“Risk: For Such a Time as This” (Third in the “Drawn In” Series”)
Esther 4:1-17; Hebrews 11:1-3
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Esther 4:1-17
When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king’s gate, for no one might enter the king’s gate clothed with sackcloth. 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. When Esther’s maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.
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. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate, 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. 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 entreat him for her people. Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, “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—all alike are 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 in to the king for thirty days.” When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, 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. 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.” Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, “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." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Hebrews 11:1-3
Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

Sermon

We continue today in our series: "Drawn In: Living the Creative Life with God." To be drawn in, not only to a relationship with God but also God's kingdom work and purposes, will involve some level of risk. To be in any kind of relationship involves opening oneself to that person or group and how such a relationship may change us. To open ourselves to God is to open ourselves to being changed . . . to being transformed into people who more resemble Jesus. Then, to live as Jesus lived, to love as Jesus loved, to serve as Jesus served opens us to the risk of being different, standing up for others that are being harmed, reaching out to people with many types of needs, of resisting certain types of activities, and giving of ourselves without expecting anything in return. Being in a relationship with God and living for God and God's purposes requires a level of risk.

Today we have read from the Old Testament book of Esther. It is the account of how Esther risked her life for a group of people about to be massacred.

The book of Esther begins by introducing us to King Xerxes who is also called King Ahasuerus. "He ruled from India to Ethiopia – 127 provinces." The King liked to throw big parties with lots of booze. At one party he decided he wanted to show off his beautiful wife to all the men gathered at his party. Alas, Queen Vashti refused and embarrassed the King. She said "No." He was furious and, after seeking counsel, decided to ban her and make a decree about all wives in his kingdom, because after all he couldn't have women saying "no" to men in his kingdom. "Every woman will show proper respect to her husband." "Every man is master of his own house; whatever he says goes." So, Queen Vashti was out, banned forever for daring to say "No." The pattern of punishing all for the so-called wrongdoing of one is set for the rest of the book of Esther.

Of course, the King then needed a new queen. They didn't have dating apps or speed dating events back then. So, his officials gathered beautiful young virgins from throughout the kingdom to be part of the king's harem. The one who pleased the king the most would become the next queen. While the spa treatments the women received sound pleasant, the rest of it does not.

This is where Esther enters. She's a Jew. She's an orphan. Her adoptive father is Mordecai. (Spoiler alert: these are the "good guys" in the story.) Esther is recruited from her community. I have to wonder if it was more like trafficking, in that I'm not certain she and the other young virgins were told the full story of why they were going to the palace, I don't know what they were promised, or whether they were allowed to leave, or were permitted to say "No" once they were there. It's all too familiar.

Apparently the only "vetting" done of the women who were recruited as potential candidates for queen was to evaluate their beauty. And Esther was beautiful. Esther was apparently not asked anything about her family background or religion, and she chose to keep it a secret that she was a Jew.

Another main character in this book of the Bible is Mordecai, the adoptive father of Esther. While Esther was at the palace, Mordecai thwarted a plot to kill the King. Sometimes good deeds go unnoticed or "un-remembered."

Another man comes into the picture. It is Haman. If we were at a Jewish re-reading of the book of Esther, we would "boo" and "hiss" at the mention of Haman. He was a bad guy. He was the King's highest-ranking official and he loved how the king's servants bowed down and knelt before him. Everyone bowed down to Haman except Mordecai, a Jew.

You can probably see where this is going. Haman's ego was bruised by Mordecai's unwillingness to bow to him. He wanted Mordecai "disappeared" for good. And, instead of just getting rid of Mordecai, Haman decided it would be good to get rid of <u>all Jews</u> in the kingdom. It sounds so ridiculous, right? Or does it just sound familiar? We humans do this over and over again. One person different from us does something we don't like, and we determine that **everyone** who looks or believes like him or her is bad, or comes from the same country, or who has the same immigration status is bad, too. "They're ALL rapists and murderers." We say they are ALL <u>so</u> bad, in fact, that we want all of them gone . . . for good, no matter what it takes. That is, unless the bad act was done by someone like us, rather than one of "them." Then, we individualize that action rather than

globalizing it. If a white man blows up a building or shoots up a school, most of us don't conclude that ALL white people are murderers.

Well, Haman with his bruised ego and prejudice against Jews went to the King and said: "There is an odd set of people scattered through the provinces of your kingdom who don't fit in. Their customs and ways are different from those of everybody else. Worse they disregard the king's laws. They're an affront; the king shouldn't put up with them. If it please the king, let orders be given that they be destroyed. I'll pay for it myself. I'll deposit 375 tons of silver in the royal bank to finance the operation." (*The Message* translation of Esther)

The king gave the "go-ahead." Do what you want, Haman. Do whatever you want with **"those people."** "Bulletins were sent out by couriers to all the king's provinces with orders to massacre, ill, and eliminate all the Jews – youngsters and old men, women and babies – on a single day . . ." **"**The king and Haman sat back and had a drink while the Jews and others reeled from the news."

Mordecai was, of course, devastated by this news. He got a message to Esther with all the details of the coming massacre. He also asked Esther to go to the King (remember she is the Queen now) and to intercede and plead with him for HER people.

Esther responded saying that if anyone (including her) approached the king without being invited they would subject to the death penalty. Talk about Risk.

Mordecai's response: Esther, people will find out you're a Jew at some point. You won't be spared either. "If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."

Mordecai's response reminds me of the familiar poem "First They Came" by German Lutheran Pastor and Theologian Martin Neimoller in 1946.

"First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
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

They 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”

We read that Esther prayed and asked for others to pray. She also took action – the only action she knew to take. Esther made herself available to the King and he invited her into his presence. She boldly asked that the king and Haman come to a couple of dinner parties that she would prepare. Loosened up and perhaps not thinking clearly, the King asked Esther at the second dinner party what the desire of her heart was.

Esther said: “Here’s what I want. “Give me my life and my people their lives. We’ve been sold, and I and my people, are to be destroyed – sold to be massacred, eliminated.” The King was shocked. “This is monstrous,” he proclaimed.

Had the King somehow forgotten(?) what Haman had proposed and he had approved regarding the annihilation of the Jews? **Is it just because he now knows a Jew personally that he has any concern for them?**

You know that happens, right? We are prejudiced against or convinced that a group of people (the whole lot of them) are bad, dangerous, or “less than,” even that they are animals. Then we get to know someone – one of “them”. Perhaps we come to know that “one of them” is related to us or we fall in love with one of them or we have a grandchild from one of “them.” Only then do some of us begin to see “them” in a new light.

Esther risked her life to save herself and her people. She was successful. She begged the king to rescind the order for the Jews to be killed. The King let Mordecai write the new bulletins to be sent out throughout the provinces. I wish I could tell you this situation ended peacefully. “The king’s order, written under Mordecai’s hand, “authorized the Jews in every city to arm and defend themselves to the death, killing anyone who threatened them or their women and children, and confiscating anything for themselves owned by their enemies.”

I’m not sure why the original orders couldn’t just be rescinded. If there was time to get the information to the Jews, why didn’t Mordecai and the King just send fliers to the other people to rescind the order to kill the Jews?

So, violence did take place. The Jews overpowered the other people who came to attack them, now referred to collectively as “those who hated them.” At least 75,000 people were killed by the Jews. The tables were turned.

I cannot celebrate this. Just as Haman had identified his hatred not just for one man who offended him, but for all who were like him, the Jews chose to do the same -- kill ALL of THEM – another **“them”.** Some will say it was just self-defense. I’m not so sure. There was another way available.

It’s a tale as old as time that continues to this day. As God’s people, I believe we are to say “No” to labels placed on an entire people as bad or dangerous because of the real, perceived, or rumored actions of one person or a few people in that group. I believe we must say “No” to dehumanizing any individuals or groups of people. To speak of or portray any human being as a wild animal is dehumanizing and opens the door for us to treat people not as humans created in the image of God but as sub-human or as animals. We must say “No” to leaders like Haman and the ego-driven King Xerxes who promote such beliefs. It is sinful to do otherwise. It is sinful to treat any human being, all of whom are created in the image of God, with cruelty, disrespect, and prejudice. Too quickly, as we have seen in the book of Esther, it takes us to dangerous and evil places.

Esther, a woman of God, bravely risked her life to preserve her people. I only wish she, too, could have seen those who threatened her people as humans made in the image of God, as well. Throughout all of history I wish that even when we are faced with the difficult act of self-defense that we would never relish killing of others or fall prey to the belief that our enemies are not humans made in God’s image. **What are we called to do or not to do in our day . . . in such a time as this?**