**Telling the story of … ESTHER** June 6th, 2021

I really like our children’s story today by Bernard Waber. It really sums up all the things about courage, from everyday kinds of courage, to awesome courage.

It reminds us that we need courage to do things for the first time, things that are maybe difficult for us to do, and courage to do things that we might not want to do. I know my husband needs courage whenever we fly anywhere, and I need courage whenever I see a snake.

But this little story also reminds us that we need courage to stand up for others, for those that might be smaller than us, or for those that maybe are being hurt.

We need courage to speak the truth, even if it means we are not liked or we get in trouble for it; and we need to courage to change things.

That’s a lot of times when we need courage!

But this little children’s book also reminds us about the positive nature of courage. When we are brave enough to step up or speak up with courage, then we can see things grow in the most adverse conditions - like the blade of grass in an icy storm. And, when we do act with courage, then we can dream for better things ahead – helping and supporting each other with courage.

Wow! This is a good story for us today, in these times when we really do need courage.

But the need for courage is not new. Our scripture today teaches us that.

The story of Esther is a story about courage.

To begin with, Esther needed courage when she was very small and was left an orphan after both her parents had died – she would have been alone and lost, probably frightened, and she would have needed courage to keep going.

Later, as a young girl, she needed courage to leave her uncle, and to head off to strange environment of the King’s palace. We are not sure exactly how old she would have been, but she was likely not more than 13 years old. And, although every girl might dream of being a princess, it’s quite possible that Esther did not want to go through with this plan. She needed courage!

And we are told that Esther needed to hide her Jewish identity since Jews were not liked in Persia. This must have taken courage too. She couldn’t confide in any of the other girls around her. She had to keep her faith and her Jewish heritage a secret for fear of being discovered and thrown out.

When King Xerxes chose Esther to be his Queen, that must have been exciting for her. But what we might forget is that Esther was just a young girl, a virgin, probably only around 13 years old, and she was taken by an older man. I am sure that took courage too!

And finally, of course, it took courage to stand up to King Xerxes and to request that her people would be saved. Esther knew the rules of the palace. Even though she was the queen, she could not even come into the King’s presence without being commanded; she could not speak unless spoken to; she could never argue or disagree with him in anyway. Queen Vashti had done that – and look where it got her! No. Esther knew her place as woman, even if she was the Queen. So, speaking up to save her people would be at the cost of losing her life - and it took Great Courage!

But the story of Esther is also a story of faith. The story that we read in the bible does not tell us that Esther prayed before meeting with the King – but we do know that she fasted for three days and nights, and fasting was a practice to seek atonement from God, and to seek Divine favor. It’s not a big leap to imagine that Esther must have come to God in prayer during those three days of fasting.

Mordecai certainly had faith that God’s hand was with her. He reminds her that God put her in the royal position to speak up - so surely God will give her courage to do what she has to do.

Perhaps faith and courage always go hand in hand.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians he reminds them to “*Stand firm in faith, be courageous.”* (1 Corinth. 16: 13), and Jesus himself said, *“Take courage; have faith, it is I. Do not be afraid.”* (Matt. 14:27)

It is clear that the message for us today is that when we have faith in God, then, through the power of the Spirit, we can have courage, and we can overcome our deepest fears.

Esther had the faith and the courage to stand firm, and the courage to speak up, and as a result, her people were saved.

Do we have that same courage today?

We cannot ignore that Tuesday June 1st marked the beginning of Gay Pride month. But it is not just a celebration of pink shirts and rainbow flags.

We need to understand that our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community face discrimination on a sometimes-daily basis.

In principle I know that we welcome anyone that is lesbian, gay, bi, transgender, or queer.

But in practice, do we have the courage to talk about what it means to an affirming community of faith?

We cannot ignore inherent and systemic racism that continues to exist.

Just over a week ago was the one-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd. It was a tragic murder that sparked the Black Lives Matter movement.

But how much has changed in the year?

Do we have the courage to continually call for an end to systemic racism.

And, of course, we cannot ignore the tragic discovery of the 215 indigenous children in unmarked graves.

We need the courage to speak up and demand action.

We need the courage to listen and to allow space for painful stories to be heard.

We need the courage to walk a journey of healing and discovery.

You might wonder sometimes – what can you do in rural SW Ontario?

What difference can you make?

Well, I imagine that the young girl Esther wondered the same thing.

But her story teaches us that God can use anyone who has faith – even a young teenager!

Esther’s story teaches us how faith and courage can go hand in hand.

It teaches us that when we are willing to stand firm with courage, God will faithfully provide all that we need to do amazing things.

It’s not easy to change a history of discrimination.

It takes courage!

But through the power of the Spirit, God can give us the courage to speak up, to stand up, and to work together to co-create a new tomorrow.

And when we have that kind of holy courage, this story teaches us that things can change, and we can dream of a better future. Amen.