

Sermon: The Salt of Courage
Scripture Readings Esther 4; Mark 9:42-50
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Our first reading from the Book of Esther is the Old Testament basis for the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim is celebrated in the spring and characterized by feasting at home, sending gifts of food to friends, and making charitable donations to those in need. The festival recalls the courage and integrity of a young woman who risked her life on behalf of her people. Esther is dated around the fourth century (Before the Common Era) when the Persians ruled this part of the world. The ancient biblical story begins by telling us how Esther came to be queen. The former Queen Vashti refused to submit when the king summoned her after a seven-day drinking binge. Outraged the King announced a decree in all the land that every man should be master in his house and all the young, beautiful virgins were summoned before him to be chosen to replace Queen Vashti. Esther was selected and kept her Jewish identity hidden. When Esther learned from her uncle Mordicai (who was more like a father to her) that one of the King's officers, Haman, issued a decree to annihilate all of the Jews, she devised a plan to go before the king and ask for mercy on behalf of her people. Hear now God's Word.

4 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; 2 he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 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. 4 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. 5 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. 6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 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. 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." 17 Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Amen.

Our second reading is found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 42-50. Jesus continues in conversation with his disciples on his way to the cross about what it means to have integrity in their faith. Then using metaphors, Jesus directs the disciples to cut those things that lack integrity from their lives. These metaphors, which sound severe to us would have been familiar during Jesus' time and emphasize how serious Jesus is about keeping faith and protecting the most vulnerable among us. Hear now God's Holy Word.

42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me,^[a] it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell,^[b] to the unquenchable fire.^[c] 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.^{[d][e]} 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell,^[f] 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 "For everyone will be salted with fire.^[g] 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it?^[h] Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Amen.

Title of the sermon "The Salt of Courage"

The Text: *"Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another." Mark 9:50*

Let us pray. Holy God, we thank you for the salt of courage within your disciple Esther, for the choices she made, and for the risks she took on behalf of others. May our lives be made of the same substance and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

In the movie "It's A Wonderful Life" George and Mary Bailey generously help one Italian family, the Martinis, move into their new home in Bailey Park, where four-room frame houses have been constructed for immigrant families. Mary and George offer a brief speech at the Martinis' doorstep during a housewarming party, symbolically holding up a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine, and a box of salt:

Bread - that this house may never know hunger.

Wine - that joy and prosperity may reign forever.

Salt - that life may always have flavor.

Salt has been a necessity of life and a beloved commodity from the beginning of time. From antiquity, salt was not only used as a condiment, adding flavor to food, it was also known for its preservative qualities. Food was able to be stored because of salt.

There are many references to salt in the Bible. Job asks. *"Can that which is tasteless be eaten, without salt?"* Elisha purifies the spring at Jericho with salt. The expression *"covenant of salt"* expresses mutual loyalty. Covenants made over a meal meant one was bound to another in loyalty. Jesus spoke of his faithful disciples as the *"salt of the earth"* and encouraged his followers to *"have salt in yourselves."*

Although we have learned in recent times that too much salt is not good for one's diet, to have salt as a part of one's character not only flavors one's life, it preserves and purifies one's being, and enhances one's relationships!

Those who have salt also have courage, perseverance, and integrity in the choices they make and the promises they keep. Those who have salt have substance! When circumstances and times call for it, they are able to act with courage and honor. Those who have salt are earthy, spicy and tough, they are willing to take a stand for what they believe. There is a certain bite to their character!

The story of Esther reveals a salty, young woman. *"for just such a time as this..."* These familiar words from this ancient story were spoken by Mordicai to Esther regarding her position of power at a time when her people who have known oppression now have their very existence threatened.

"Who knows?" Mordicai wonders out loud with his niece Esther, *"Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."*

As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Esther understands the meaning of these words and believes that God is working in the coincidences and the circumstances of her life. This perspective gives purpose to her position and prosperity which provide an opportunity for her to become an instrument of God in protecting the oppressed.

At some point Esther makes a conscious decision to be faithful to her concealed identity as a Jew, and to her people. She didn't have to risk anything, but Esther chose to risk her life by approaching this unpredictable, irrational, misogynist king in the inner court on behalf of her people.

Esther's courage reveals the salt of her character. Esther's choice reveals the substance of her integrity. Esther's timing—knowing when to keep silent and when to speak reveals the wisdom of her self preservation. Esther knew who she was, to whom she belonged, and she was faithful to her identity. Esther's story is a message of hope for those of us, men and women alike, who sometimes struggle to understand God's will in the circumstances of our lives. Esther encourages us to act within those circumstances to bring hope and healing to others and to advocate for the oppressed.

This week the nation was riveted by the testimony of a woman who risked her reputation speaking in the inner court of the U.S. Senate. Psychologist Dr. Christine Blasey Ford testified about an alleged sexual assault with the Supreme Court Nominee, Brett Kavanaugh.

It was twenty-seven years ago in the Fall of 1991 that another woman risked her reputation speaking in the inner court of the U.S. Senate. Attorney, Civil Rights activist, Professor and Presbyterian Anita Hill testified about an alleged sexual harassment in the workplace with then Supreme Court Nominee, Clarence Thomas.

Anita Hill's pioneering and courageous voice, a quarter of a century ago, brought a new public awareness to issues of equality, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the workplace. The fruits of her salty steadfastness initially led to a wave of women elected to public office and ultimately led to a wave of women coming forth to describe their own experiences with sexual harassment as part of the #MeToo movement that took root in late 2017.

Two weeks ago during our Congregational meeting two young salty women courageously stood up to affirm gender and marriage equality within our faith community.

During our trip to Eastern Europe this summer, Peter and I were reminded of the history of communist repression which silenced dissenting voices for forty years as well as the final fruits of sacrificial solidarity, political protest, and governmental reform which brought down the Iron Curtain shortly before Anita Hill's testimony.

May each of us have the substance, the toughness, and the salt of courage to give voice, to advocate, and to protect those we love. May our faith begin by letting go, by being willing to give up what seems certain in order to take risks for others.

May we be willing to invest in this faith community with our talents and financial support, grateful for the privilege of being a part of something larger than our individual lives. May we be found faithful, well-flavored and well-preserved servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.

Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another. Amen.