

"Courage under Fire"
Esther 7:1-6,9-10, 9:20-22

A mouse looked through a crack in the wall to see the farmer and his wife opening a package; what food might it contain? He was terrified to discover that it was a mouse trap! Retreating to the farmyard, the mouse proclaimed the warning, "There is a mouse trap in the house, there is a mouse trap in the house." The chicken clucked and scratched, raised her head and said, "Mr. Mouse, I can tell you this is a grave concern to you, but it is of no consequence to me." The mouse turned to the pig and told him, "There is a mouse trap in the house." "I am so very sorry Mr. Mouse," sympathized the pig, "but there is nothing I can do about it but pray." The mouse turned to the cow, who replied, "Like wow, Mr. Mouse, a mouse trap; am I in grave danger, Duh?" So the mouse returned to the house, head down and dejected to face the farmer's mouse trap alone. That very night a sound was heard throughout the house, like the sound of a mouse trap catching its prey. The farmer's wife rushed to see what was caught. In the darkness, she did not see that it was a venomous snake whose tail the trap had caught. The snake bit the farmer's wife. The farmer rushed her to the hospital. She returned home with a fever. Now everyone knows you treat a fever with fresh chicken soup, so the farmer took his hatchet to the farmyard for the soup's main ingredient. His wife's sickness continued so that friends and neighbors came to sit with her around the clock. To feed them, the farmer butchered the pig. The farmer's wife died and so many people came for her funeral the farmer had the cow slaughtered to provide meat for all of them to eat. So the next time you hear that someone is facing a problem and think that it does not concern you, remember that when the least of us is threatened, we are all affected.

In our Bible story from today, the main character Esther hears about a plot to kill all of her people, the Jews. Now, from her end of things, she could have kept silent as this was really not affecting her, but she didn't. She went to the king and exposed the plot of Haman and saved her people. In fact, we are told that she risked her own life to rescue the lives of her people. In order to appreciate fully the message of this book, we have to look at its background. This is a story that the Jewish people have told for generations. This book is a novella (which is a written, fictional, prose narrative longer than a novelette but shorter than a novel) set in Persia during the Exile (486 to 465 BCE.). Ahasuerus the king has banished Queen Vashti for her disobedience. Esther, a Jewish orphan, has been brought up by her cousin, Mordecai. When the king seeks a new queen, Mordecai offers her as a candidate, without revealing that she is Jewish. She is chosen. Mordecai then discovers a plot to assassinate the king; he tells Esther, who tips off the king. Then the king's life is spared. Later on the prime minister of the king plots to kill all the Jews because Mordecai refused to bow to him. So, Mordecai asks Esther to intervene for her people. But that was a great risk for Esther. Even though she was technically the queen, she had no power. She was supposed to respond to the needs of the king and only appear in his presence when summoned. So, to go in and petition the king without being invited would have meant possibly offending the king and being put to death. Esther had a lot to lose and not much to gain personally by trying to save her people. As a disempowered woman, she could have just followed the path of being passive and waited for someone else to take care of the problem. But the moral of the story was to show the reversal of roles through faith. The powerless become powerful. Those who are oppressed can make a difference and even change the destiny of many. That is why this story is still celebrated by Jews around the world in the feast of Purim. The Book of Esther explains the origins of the Jewish Feast of Purim, a celebration with feasting, and drinking, and sharing gifts, not just with one another, but also with the poor. Purim is not one of the major feasts of Judaism, but Jewish writers recount vivid childhood memories of hearing the story of Esther read aloud and of play-acting the roles of its

main characters and celebrating Esther's courage. *Purim* means "lots," in reference to Haman's casting lots to decide when to kill the Jews (3:7).

Courage is not always at our disposal in life, especially when things are not going well for ourselves or for others. One of the hardest things to do in life is to face our own pain. Most of us would rather not feel any pain. Most parents when you ask them what they want for their children would say, "We want them to be happy." Our culture goes to great lengths to help us avoid pain. At the first sign of a headache we take Tylenol or something else to get rid of the pain as soon as possible. Sometimes the right thing to do is to say, "Why am I having a headache?" Maybe the headache is telling you that you have been working too hard or that there is too much stress in your day or that you are worried about something. There is nothing wrong with taking a pill to get rid of a headache, but I think sometimes we do this kind of thing too quickly. We have developed other ways to avoid our pain such as shopping, gossip, blaming others for our problems, or excessive use of drugs or alcohol. It is not easy to deal with pain because it hurts. Sometimes we are not even aware that we have any pain to deal with because we have buried it so deeply that it only surfaces in destructive ways. That is why we always need the courage to not go for quick fixes because what is at stake is our own transformation. In his book, *God Has A Dream*, Bishop Desmond Tutu writes, "Dear Child of God, I am sorry to say that suffering is not optional. It seems to be part and parcel of the human condition, but suffering can either embitter or ennoble. Our suffering can become a spirituality of transformation when we understand that we have a role in God's transfiguration of the world." Our transformation cannot happen until we are able to face our pain.

In the same manner, it is hard for most of us to always find the courage to stand up for what is right. There was a test conducted by a university where 10 students were placed in a room. Three lines of varying length were drawn on a card. The students were told to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the longest line. But 9 of the students had been instructed beforehand to raise their hands when the instructor pointed to the second longest line. One student was the stooge. The usual reaction of the stooge was to put his hand up, look around, and realizing he was all alone, pull it back down. This happened 75% of the time, with students from grade school through high school. The researchers concluded that many would rather be president than be right.

It is hard to have courage under fire. That is why we need stories like that of Esther to remind us of what we are capable of with God's help. Standing up for justice at the risk of our own security and safety takes a lot of strength that can only come from the inside, from the place where God dwells in our hearts. Jesus' own ministry reflected this kind of courage. As he faced the pressures of the injustices of his day, he was able to stand firm in God's love. Nothing swayed him away from standing up for the poor and oppressed, even when he had to face a tremendous amount of pain.

The story of Esther asks hard questions for our faith. How are we called to respond to those who are dealers of death in our world? What are we prepared to risk in order to preserve life? Do we have the courage to deal with our own pain to allow transformation to happen? One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the enemy, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became very fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill every man in it unless the young man were handed over to them before dawn. The people went to the minister and asked him what to do. The minister, torn between handing over the boy to the enemy or having his people killed, withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. After many hours, in the early morning his eyes

fell on these words: "It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost." (John 11:50) Then the minister closed the Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village because the minister had saved the lives of the people. But the minister did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him, and asked, "What have you done?" He said, "I handed over the fugitive to the enemy." Then the angel said: "But don't you know that you have handed over the Messiah?" "How could I know?" the minister asked anxiously. Then the angel said: "If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known."

May the courage of Esther inspire you today to face your deepest fears and pain in order to become a strong advocate for those who suffer in our world. Amen.