

For the past month, we've been meditating on *Virtues [that] Renew the World*. So far we have mediated on the virtues of wisdom, self-control, and justice. Today we turn our attention to the virtue of courage. You may have noticed that these are four classical cardinal virtues, known by slightly different names—prudence, temperance, justice, and courage. In other words, these qualities have shaped women and men with strong moral character for thousands of years. No need to re-create the wheel. We turn to ancient words and stories to conform our character into the likeness of Christ—the perfection of all virtues.

We've been attuned to stories these past five weeks, too. We acquire moral character [virtue] when we see ourselves as characters in a story. I might forget the subtleties about the nature of wisdom, but I remember the Lord's words to Solomon when he built the Temple. I may not understand the intricacies of justice, but I remember the story of Charleston Christians who forgave the murderer of their family members. We acquire moral character when we see ourselves as characters in a story, as David Brooks has said.

Today is no different. When we look for the virtue of courage in the Old Testament, we have profound examples in Esther and Mordecai. So let's continue as we've begun. Let's search for courage in ancient times and the stories of old.

So we go to that ancient and distant land—Babylon. That's where our story opens. To give you some modern bearings, Babylon would be in modern-day Iraq. But even in those days, the names could change quickly between kings and kingdoms. King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Israel and subjected her to harsh exile far from her home. After 70 years of exile, King *Cyrus* comes to power as the ruler of the Persian Empire, granting Israel freedom to return home. So Israel returns to Jerusalem in ruins—but not all of Israel. Many Jews *remain* in the Persian empire after the exile ends, after *Cyrus* dies, after his son *Darius* dies, even when *Darius'* son *Ahasuerus* takes the Persian throne. In that number of Jewish men and women living in

Persia during Ahasuerus' reign is a young orphaned girl named Hadassah, a Jewish name resembling a myrtle tree. And her name foreshadows her destiny if you understand the symbol of the myrtle tree. For Isaiah promised, 'Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle...I will put in the wilderness, the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive [tree.]' So would Hadassah become in the wilderness of Persia. But we know this orphan girl neither by the name of Hadassah nor Myrtle, but Esther.

We don't know why or how Esther became an orphan, but her life begins in vulnerability. She's the child of exiles, exiles who died without a homecoming. She's only heard stories about Zion. Her eyes have never seen Solomon's Temple. The lone vestige of her parents' faith is found in her uncle, Mordecai. Here is a true Israelite, a man of integrity and character, even when he lives in a foreign land. Here is a man who takes his orphaned niece into his own household, welcoming her as his own daughter.

Mordecai and Esther live in a fortress town in the Persian Empire—Susa, as it was known. As Esther grows up from a girl to a young lady in Mordecai's house, she's turning heads of all the lads in Susa. She's stunning. But something else turns everyone's attention in Susa, not on her streets, but in the royal courts. King Ahaseures—or Xerxes, as he was also known—is enraged at his queen, Vashti. Here is no example of loving, humble husband. Xerxes only cares about Xerxes. So King Xerxes makes it known he wants a new queen.

In the search for a new queen, all the young women of Susa are brought into Xerxes' court. It's like an ancient beauty contest. You could think of this as Persia's Next Top Model. The most beautiful contestant becomes queen! Only there's no panel of judges—only Xerxes and his adolescent desires.

Esther joins the contest, but with specific instructions from Mordecai—don't reveal that you're a Jew. When Esther comes before Xerxes, he's none the wiser that she's a daughter of Israel, the people who worship Yahweh alone. All he sees is what every boy in Susa already knew—she is the most beautiful woman in the city. When Xerxes sees Esther, the contest is over.

Xerxes wants Esther to be his new queen. Now an incognito Jewish exile occupies the highest office available to women in the Persian Empire.

With Esther's establishment as queen, Mordecai has access to the royal court. In the early days of Esther's reign, Mordecai learns of an assassination plot on Xerxes. He discloses the plot to the king, leading to the arrest of the assassins, and Mordecai earns the king's favor.

Mordecai's loyalty and virtue would lodge in the king's memory, but in those days, Xerxes was even more enamored with another servant of the court—Haman. If the Book of Esther became a film, you'd hear a minor key change in the soundtrack when Haman enters the scene. The slow bellow of double bass strings. Haman would wear dark clothes.

Haman's ascent in Xerxes' court was swift. Xerxes appoints him second in command over the whole Persian Empire. Beyond his office as Xerxes' #2, the most important detail you need to know about Haman is that Haman *really* likes Haman. Haman likes his velvety seat next to Xerxes. Haman thinks he's super-human. So Haman requires all humans to bow before him when they enter his presence.

And it is Haman's hubris that sends our story into crisis. Everyone in Susa who appeared before Haman bowed before Haman. But Mordecai would not bend the knee. He was far from home, but the Law of God was written on his heart. 'You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not bow down to them or serve them.' Like his forefathers in the Babylonian exile; like Daniel before King Darius and the lion's den; like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego before Nebuchaddnezar and the fiery furnace, Mordecai refuses to bend the knee before an imposter 'deity.' God saved his forefathers from previous Babylonian kings. Haman wasn't even king.

Time and again Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman. And this becomes the moment that Mordecai chooses to reveal his faith. Remember Mordecai advised Esther to conceal her identity as a Jew—a Yahweh worshipper—a secret in early days. But times have changed since then.

Mordecai knows it's time to reveal that he is a Jew—just like Daniel, just like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

*Mordecai is a man who knows what time it is.* And so we learn that courage means knowing what time it is. How do you know what actions are called for in which times? Only by drawing near to the Holy One. Virtues are like a web, or a network—they are interconnected. By wisdom, by patient listening, by perception, the wise person discerns the times. And even when adversaries align against the people of God, the wise person knows it's time for courage, even when that requires costly obedience.

Mordecai's revelation sets in motion a crisis for the people of God. Haman doesn't just have a vendetta against Mordecai. This isn't Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr going to the courtyard to settle their dispute in a duel. No, Haman rages with anger against Mordecai and all Jews throughout the Persian Empire. He drafts a sinister, demonic policy for Xerxes' pen—the Empire will enact a one-day genocide against all Jews throughout its 127 provinces.

Given this dreadful plot, Mordecai draws near Esther, speaking to her as a father to his daughter, but also the Queen of Persia. 'Do not think you will escape death because you live in the king's palace. If you keep silent, God will deliver his people from another place. My dear, who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?'

Esther has a courageous father in Mordecai. His courage discerns the time. But Mordecai doesn't have access to the king like Esther. Esther can persuade the one man who can stop this evil genocide. But she must break the law to do so. She has to enter the court of her husband, Xerxes, without invitation. We're not talking about a mild breach of court protocol here. Esther's entrance into Xerxes' presence on *her* initiative could mean her life. And Esther knows it. /

Do you think she was afraid? Scripture is silent on the matter. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't. But this I believe about courage. To be courageous doesn't mean the absence of fear. *It means fearing the right thing or the right*

*person*. The presence of fear in the human heart does not disqualify a person from courageous action. Moses may have stuttered in Pharaoh's presence, he may have needed Aaron to help him, but courage was saying 'Thus saith the Lord' anyway, even if his voice quaked.

Yes, courage does not require the absence of fear, it means fearing the right things. And only God deserves our holy fear, nothing else. Surely Mordecai and Esther knew the words of a King greater than Xerxes—King David, who wrote, 'The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?'

I'm reminded of words spoken by an Orthodox pastor who said, 'Fear cannot tolerate a steady gaze.' When you gaze at those earthly realities that spark fear, over time you will see they are nothing to fear. Because you will see them in light of the Great One, God Almighty.

So when Mordecai comes to Esther and says, 'It's time,' Esther has been trained in courage and she responds with bold action. She tells Mordecai to gather all the Jews in Susa and observe a three day fast. And then she speaks these courageous words, 'Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.' You see, courage not only knows the present time, *courageous people count the cost for action today and trust God with their tomorrows*. Both Mordecai and Esther believed God would be faithful beyond their personal success. Mordecai believed God would deliver his people one way or another. Esther trusted God even if Xerxes took her life as soon as she opened the doors of his royal chambers.

Time doesn't permit me to complete this wonderful story in entirety. I must summarize, for I want to tell you a modern Esther story, too. But in Esther's story, God used Esther's courage to save his people. In a series of events surrounding a feast that Esther hosted—a story of wisdom all its own—Xerxes revokes the genocide plot against the Jews. The rest of Esther's story is a series of reversals. Haman falls out of favor with Xerxes and *Mordecai* takes his seat. Haman had been constructing gallows for

*Mordecai*, but Haman meets his death on the gallows he built. Not only is the genocide against Israel overturned, but Israel actually conquers her enemies in the months following.

So the story of Esther and Mordecai is not only a story of courage, but *how courage throws evil in reverse*. [Repeat] God could have thrown evil in reverse another way, but Esther said yes when the times called for courage, to risk her life for her people. Esther's courage renewed the world.

In another era, in another land, when Germany exiled Jews in concentration camps, a young woman stood with the courage of Esther, though her life was *not* saved like the Queen of Persia. As faithful Christians witnessed the rise of the Nazi government in their homeland, some young students resisted that repressive regime in the name of Christ.

Sophie Scholl was a university student in Munich at the height of World War II. With her brother and a group of deeply devoted Christian friends, Sophie distributed leaflets at the University of Munich, calling for non-violent resistance to Nazi policies. Like Esther, she knew the times called for courage even though it was against the law, even though she might die.

Soon she was arrested and stood in a Nazi court awaiting her sentence for treason. When the judge announced that she would be executed, Sophie's reported response was this: "where we stand today, you will stand soon." She had immersed herself in the stories of the saints; she trusted in the God who would vindicate her.

On the day of her execution, prison guards led Sophie from her cell to an open yard, vacant except for the presence of a guillotine. When she entered the execution yard, Sophie said: "How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause? Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go, but what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"

Courage always throws evil in reverse. You might not see evil conquered on the day of a martyr's death; you might not see the fruits of courage for

many years. But the Holy Spirit takes the courageous acts of the saints and sows those actions in the soil of his Church for later generations to harvest. For courage is not for my own virtue, it is a sacrificial action so that others might live.

So take courage, my brother and sister. Do not fear the fear within. Fear cannot tolerate a steady gaze. Open your Bible this week and search for the many places when God the Father and God the Son say, 'take heart' or 'take courage.' For they are one and the same command. When the Lord is your light and your salvation, *courage is there for the taking*. And just like Hadassah-Myrtle-Esther, you and I can grow in courage, even in the wilderness, and trust that 'Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off<sup>1</sup>.' In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55.13