

IN SEARCH OF REFUGE - SHE PERSISTED

Epiphany

Esther 4:7-16

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Esther 4:7-16¹

⁷ [A]nd 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. ⁸ 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.

⁹ Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹ "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." 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."

Pastor Catherine Foote

Please join me in prayer.

God,
May the words we speak,
May what we hold in our hearts
Be sifted and held by you. – Amen

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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And so the title of this sermon, "She Persisted," comes not from the Bible text of Esther but from an incident two years ago that you might remember. Two years ago this month when Elizabeth Warren stood up in the Senate in opposition to the nomination of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General. Warren stood up to read into the record a letter from Coretta Scott King. And that letter itself had been written decades before pointing out and opposing the nomination of Jeff Sessions to a judgeship because of his opposition to voters' rights.

So it was two years ago this month that Elizabeth Warren stood up to remind the whole community of its history. Its history. It was February. It was Black History Month – just like it is right now. And when Elizabeth Warren stood up to remind the community of history, it was a very specific history. It was a racist history. And Black History Month is *not* a month to celebrate or remember someone *else's* history. It *is* a month to remember *all* of the ways stories in our history have been silenced and put aside. Stories of oppression have been erased so that somehow a dominant group can feel good about its history.

So here's Elizabeth Warren saying don't forget your history. Don't forget *our* history. And, of course, you all remember she was told to sit down and be quiet. In fact as she attempted to read that letter, she was not only silenced she was *censured* by the Senate and Mitch McConnell uttered those now famous words, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. And *nevertheless she persisted.*"

So stay with me now: "She persisted." The story of Esther is a story of persistence.

And if we explore the history of that story, well here's how it goes. In the opening of the book the king has a queen. Her name is Vashti and she is wonderful at throwing parties, and the king delights in her – until she refuses to become a public display for him. And then he's done with her. He banishes her. After the first chapter of Esther, we don't hear from this elegant, powerful woman again. Just set aside.

Now the king has to look through the whole kingdom to find another queen. He turns it, of course, into a beauty contest. But here's the thing: Esther wants nothing to do with this. Esther actually goes into *hiding* to avoid being taken to the palace. After the king has looked through the whole kingdom and not found to the bride he wants, he calls his servants to go out again and this time they find Esther and they bring her to the palace. They kidnap her. They put her in the harem. They prepare her to meet the king. And basically it is a story of violence.

Esther is taken to the palace and becomes the queen, not because she wanted to, but because the King could. That's how the story goes.

In the meantime, another character in the story –Haman – is kind of resentful that people other than him are getting things: recognition; awards; gratitude. So he hatches a plot. And his plot identifies *an other* that he can blame for everything that's gone wrong in the kingdom. [Oh! My goodness! Does this sound familiar? Does this sound *heartbreakingly* familiar?] And he gets the King to issue a decree: all the Jews in the kingdom are to be executed.

Well, Esther's a Jew. She's kept it secret from the king. But there she is in the palace.

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What will she do?

I used to think I knew exactly what I'd do. Oh, yeah! I would be brave! I would be courageous! I would speak right up!

Oh! I lived in a fog, a fog of privilege and naïveté and my own silly self-confidence.

When I read this text again, I'm humbled. Because here's the thing: Esther had been warned. She already had the example of Vashti. Right? That's how power captures our imagination. As Walter Brueggemann would say it: "This is the way things are." And it warns us:

Do not proceed.
This is the way things are.
Bad things will happen if you rock this boat."

Right? Esther was warned. We've *all* been warned. We've all been warned. There has been a calculated effort to capture our imagination and take us right into fear. Right?

If the warning doesn't work, well, let me *explain* it to you. That's ... That's what the power says. Let me catch your imagination this way. *Here's* the logical way we do things. *Here's* how things are. Let me explain it to you.

And things were explained to Esther. Right? "Hey, by the way don't go into the king unless he invites you, because if you do go into the king and talk to him without an invitation, you *will be* silenced. You will be *profoundly silenced*. Let me explain it to you."

And then this other word comes to Esther. Oh, may we hear this word as well! "Don't imagine that what is happening to those people over there will not happen to you. Don't imagine that *your* silence will save you."

The book of Esther never mentions God, by the way, which is a *fascinating* thing. The book of Esther and the Song of Solomon are the two books we have in our canon that don't name God. But Mordechai *knows* that good is at work and justice will prevail. Mordechai ... Mordechai makes it clear justice *will* prevail. Goodness will reign – and if not through you through someone else. So which side will you choose?

You know, *we* didn't get here through our own insight and free will. *We* have been taken to this moment and *now* is the time to choose. God is at work in this world. Which side will you stand on? Will you recognize that what happens to the refugee is happening to us? And imagining some silly, mythical wall will save us is absurd. [*Amen.*] Amen.

It ignores the foundation of human life. What happens out there, happens right here. And if *we* don't stand up, others will! Because justice will not be denied – that's what history teaches. So Esther persists.

Now here's what she does –and here's what I think we are all called to. She asks her community to hold her. She calls for fasting. She calls for prayers. And then she steps into justice.

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What fasting and prayer can do for us is sweep away those warnings and those explanations and clarify for us the right, and the justice. Wow! There is no more profound call in Scripture than those words of Esther. "I'll step into this and if I perish, I perish. But I can't keep silent and I won't do anything less."

Elizabeth Warren is 69 years old that means she was 67 when she stood up in the Senate and persisted. That's how old I am. I still don't know if this is a lesson I've learned. Do I have the courage to step forward and risk places of privilege and comfort for the sake of recognizing all of humanity, for the sake of hearing *every* story and most *especially* the stories that have been silenced?

Community:

Community.
Let's stand together.
Let's keep moving,
For the sake of the refugee
 out there and right here.
Together.
I know we grow weary.
The warnings are all around us,
And the explanations are right there.
Nevertheless, for the sake of love
 whose public face is justice,
May we persist.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew 06/20/2019 from <https://universityucc.org/sermons> then to "More Podcasts" and SoundCloud as needed.