

Your Silence Will Not Protect You – A Sermon on Esther

Esther 4:12-16

¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, 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.” ¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶ “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, night or day. 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.”

There are two books in the 66 books of Bible which are named after women. One is Ruth, a book about a woman with extraordinary love, faith and courage. We all know her story so well.

As much as I like the story of Ruth, there is another book named for a woman who never fails to capture my imagination and awe. And that’s the story of Esther. We spoke about Esther in the Women’s Bible Study last Wednesday when we met at Vanda’s. Her story came so close to me when I prepared for the meeting with the women that I thought it would make an interesting sermon, too.

Esther was an orphan, a Jewish girl growing up with her uncle Mordecai in exile in the Persian empire. And the king at the time gets frustrated with his queen, who won’t do what he says. Vashti is enormous, she simply refuses to show up when the king wants to show off with her in front of his drunken ministers and military mates. So, he gets rid of her (whether we like that or not – that is how things worked in the Persian empire in those days). The king regrets very soon having sent Vashti away, and his advisers encourage him to find a new wife. So, he looks for a new queen among all the young and beautiful women of his kingdom. They all are led to his harem and asked to present themselves as at a miss world competition (again: whether we like that or not, that is how things went...) In the end, Esther is just the woman to fill the role. But her uncle tells her, whatever you do, don’t tell him you are Jewish. That will put you in danger.

About that same time Mordecai uncovers a plot to kill the king, and stops it. Mordecai is made an advisor to the king. However, the king has another advisor too, a man named Haman. Haman loves power. He expects everyone to bow down to him.

Mordecai, Esther's uncle, refuses (whether the refusal was a wise thing to do or not, could be discussed. We don't find special religious reasons for Mordecai to not bow down before Haman, but maybe he is only willing to bow down before his God?).

Mordecai's behaviour enrages Haman so much that he decides to kill not just Mordecai, but have every Jewish person in the whole Persian empire be wiped out.

When Mordecai discovers this, he goes to his niece Esther and begs her to get the king to intercede. But the wife of the king can't just go to her husband. She has to be summoned first. The king hadn't called her for 30 days – a whole month – why would he want to see her now? How could she dare go to him without being invited? She lets Mordecai know that she thinks there is nothing in her power that she can do.

Mordecai warns her and lets her know that she should not think, she'd be safe in the palace while all the Jews outside are wiped out. "If you keep silence at such a time...," he warns her and makes her think. So, Esther comes up with a courageous plan. She can't do this alone. She needs support. She needs her people stand at her side. She needs to be in touch with God. She asks Mordecai to tell all of the Jewish people to fast and pray for her for three days. She herself fasts and prays too – prepares herself for the task that lies ahead... On the third day, she takes an enormous risk. Unsummoned she goes to the king and invites him to a feast. She wins his favour. And: he accepts. At the feast she invites him back again to a second one.

In the meantime, Haman is still angry. Mordecai still won't bow down to him, and so he is so mad he starts to build the gallows on which to hang him. And that same night, the king can't sleep. And he's looking for anything to put him to sleep. And so, he has the court records read back to him. He discovers that he had never rewarded Mordecai for helping him. Mordecai was given all the kingly honours one can think of, and Haman was as jealous as one can only imagine.

By then it was time to go to the second feast. Esther had invited the king, Haman, and Mordecai. And at that banquet, Esther tells the king the truth about who she is. She tells the king that Mordecai is her uncle, and like her he is Jewish. And she tells the king that Haman wants not just to kill Mordecai, the man who had saved him, but all of the Jewish people as well – and Esther too. The king, knowing now who his wife is, and knowing that he still owes Mordecai for saving his life, decrees that the Jewish people can now stand up for themselves against attacks and are fully

integrated into the kingdom. Mordecai takes a prominent position in his court. And Haman, the man who would have killed an entire people, ends up suffering the same fate he'd wished for Mordecai.

That's the story of the book of Esther. It's one that every year our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate during the festival of Purim. Purim is a festive day. It's when the faithful throw feasts, dress up in elaborate costumes, and eat and drink and are happy.

The fact the story of Esther is celebrated with such joy and celebration is something that should not be overlooked. Because Esther, is about as close to a female superhero as we get in the Bible. She not only saved herself, and her uncle. She saved her entire people.

And she did it in the most amazing way. She didn't do it with fancy weapons. She didn't do it with an army. She didn't do it with a costume or a cape. She did it by doing this: standing up and telling the truth. By doing so, she integrated the Jews into the very nation that was going to wipe them out. She changed the society of those days without destroying or dividing it. How wise of her!

Esther told the truth to a king that she knew did not want to hear it. She told it knowing that it could have got her killed. She risked everything. She risked her life. And the most amazing part is that she didn't have to. Esther had all that she needed. She was the queen. She had wealth. She had relative safety. She had the protection of the king. All she needed to do was keep her mouth shut, and she would have guaranteed that safety for herself.

But Esther couldn't do that. She couldn't see her cousin killed, and she couldn't see her people exterminated. And so, though it was a risk to even go into the king's presence and invite him to that feast, she did. She took her own life into her hands and dared to stand up and in front of the powerful in order to save others.

Then again at the feast, Esther stands up and tells the king her truth. Again, she is taking her life into her hands and she manages to save her people. Ever since her people celebrate her.

When her cousin had first come to her and asked her to do this thing, when she stood trembling in front of the king, when she opened her mouth to speak those words, she didn't know how things would turn out. Not only did she risk to lose her own life, she held the lives of her people in her

hands... So why did she do it? I think, there is one thing that Esther understood: “Your silence will not protect you.” Your silence will not protect you, so refuse to stand down, refuse to be quiet, and refuse to hide.

Because we have all been silent sometimes when we have wanted to call out our truths. We have all seen something unjust without speaking up. We have all, at times, waited for others to be the hero. And in those moments, we have been safe. But if we are honest with ourselves, that safety does not last long. It lasts only as long as it takes for our conscience to catch up with us. And only as long as it takes to see the price that our silence has taken on others. And then, we really understand, that our silence will not protect us, just as it will not protect others.

Pastor Martin Niemoller, who lived in Nazi Germany, once wrote a statement about his own silence in the face of the cruelties and injustices he was seeing:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—^[1]_[SEP]Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Niemoller ended up spending seven years in a concentration camp. In the end his silence did not protect him. But he survived the camps, and he became reflective about his silence. And part of his legacy became regretting that silence, and apologizing for it. In fact, after the war, he became one of the most committed pacifists; one who made sure that the world remembers and will not forget. Never again, was his great commitment, and he never got tired of speaking up and out against any kind of injustice, hate and evil.

Back to Esther. I hope we are learning that in the end, God made us for more than silence. God made us for courage.

I think our Jewish friends are right when they throw a party every year and retell this story. And I pray that if only we can learn what Esther learned. ...that we can learn to be people of courage and not people of silence. Amen.

2 Timothy 1:7

⁷ God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of thoughtfulness.