

19th Sunday after Pentecost (Yr. B)
Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22
September 30, 2018
The Rev. Carenda Baker

“Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”
(Esther 4:14)

Who are your heroines and heroes? Think on that; I’ll invite you to name some of them in just a bit. I have to confess I’ve taken a particular shining to Wonder Woman since the movie was released in May, 2017. I’ve watched it several times in the past six months. I’ve read all the Harry Potter books, and I’ve recently watched again 5 of the 7 Harry Potter movies in the past two months. I’m drawn to the leading character Harry, and his wise, wizard mentor Albus Dumbledore.

We are drawn to stories of real human dilemmas that ask eternal questions. Can good really triumph over evil? Can violence be met by nonviolent resistance and be turned back by soul force? Can forces that oppose God be redeemed through suffering love? Will the meek and lowly ever be lifted up one day, for good? Can the high and lofty ones get beyond themselves to learn compassion and humility? Can we face and move through adversity – bear its barbs and scars, and come into a deeper, richer, God-filled gracious and compassionate place?

Every day, cynicism and skepticism, fear, isolation and despair can easily take hold of us and tempt us to give up on hope, faith, and love. This is the very reason we need heroines and heroes. Heroes and heroines are important because they are linked to the drive to be better than we are. We are drawn to heroines and heroes because we all secretly yearn and *want to become them*.

Heroines and heroes don’t start out that way. They are shaped in a process of “becoming” over time. Name any real life heroine or hero of yours and you will see this is true. And I hope among your heroes and heroines you identify some whose names are not widely known, the ones who come from our everyday lives, may even be among your friends and family – volunteer firefighters, EMTs, and police personnel; emergency room medical staff; teachers; caseworkers with the Office of Aging and Children and Youth services; addictions and trauma counselors. Who is your heroine or hero? (Invite congregation to name them aloud).

In today's first reading, we heard a portion of the book from the Hebrew Scriptures, Esther. No other book of the Hebrew Bible has received such mixed reviews from good, God-fearing people – both Jews and Christians – as Esther. There has been controversy about whether it should be included in the canon of Scripture.

Some criticize the book for what it contains; others for what it lacks. For instance, the Persian king, Ahasuerus is mentioned 190 times, but the God of Israel, not once. There is no mention of such foundational Jewish practices and beliefs as Torah, covenant, prayer, worship, distinctive dress, or food laws. The book of Esther is part harem tale, court intrigue, and success and deliverance story. And unfortunately, it also contains a generous helping of hatred and vengeful, bloodthirsty come-uppance killing, the likes of which the psalmists at times pleaded with God to pursue on their behalf. The book of Esther was deemed by some “not religious enough”, so later 107 verses were added to “clean it up” and make it sound more acceptably religious.

Esther *is* a thoroughly human story. It is a story about how the Jewish feast of Purim came into being. Purim commemorates the exiled Jews' deliverance from those in a position to destroy them. The Jews living in exile in Persia are first threatened with extermination and then there is a great reversal of fortune.

This is also a story of irony, a dark comedy that reveals the posturing of the proud as foolishness. First, King Ahasuerus, the ruler of the entire Middle East is thwarted by his wife, Queen Vashti when he tries to display her as a trophy at a feast. Then the scheming Haman, the king's right hand man, becomes jealous of a Jewish man's favor with the king. Haman deceitfully got the king to order the extermination of the Jewish people. Haman has the gallows built to hang Mordecai, the Jewish man of whom he is jealous. But Haman ends up being hanged on his own gallows when his plot is exposed.

How is this reversal accomplished? By militia and a palace coup? No. By an orphaned girl, Esther, isolated in the Persian harem, and chosen by the king, because of her beauty to become his replacement queen.

Counseled by her uncle, Mordecai, Esther first hides her true identity as a Jew – who knows for how long. When Mordecai learns of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews, he asks Queen Esther to intervene with the king on their behalf – herself and all her and Mordecai's people.

The law said that if anyone went to the king's inner court without being summoned, they would be put to death – no exceptions, unless the king held out his golden scepter

allowing them to speak. “The king hasn’t called to see me for a month”, Esther tells Mordecai.

Mordecai replies to her: *“Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise 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.**”* (Esther 4:12-14). This line of Haman’s is the most well-known line in the entire book of Esther.

When the time is right, Esther from her privileged position intercedes on behalf of her people. She risks her life, and fulfills her destiny – one greater than she had ever dreamed of.

It seems Esther is the 165 BCE version of Wonder Woman!

Many centuries after the story of Esther was first told, following the end of World War II, German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller, at first a supporter of the Third Reich, who grew to oppose the rise of the Nazi regime said:

“First they came for the Communists (socialists), and I did not speak out—because I was not a Communist (socialist).

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me”.

In the face of adversity, risk and danger, even threat to life, what emboldens people to use their personal agency to face that adverse situation in front of them? Why do people seize the moment, use the resources God has given them, and act? And how exactly does God fit into the picture?

God fits in the picture because we are created in the image of God. We are imprinted with goodness and love, and like God our Creator, deep down part of us wants to give and share goodness and love. Humanity was created not to live in isolation, but in community with others. Esther was not all alone in her dilemma. She was the only queen of Persia in that moment, but she had a mentor in her uncle Mordecai. The presence of wise mentors is invaluable. Their counsel can be life-saving and life-giving. Mentors are a gift from God. At Mordecai’s urging, Esther acts in solidarity with him and her people when she asks the king to spare their lives. When we act from the

foundation of God's goodness and love, we will naturally want to eliminate and prevent suffering - for ourselves, yes, but for others, too. Being in solidarity with others means we recognize that life is not all about us, all about me. There is a bigger picture, a larger common good that we are called to tend. This is what heroines and heroes do – they move beyond themselves to tend the greater common good. Those who have the courage to act move beyond cynicism and skepticism, through desperation. They seize the courage to act and expand the horizons of possibility which have become too cramped.

This is part of what Jesus was saying to his disciples when they complained to him that someone else, not part of their group, someone not explicitly a follower of Jesus, was casting out demons using Jesus' name. Heroes and heroines – those who act for the greater good, those who act in love – can come from anywhere. They can be of a different race, religion or no religion, gender, social class, educational status. Most heroines and heroes are not famous or well known. They may not be aware that God is using them. But watch for them! Don't dismiss or discount them, says Jesus. They are life-preservers, acting like salt to keep alive the good, the gracious love of God which will not be contained or stamped out. Pay attention, says Jesus. And keep alive that same salty savoriness in yourselves.

And in our day? ***Who knows? Maybe you and I were made for just such a time as this.*** Amen.