

<sup>1</sup> When Mordecai learned all that Haman had done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; <sup>2</sup> he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. <sup>3</sup> In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>4</sup> When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. <sup>5</sup> Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. <sup>6</sup> Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, <sup>7</sup> and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. <sup>8</sup> Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and to entreat him for her people. <sup>9</sup> Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. <sup>10</sup> Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai: <sup>11</sup> "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that, if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law: to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone may that person live. I myself have not been called to come to the king for thirty days." <sup>12</sup> When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, <sup>13</sup> Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup> For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." <sup>15</sup> Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, <sup>16</sup> "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days and nights. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." <sup>17</sup> Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Esther 4:1-17

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"The Courage to Stand Up for Others"

Pastor Amy Terhune

In late 1946 or early 1947, a Bedouin shepherd named Muhammed edh-Dhib fell through earth into an old cave while tending sheep on the north side of the Dead Sea in the West Bank, which at that time, was territory belonging to Jordan. In the cave, he found several scrolls preserved in clay jars, which he brought back to his home camp. The family eventually tried to sell them to antique dealers in Bethlehem, and in time, they came to the attention of archaeologists in the region. At the time, post-WWII, the region was in turmoil, and Israel was established as an independent nation in 1948. Not long thereafter – in early 1949 – archaeologists began interviewing Bedouin tribes in the area and started an excavation of the caves at Qumran in the early 1950s. Over the next decade, 981 separate ancient manuscripts, mostly fragments, were discovered in 12 caves in the mountains there on the north shore of the Dead Sea. Prior to the discovery at Qumran, the oldest biblical manuscripts in the world were Masoretic scrolls from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The scrolls at Qumran were more than 1000 years older, dating between the 4<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, to the 1<sup>st</sup> century of the common era. What these

writings made clear is that during that first millennium, Hebrew texts were copied with remarkable accuracy, although there are notable exceptions that allowed for enormous breakthroughs in Biblical scholarship in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in Exodus and Samuel. Among the fragments found at Qumran, there are community writings, prayers, and rules of the Essene community, which thrived at Qumran from approximately 200 BCE to about 150 CE. There are also fragments of apocryphal writings. But most importantly, there are fragments of 65 of the 66 books that comprise the Hebrew Scriptures (or our Old Testament).

The one book in our Hebrew Scriptures from which they never discovered any fragments at Qumran was the Book of Esther, from which we read this morning. This is probably because the Essene community did not consider Esther heroic, and the feast of Purim, which is established at the end of Esther to commemorate their deliverance, does not appear on any of the Essene religious calendars discovered at the site.

They're not alone. Esther is the only book in the Hebrew Canon for which Martin Luther would not write a commentary. As far as he was concerned, that book had no place in scripture, and he said so more than once. John Wesley, who had a little more respect for the integrity of the Hebrew Canon, did write a commentary, but compared to others he wrote, his commentary on Esther is brief and offers little theological insight.

Scholastic rejection of Esther isn't without merit. In the 10 chapters of the book of Esther, God is never mentioned – not once. Neither is Israel, Covenant, Torah, prophesy, temple, sacrifice, or even prayer, though prayer may perhaps be implied in the fast that Esther holds at the end of today's lesson. Moreover, the book glorifies retribution and the slaughter of enemies, which over the centuries, has led many Christians to reject it as against the teaching of Jesus. Set in the time of exile, the book deals poorly with difficult topics like genocide and sexual exploitation. And its characters are not necessarily likeable. Haman is a megalomaniac with truly evil inclinations. King Xerxes is ignorant, corrupt, morally ambivalent, and weak as a leader. And even Mordecai is arrogant and manipulative. I get why it has a mixed record, historically speaking.

And yet, when her people needed her, Esther came through. Remember her story with me. She's born a Jew in exile in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire. She is named Hadassah – that's her Jewish name – and is orphaned as a very young child. Her cousin Mordecai takes her in and raises her as his own. Meanwhile, King Xerxes holds a great feast in the citadel, and he and his advisors get wasted drunk, which is when he gets the bright idea to summon Queen Vashti to dance for them. She refuses, he's embarrassed and enraged, and he banishes her. Then he holds a beauty contest to find a new wife, and that's when Esther enters the scene. Esther is her Persian name – she does not reveal her Jewish identity – and when she is called before the king, she wins the beauty contest, and Xerxes makes Esther his Queen.

About five years pass when our lesson for today opens. Haman has finally succeeded in plotting the destruction of the Jews. Esther, meanwhile, has led a sheltered and comfortable life in the palace. She has learned palace etiquette but seems to be completely unaware of the political maneuverings, for even though Haman's edict for the destruction of the Jews is posted in the citadel at the end of chapter 3, Esther doesn't seem to know about it. And while her Jewish identity is hidden from the king, her servants seem to know, for they're the ones who tell her about Mordecai's grief in the public square. Interestingly, her first instinct is to send him clothes. Is she trying to comfort him, or is she embarrassed by his behavior? We don't know. It's only when he refuses the clothes that she seeks more information about what's happening.

When asked to intercede, her first response is to cave to palace convention (I can't go without being summoned) and then to deny her role/influence (I haven't been summoned in 30 days). Her excuses

put her in good company with others such as Moses, Jeremiah, Gideon, who initially tried to get out an obligation to serve God.

In *The Atlantic Magazine* this month, journalist Derek Thompson has written an article entitled “The Anti-social Century”. In the article, he highlights research showing that Americans are spending an unprecedented amount of time alone. More and more of us work from home, with only occasional contact via computer or phone. We are more likely to entertain ourselves through screen time than by getting together with friends or family. Even kids and teenagers are more alone than at any other era in our history, stunting skills that are necessary and important in relational and social development. Thompson writes, “This surge in solitude isn’t just altering the way we spend our time. It’s reshaping the economy, changing our personalities, and darkening our politics...” [from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/american-loneliness-personality-politics/681091/>]. It’s compromising our ability to empathize and feel compassion for others. On nearly every major issue from healthcare to human rights to immigration to college debt to education and mass shootings, the American mantra on blogs and social media has developed an ugly refrain that goes like this: Life’s not fair. It’s not my fault. And it’s not my problem.

The first two parts of that mantra are unquestionably true. Life is not fair. And much of the time, that’s not my fault. Those two things are true. But scripture is absolutely clear that yes, it is our problem. When Cain murdered his brother Abel and God asked where Abel had disappeared to, Cain said to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” To which God said, “Yes. You are.” In the sermon on the mount, Jesus said, Love your enemies. When a lawyer pushed him on who his neighbors were, Jesus pointed out the most despicable, hated, offensive person he could – a Samaritan. That’s who your neighbor is. It’s your problem. You have an obligation to care. That’s how it goes. Esther said to Mordecai. It’s not fair, it’s not my fault. And he said, that doesn’t mean it’s not your problem. Don’t think you’ll escape this at the palace.

What touches me about this scene is that Mordecai acknowledges the ambiguity of the situation (“who knows”, “perhaps”). He does not know the future, but he has an unequivocal faith that God will save, and pointed conviction that God has put Esther in a unique position to make a difference. Fair or not, she must either rise to the occasion or perish. We, too, must learn to see the fate of others as our own fate. As children of God, we belong to each other. Fair or not, we also have an obligation to take risks for the sake of those in peril. It’s not always easy to see how events will unfold, but this does not alleviate our responsibility or God’s call upon us.

One of my favorite stories is that of Chiune Sugihara, “...who dreamed of becoming the Japanese ambassador to Russia. By the 1930s, he was the ambassador to Lithuania, just a step away from Russia. One morning, a huge throng of people gathered outside his home. They were Jews who had made their way across treacherous terrain from Poland, desperately seeking his help. They wanted Japanese visas, which would enable them to flee Eastern Europe and the Gestapo.

“Three times Sugihara wired Tokyo for permission to provide the visas; three times he was rejected. Remember, Japan was an ally of Germany, and so Sugihara had to choose between the fulfillment of his dream as an ambassador and real people's lives. Being a committed Christian, he chose the latter. He disobeyed orders. For twenty-eight days he wrote visas by hand. When the Japanese government recalled him to Berlin, he was still writing visas and shoving them through the train windows into the hands of the refugees who ran alongside. He was stripped of his ambassadorship and spent the remainder of his days selling light bulbs in Japan. When his story was finally told, his son wrote, “My father's life was fulfilled. When God needed him to do the right thing, he was available to do it.” It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t his fault. But he made it his problem. Today, it’s estimated that Sugihara singlehandedly saved about 6,000 Jews. [adapted from <https://sermons.com/sermon/making-sacrifices/1443633>.]

Esther chooses to accept the risk and embrace the opportunity to make a difference. She doesn't know that it's going to work. She could enter the king's presence and be put to death. Given Vashti's history, that's a real possibility. But she fasts, I assume she probably doesn't some pretty agonized praying, and she places herself in God's hands. In so doing, we see her become the woman and the leader God has always meant for her to be. When we act with courage, there are no guarantees. Yet I love William Faulkner's wise words here when he wrote, "You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore." God is felt and experienced as we step up in faith.

The Aleutians are one of the native, indigenous tribes in Alaska, and early missionaries to the tribe discovered an interesting practice when winters were hard and lean. If the tribe was starving, a young, brave hunter would go out into the bitter cold in search of food for his people. Armed with only a long spear and his compassion for his starving village, he would wander, anticipating the attack of a polar bear. Having no natural fear of humans, a polar bear will avoid a group of people, but it will stalk and eat one man. In the attack, the Aleut hunter would wave his hands and spear to anger the bear and make him rise up on his hind legs to over ten feet in height; and then, with the spear braced to his foot, the hunter would aim for the heart as the weight of the bear came down upon his spear. With heart pierced, the bear would die, but the hunter faced the very real risk of being maimed, smothered, or killed in the process. I can't imagine what kind of courage it takes to hunt a polar bear that way. Loving family and friends would then follow the young hunters tracks out of the village and find the dead bear – enough meat to sustain the tribe for several weeks. Observing that practice, early missionaries proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the "Good Hunter" who lays down his life for the world. [from <https://sermons.com/sermon/the-good-hunter/1483897>.]

We are living in time when hate and division is all around us. It's not fair. It's not our fault. But it is our problem. We're called to care. We're called to stand up for others. Recently, I saw a documentary of the life of Nelson Mandela, who worked to end apartheid in South Africa, and was imprisoned there for many years. He believed unequivocally in God. He was a man of deep faith. He also believed in the power of human agency, divinely given by God. It is in your hands to create a better world for all who live in it, he told people. Fear is what you feel but courage is what you do, he told people. I think Esther understood that. She rose above her fear to step out in faith. She took a risk for the benefit of others. It might have backfired. It might have killed her. But she lived her courage. She let compassion lead her. She never let go of hope.

In that documentary, something Mandela said really stuck with me, which I offer as a prayer and blessing to close today: May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears. Amen and amen.