

... *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.*

Esther 4:12-14 ... Each week we are visiting with a familiar biblical story which invites us to listen and respond with courage, trust, & live with hope. Today the focus is with a well-known expression from Esther.

The book of Esther is set about 60 years after the Persians have defeated the Babylonians (479BC) and many of the Hebrew people have returned from exile to their homeland. Remember, the people were encouraged to bloom... and some of the Jews decided to stay living there, now part of the Persian Empire.

The story of Esther takes place in the royal city of Susa, where King Xerxes maintained a palace.

One other fun fact about the book of Esther... it is one of only two books in the Bible to not name God in a direct manner (also Song of Solomon). Careful reading of these books will show that, though not directly mentioned, God is at work behind the scenes... a lot like prevenient grace...throughout the stories.

The book begins with a '*fifth-century BC version of The Bachelor*'¹. The king is searching for a new queen and all the beautiful 'bachelorettes' (*virgins* in the text) are brought before him. They come in one each day so he can choose his favorite. Esther is one of the women brought in, and she ends up the new queen.

Esther is an orphan who was raised by her uncle, Mordecai. She is beautiful, smart and courageous. She is, also, Jewish, which her uncle believes she should keep secret.

Back in the palace, the king elevates Haman to be in charge of all the other officials. The king also orders that all people should bow down whenever Haman approaches. Esther's uncle Mordecai refuses to bow down (sound familiar ala Daniel?). Haman is aware that Mordecai is Jewish and, taking offense, asks the king to order the death of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Tragic, isn't it, that the Jewish people have been targeted so many times throughout history.

¹¹ Hamilton, Adam. 'Day Eighteen' in *Living Unafraid: Lessons on Hope from 31 of the Bible's Most Loved Stories*. New York: Convergent Books, 2019.

The king signs the decree, completely unaware that this order includes his own queen.

Mordecai learns of the order and begs Esther to speak to the king. Esther is afraid, for no one can approach the king unless summoned. Esther had not seen the king for a month. Mordecai challenges Esther, as we heard in the text, to speak out and stand up...not remain silent in the face of pending genocide.

Mordecai is clear in his statement of faith... that God's people will be saved by someone, if not Esther. Mordecai suggests that perhaps her place in the royal family is by God's unseen work.

The rest of the story is that Esther, buoyed by community fasting, does stand up and speak out... and the people are saved from destruction.

John Wesley commented, '*we should every one of us consider, for what end God has put us in the place where we are? And when an opportunity offers serving God and our generation, we must take care not to let it slip.*'² Who knows, perhaps you have come into your place, position and sphere of influence for such a time as this? We can remain silent... or we can stand with and speak for another. Proverbs 31:8 puts it like this... '*Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable*'. Make no mistake; this requires moral courage, faith and strength in the Lord.

There have been many opportunities to remember those who took such action in our time... MLK, John Lewis, Ruth Bader Ginsberg... but I am also referring to those who stand with the grieving families and friends and colleagues who because of the shade of their skin are also targeted, the clothes of culture that are worn or the place where they worship has a different name than 'church' or a sacred text that is different than a bible. One of our UMC congregations had a member, an immigrant family member living in the church property, employed by the church, and was taken under false pretenses by ICE. The wife & children are safe and here, but Binsar was taken, first to Baltimore, and then to GA... and now is unknown in whereabouts. You can speak up and say something...I have called and signed petitions to protest this action. They are in active in applying for

² Wesley, John. *Notes, Esther, 4:14*. In *The Wesley Study Bible Common English Bible*. Nashville, 2012. 638.

citizenship. There are many injustices that are occurring even now, in the news or not. See something, say something... this is the phrase that came out of the Holocaust Museum... the concern for bad actors, the concern for people abusing the position and power they have. Let us not be silent when there are voiceless persons who need us to stand up and speak out.

Let's pray ... Lord, you know there have been many times when I have been too afraid to speak out or stand up. Give me courage and strength, Lord, to use whatever influence you've entrusted to me to speak out on behalf of the voiceless. Use me to positively shape my community and this world, that it might look more like your kingdom. Amen.