

“Ordinary Faithfulness”

Esther 4: 9-17

Second Sunday after Pentecost, (June 26) 2011

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She told me how much she was enjoying her Bible study at Youth Camp.

I asked her, “What has meant the most to you this week?”

She said, “Your Bible Study has helped remind me who I am. Did you know it is hard being a Christian and a teen-ager at the same time?”

Here she was at seventeen years of age and already she knew that what it meant to feel like a stranger in the culture, already she knew that the world around her was trying to press her into its mold.

Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a king who ruled over the world from India to Ethiopia, his name was Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I, and he was king of Persia. He decided he needed a queen, so he ordered that the loveliest women from his 127 provinces be brought before him that he might choose the loveliest as his queen. He chose Esther.

Though the king did not know it, Esther was an orphan, a Jew in the care of her uncle, Mordecai. Mordecai advised Esther to marry the king, even though he was not of her faith or her people. Besides, Esther was a poor nobody, a woman,

and Xerxes was a king and in the socio-economic-gender based class dependent politics of the day, what could she do?

Now, one of the king's advisors was a toady named Haman, who wasn't only a bureaucrat, he was a bad bureaucrat. Haman plotted to kill all the Jews in all the king's lands, seeing these foreigners as troublesome aliens who would never be loyal subjects.

He set a date for the mass executions. Then, in good little toady, bureaucratic kiss up fashion, Haman slithers up to the king and says, "Dear King, it has come to our attention that there is a certain group in your kingdom who consider themselves above your laws. They are different from everyone else. Although multiculturalism and diversity is an otherwise good thing, a rule is a rule. Allow me to help my king by destroying them."

This sounded good to the king, who agreed and ordered that on the thirteenth of Adar all Jews would be slain.

The Jews were distressed by this horrible news. Mordecai sent news of the plan to Esther in the palace, begging her to help. "Who knows?" asked Mordecai, "maybe you have been put in the palace for such a time as this."

Now a word about palace etiquette. In those days, it was hard to get to see the king, even if you were a corporate CEO with a fat donation to make, you couldn't get in. Even the queen had to ask permission. If she showed up

unsummoned by the king, even the queen could be killed.

Esther reminds Mordecai of the rules. You bother the king when he doesn't want to be bothered, you could be a dead queen. Mordecai reminds Esther that she is the only hope her people have.

Esther is in great fear. She lies awake in torment for three days. Finally, she decides that she will go, saying "If I die, I shall die."

Esther entered the throne room. She was terrified. Yet the king bid her to speak.

"Dear King," she said, "would you grant to me just one little favor?"

"Just name it," said the king, "even half my kingdom, or whatever." (She had obviously caught him in a great mood.)

"Would you and your trusted lackey, er, uh, I mean advisor Haman due me the honor of attending a great dinner with me?"

Haman, when he learned of the invitation, was even more full of himself, so proud that he was being invited up to the big house for a great party. He was obviously in tight with the king and the queen. Passing old Mordecai on the way to dinner, he told him to get ready to swing from a rope, that Mordecai and Mordecai's people's days were numbered.

Esther spent the whole next day wondering how in the world she was going to talk to the king about Haman's plot against the Jews. The banquet was a great affair, but Esther couldn't bring herself to speak to the king about her people.

At the end of the evening, Esther said that the food and the wine had been so great, the dinner table conversation so scintillating, that she was going to give another dinner tomorrow. Would the king and his toady...advisor be good enough to come?

They agreed. Next night, maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was the well-prepared food, but the King blurted out, "Esther, you are such a great queen, tell me what would make you happy."

Esther finally had the courage to say, "Dear King, there is an evil man in this palace who wants to kill me and those whom I love. Let me and my people live; that's all I ask."

"What?" asked the king. "Tell me who this scoundrel is."

"He's over there," she said, "the fellow in the shiny suit just finishing his chocolate mousse."

Was Haman shocked! He didn't even know Esther was Jewish! He was even more shocked when the king ordered him taken out and hanged on the very gallows Haman had been preparing for old Mordecai.

And that's how the people of Israel were preserved, even to this day. A savvy woman, laying aside her own safety, speaking up in behalf of her people, saved them in a foreign land.

I expect that this is the first time some of you have heard this story of Esther. Esther has never been one of the top ten books of the Bible and in over twenty years of preaching this may be the second sermon I've ever done on Esther.

So why isn't Esther more popular? For one thing, Esther is a woman, and most of history seems most interested in the actions of men. For another thing, some Christians have been a little perplexed by Esther's morality, becoming the mistress, then the queen of a pagan. And then, some folks are uncomfortable over any story of a woman in a leadership position.

Finally, God is never mentioned in the entire Book of Esther. God doesn't speak, or intervene, nothing.

So why should I tell you this story, and on a Sunday, and in church? If you are young, then a major job in your life is looking for good, solid, adult role models.

There are heroes out there, grand names like Teresa of Calcutta, or the great civil rights leader, Fannie Lou Hamer. But sometimes these great, grand heroes are not role models at all. Their attainments are too great, their accomplishments so spectacular that how can an average, everyday persons like you and me possibly

hope to match our lives with theirs?

Esther was a hero, but a reluctant one. She did a great deed for her people, but she took small, hesitant steps on the way there. She assimilated herself into the dominant culture, so much so that many of her people probably thought that she had given away the store, had allowed herself to be so thoroughly enmeshed in pagan culture that she was no longer a Jew.

As a woman, she was powerless, even though she was queen. Yet Esther used what power she had, maneuvered skillfully within the limits imposed upon her by the culture, and did a great thing.

What she did was not particularly spectacular but that's good because most of us are not very spectacular ourselves. Fortunately, most of the good that God needs doing is not too spectacular. Someday, some one here may be required to die for the faith that you profess, but not likely. More likely you will be given the opportunity, or the dilemma, of summoning up the courage to speak out at some party, or to put in a word in behalf of someone who can't speak for himself, or say something when a bigoted comment is made. Somehow or another, you'll know in your heart that you're have to choose between being faithful to Christ or just blend in with your peers. Perhaps it will be to write a letter, show up at a meeting opposing the tar-sands pipeline, or volunteer for service when it's easier to stay at home. Maybe it's learning how to daily wean ourselves off of electricity and gasoline, or buying at the Farmers' Market when going to the supermarket is easier. Not large. Not grand. Not spectacular. But faithful. Ordinary faithfulness.

Sometimes our faithfulness in the face of the pressures of the world is even more subtle and is embodied over time. For example: the seventeen year old girl that I mentioned earlier who was in my Bible study at Youth Camp a few years ago was named Meredith. One day our group was playing a game where each person writes on an index card two true things about them self and one false thing. Then we read them in front of the group while the person stands and we try to guess which one is false. Things like: 1) I like pasta. 2) I have three cats. 4) I play basketball. Well, when I got to Meredith's card it said, 1) I have three cats 2) I've had cancer 3) I like to travel. Well, the kids talked, trying to debate the one about cats and travel. No one wanted to ask her about cancer.

Later, I was drinking coffee with another pastor and Meredith walked by. I called her over and asked her, "Meredith, when did you have cancer?" She said that five years ago she was at her first youth camp but felt really tired and exhausted during the week. Finally, by mid week she was sent home and taken to the hospital where they discovered that she had leukemia. Then the light went on in my head, I said, "I remember you. We had you on our prayer list for a long time and kids in the youth group sent you cards." She said, "Yes, the whole youth camp sent me cards."

Meredith went on to say that she has been cancer free for two years and given her age and the kind of cancer she had, the doctors consider her cured. Then she said, "Mister Childress, you know what I learned? I learned that life is a gift. God did not give me cancer but God did show me through the cancer that life is a gift and not to be taken for granted." I said, "Meredith, you know something that

often takes people many years to learn and some people never learn.”

This young woman, wise beyond her years, was embodying faithfulness to God in a culture that tells you constantly that you are the center of the universe and that life owes you something. Sometimes our faithfulness calls us to make a stand in a particular way at a specific time but often it is about being learning to stand with God over a period of time. It is simple and quiet and small day-in, day-out, over time. Lots of daily, small fidelities.

Today’s story is about such things. As Christians we live in a world that, on the whole, neither worships nor obeys our God. Our age prefers the Market, the Economy, and the Power to back those up. The motto of our age is not, “What doth the Lord require?” but rather, “How can I get mine?” and “What do I have to do to get along?” In such a climate we are tempted to let ourselves off the hook too easily, to say, “I’m no martyr, I’m just one normal, average, person, what can I do?”

Years ago, I remember seeing the historian Stephen Ambrose being interviewed. The reporter asked Ambrose what stood out in his mind as a key which made D-Day a success for the Allies. Ambrose named several things: timing, weather, the element of surprise, and so on. Then he said what struck him the most were the hundreds of unknown, forgotten soldiers who exhibited leadership in these most extenuating circumstances. Soldiers who perhaps had rank but mostly did not, and who looked around in the chaos, gathered a few others around him and said, “Follow me.” He said that it takes at least six eye-witnesses of someone’s act of courage for someone to be considered for the Congressional

Medal of Honor but how many acts of leadership and heroism were committed there by soldiers that hardly anyone saw?

The story today is for us: a small, unspectacular, church. In little, ordinary ways, the Kingdom of God, is being defeated or advanced through us, the battle is being lost or won on the basis of our little words, gestures, acts, and habits.

Esther is a story about that.

Amen and amen.