



First United Church of Oak Park
Courage Is the Root of Change
Esther Books 2 & 4, Selected Verses
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The Book of Esther is a Jewish novella set among the Jewish diaspora community in the Persian empire during the reign of King Ahasuerus.

The story of Esther is one I am very familiar with, not because it is often preached on, but because I was an avid watcher of Veggie Tales growing up. Several Bible stories were brought to life for me by these cartoon vegetables, as well as more than a few catchy silly songs, thanks to Larry the cucumber, but the episode about Esther was a favorite of mine.

The reason we don't preach on Esther much is because her story is only included once in the Revised Common Lectionary as well as once in the Narrative Lectionary. Which means if your church follows the Revised Common Lectionary, as many do, you will hear about Esther once every three years, and if your church follows the Narrative Lectionary, you will hear about Esther once every four years ...that is, IF the preaching pastor opts to stick to the lectionary that Sunday, AND you happen to be in the pews to hear about it.

The rarity of her story coming up in the lectionary is likely due to the fact that both the Jewish and the Christian traditions struggled to afford her story, and Book, canonical status because of its lack of religious elements. There are no prayers, or sacrifices, no mention of Jerusalem or the temple. In fact, there is no mention of God. That's right, a Book in the Bible that does not mention God. However, the Book does contain an underlying theology of the providence of God:

God, though unseen and unacknowledged, is at work through human instruments, namely Mordecai and the heroine of our story, Esther.

It's no wonder to me why this Veggie Tales episode was one of my favorites growing up, because a female-protagonist-underdog-story will always capture my attention. I can even picture myself reading the summary of Esther printed on the inside jacket of its book cover ...

Meet Esther, a powerless woman living in an ancient patriarchal society, who is captured by the King and Emperor, Ahasuerus, along with countless other beautiful virgins, and then chosen and crowned queen. For fear of being killed, she must keep her identity a secret. Little does she know the courage she will need to muster if she is going to save her own people from the genocidal murderous plot of the king's power-hungry right-hand man, Haman. All it will take is revealing the secret of who she is—oh, and risking her life itself.

To all of this, Esther's cousin, Mordecai, says, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

I can only imagine how terrifying this situation must have been for Esther. She is at risk of being killed for who she is, then must risk being put to death just for appearing before the king without being invited. There is no guarantee that she will even get to plead her case, and if she does plead her case there is still a good chance she and all of her people will be killed anyway. The courage it required for her to act and take these steps is unfathomable to me. I greatly admire her courage.

I just recently finished reading a book titled "*Lessons in Chemistry*," by Bonnie Garmus. Chemistry was one of my worst subjects in high school, but since I trust the source that recommended this book to me (my mother), I gave it a shot and started reading. I do know that you can't judge a book by its cover, but as it turns out, not even by its title sometimes. I was hooked almost immediately.

The inside jacket of the cover reads:

"Chemist Elizabeth Zott is not your average woman. In fact, Elizabeth Zott would be the first to point out that there is no such thing as an average woman. But it's the early 1960s and her all-male team at Hastings Research Institute takes a very unscientific view of equality...Like science, though, life is unpredictable. Which is why a few years later Elizabeth Zott finds herself not only a single mother but also the reluctant star of America's most beloved cooking show, Supper at Six. Elizabeth's unusual approach to cooking ("combine one tablespoon acetic acid with a pinch of sodium chloride") proves revolutionary. But as her following grows, not everyone is happy. Because, as it turns out, Elizabeth Zott isn't just teaching women to cook. She's daring them to change the status quo."

Just as it may have been surprising to you to hear that God is never mentioned in the Book or story of Esther, what most surprised me about *Lessons in Chemistry* was how God and religion entered into Elizabeth's story. In response to an audience member's question, Elizabeth reveals her identity as an atheist on television, and as you might imagine, this did not go over too well in the 1960s.

As often happens when one is continually beaten down by the system that marginalizes and oppresses them, Elizabeth Zott began to lose hope, feel discouraged, and lose sight of who she really is. Thankfully, she is reminded by a minister friend who tells her, "Chemistry is change and change is the core of your belief system. Which is good because that's what we need more of—people who refuse to accept the status quo, who aren't afraid to take on the unacceptable..." Or as Mordecai said to Esther with similar encouragement in the face of such a difficult and life-risking situation, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

I can't help but draw parallels between these women, Elizabeth and Esther. Neither one wanted to be where they were, a television personality or a Persian Queen, and even though both women were powerless, in so many ways, they had their position, and their influence, which they both utilized to work within the system to achieve their goals.

Esther risks appearing before the king, revealing the secret of her identity to plead for the lives of her people.

Elizabeth appears on public television, and risks using that platform to plead for change and for women to be that change. She says, "Whenever you start doubting yourself, whenever you feel afraid, just remember, courage is the root of change—and change is what we're chemically designed to do..."

Courage is the root of change.

We may be chemically designed to change, but change isn't easy, and neither is being courageous. There's a reason courage must be mustered, summoned, or prayed for—because courage is only needed to do something really tough, something others have likely failed at, probably more than a few times, like affecting positive change, or upsetting the status quo by advocating for justice and equity.

Courage is one of the primary ingredients in the recipe for a hero.

But that doesn't mean that heroes don't experience fear or doubt; every hero is bound to grapple with these at one time or another. Fear and doubt are the reasons courage is a necessary ingredient; the more fear or doubt you have the more courage you will need to balance them out. Sometimes that courage comes from within, sometimes from without, from those who love and support us.

At the beginning of this sermon series on our Heroes of the Faith, Pastor Lydia preached on a passage from 2 Timothy from which we gleaned four helpful tips for any potential heroes...

1. Remember, you are not alone
2. Remember where you come from
3. Remember who you are
4. Remember your power.

In the two women's stories I've talked about today, each of them does not muster the courage and take the risks she does alone. Each has her people to encourage and support her, to remind her where she comes from, to encourage her to remember and own who she is, and to own the power she has.

These women are heroes. Relatable, courageous, incredible heroes...

One a Persian Jewish queen, the other a humanist atheist chemist.

I know I can't judge a book by its cover, but maybe it's even worse to judge it by its title. For God can do extraordinary things, in unexpected places, through some unexpected, yet incredible people.

Truly. Thanks be to God.

Amen.