

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 25, 2010
Lessons: Esther 4:8-16, II Corinthians 5:14-15 and Matthew 16:24-26

AN ANCIENT PROFILE IN COURAGE

Esther is Queen of Persia, but she is also a Jew, and the king's counselor Haman has concocted a plot to destroy the Jews throughout the land. Mordecai, who raised Esther as her adoptive father, seeks to persuade the young queen to intervene with the king on behalf of her people, but under the law if Esther approaches the king without being called, she will be executed, unless the king chooses to extend to her his golden scepter. In the past thirty days, the king has not called for her at all, and so her favor in his eyes seems most uncertain. The exchange of messages between Mordecai and Queen Esther gives us a profile in courage.

First, Mordecai assures Esther that the safe choice will not prove safe. Being queen will not protect her from the edict against the Jews. If, however, we were to imagine that such a warning settles the matter, we are mistaken. Frightened people do not often say to themselves, "Well, I may as well stand up and do what is right because hiding will not save me, anyway." No, with fear comes denial, and we go into hiding. Secondly, Mordecai assures Esther that she is not the Jews' only hope. If she refuses to speak to the king, deliverance will come for her people from somewhere else, but she and her family will perish. Is he tempting her to back away, to chicken out? No, he is reminding her not to look upon her royal station in life as either blind chance or personal privilege. "Who knows?" he asks. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Before acting, Esther puts herself into solidarity with her people before God by fasting and asking them to fast with her for three days. Strength comes not from her youth and beauty nor hope from her own cunning. "After that," Esther tells Mordecai, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." There is our profile in courage.

Young Queen Esther is no zealot seeking martyrdom for glory and reward in an afterlife. Neither does she cast herself as the hero upon whom all depends. She has no guarantee that her courage will save her or her people. Fear and the natural human instinct for self-preservation would tell her not to throw her life away on a longshot. The prudent keep silent in such an evil time – even the Bible says so. But chance or fate or, perhaps (Who knows?) God has brought her to this position at this moment. By fasting, Esther shows without saying that she trusts or, maybe, just hopes God is the One at work in her life, and then she does what she must do but must also choose to do.

On my personal blog called, “Faith Pondering,” I took the challenge of Queen Esther’s courageous decision into our current political sphere where courage seems often lacking and doing what one believes better for the nation or state takes a back seat to personal political survival at the polls and favor with party leadership. My purpose this morning in a sermon is different. I am speaking now, not of people elected to positions of responsibility with power but, rather, to us – to you and me – and our attitudes toward our own lives.

Mordecai takes away from Esther, whom he loves as his own adopted daughter, any notion that being queen is all about her. Being queen means nothing unless she now chooses to give it meaning that matters. What is at stake for Esther is precisely her life — not her survival, but what her life is and what it means. We need to think long and hard about what Jesus is telling us when he says the person who chooses to save his or her life will lose it, but the one who loses it for him will find it. How does life, which seems to be something we just have (almost by accident), become something we must find?

The word used here in Matthew’s gospel for life is *psyche*, which relates to our breathing and so to the very physical nature of our existence, but also speaks of the mind (and, therefore, the will that can make choices), and of the soul (the very self). So, it might help to read that by trying to save *my life*, I may risk losing *my soul*, my truest self. It is, perhaps by analogy, a little like saving my pride but losing my honor, or like saving my good name but losing my integrity. Do those analogies help? I can lose my life literally by dying, which is something we all must do, but I can also lose my life by clinging to the comfort, position, or advantage I wrongly imagine to be the substance of my life and self. By trying to hold on to what I have, I can lose everything.

From Jesus, we learn that life is more than survival or even prosperity, more than happiness or flourishing, more than self. We learn also that worse can happen to a person than death. It is possible to lose life more profoundly than we lose it by dying.

People say, “Everything happens for a reason.” I don’t think so. Not everything has meaning in itself but may still have potential meaning. God calls us to choose, to step up and participate in finding meaning in our lives. Many things pleasant or unpleasant just happen. True, of course, they have causes, but causes are seldom plain and simple. Saying something good or bad, helpful or harmful, happened for a reason suggests it serves some greater purpose, which it may or, perhaps by our choice, may not. God does not manipulate us like puppets on strings. The event that disrupts my life may have God-given potential for meaning, but whether or not that potential is realized may be a choice God gives me to make in faith, trusting or just hoping (like Esther) that God will indeed give that choice meaning and value.

Mordecai does not tell Esther her choice to go to the king and plead for the life of her people will definitely work out for the best. He asks, “Who knows?” – but that she has been brought to her royal position for just such a moment. No guarantee is given, no outcome assured. Esther has a choice to make about herself and the meaning of her life in relation to God and in relation to her people, come what may. What does her life matter?

Our question for the Sundays of Easter is this: *What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make for us here and now in the living of our lives?* It is a paradox (an apparent contradiction that calls us to deeper understanding) that the resurrection which makes death less to be feared should also make each day of life more valuable. Because we no longer recognize death as the end of all things, we are freed to care more about the nature, quality, and meaning of our lives than the mere extension of them. But quality of life cannot truly be separated from quality of the self, the soul. Comforts, luxuries, entertainments, or even achievements, victories, and personal successes can all be just window dressings for an empty house. God gives me opportunities to take steps in faith by which God will give meaning to my life, even if I don’t really see how it works out to have any great meaning.

When we might choose between the safer and the better, we may need to hear some Mordecai asking, “Who knows but that it might be for just such a moment as this that you were brought to the choice now before you?” It’s so easy just to let the moment pass, but how many of those moments pass before meaningful life is gone? From my childhood, I recall the lyric, “He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.” Or maybe just to run away again. Perhaps it gets a little easier each time we let the moment pass and protect what we have come to think is our own.

I learned as the editor for a year of our college newspaper to try to pick my battles. It is not only foolish but arrogant to think my integrity gives me either the need or the right to challenge people on everything that might seem wrong to me. Beware the purist in a cause, because human life and society are complex, and (as the apostle Paul reminds the proud) our view is always partial and our knowledge imperfect. But the line between prudence and cowardice gets very thin sometimes. Mordecai is wise to take away from Queen Esther both the temptation of fear to seek security in silence and the temptation of pride to imagine herself heroic. Esther is wise also to fast and ask her people to fast with her before she takes the fatal step forward, not proud or confident, but humbled and frightened.

Jesus calls us to find ourselves by loosening our grip on what we think is the substance of our lives. We are to follow him and let God’s grace give meaning to our choices, our lives, the very breaths we draw, and the deepest levels of personhood in relation to God and others we call our souls. Amen.