

“ORDINARY PEOPLE DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS:  
II – ESTHER”

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Esther 4

Thursday was May 5<sup>th</sup>, and May 5<sup>th</sup> is a special day for me. May 5<sup>th</sup> was my father’s birthday, and he would have been 88 this year. He’s been gone since 2005 and I miss him every single day.

On a happier note, May 5<sup>th</sup> this year was also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of women in the United Methodist Church. On May 5, 1956 at the General Conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, women were given full clergy rights, and Maud Jensen from Central Pennsylvania became the first woman to have full rights as clergy.

But, as you might expect, there were women in ministry in the Methodist tradition before that. All the way back to John Wesley, who sent women into the ministry field, even though they weren’t credentialed, as it were.

And there was one particular woman, a woman by the name of Lea Joyner, who was in ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church South, in Louisiana. Though she was ordained, she did not have clergy rights, and as a result, the denomination did not give her an appointment to serve. Actually, what they said to her was “no church will have you.” Did that stop her? Not at all!

The denomination gave her some money and told her to start her own church in Monroe, Louisiana. I’m not sure it wasn’t just a way of trying to pacify her and make her happy. But Lea took the money and ran with it – and indeed, started her own church – and wait until you hear what happened! By the time she retired from ministry, there were 2200 members in that church, and she had the distinction of having the longest pastorate in Louisiana Conference history!

Now, why did I tell you her story this morning? Well, I think she was not unlike the two women central to the scripture lessons this morning – Esther and Mary. She, like each of them, knew she was called to something more in her life, and even though there was a lot going against her, she said yes and did it anyway.

All of us are well acquainted with Mary’s story, so today, I want to focus on a woman named Esther. Hers is a fascinating story, and I’ll tell you as I begin, that it’s a long and involved story, but it is truly fascinating.

So here goes. Esther's story begins actually before Esther. It begins with a king by the name of Ahaseurus. He was the King of Persia, which was a huge kingdom, so he was a tremendously powerful man. There was perhaps no more powerful man in the world at that time. His kingdom was divided up into 127 provinces that extended from Asia Minor all the way down to Africa, and he ruled his kingdom from the capital city of Susa.

Now, Ahaseurus had a wife by the name of Queen Vashti. One night, at a banquet, King Ahaseurus ordered Vashti to appear at the banquet before his guests with no veil, so as to display her beauty. That was dishonorable, and Vashti refused to obey him.

Well, the King was a mighty powerful man and no one ever said "no" to him, and here his own wife was saying "no" to him, in public, no less. He was furious. He couldn't have it. He couldn't have the people think he was weak. What would they say? Would other wives try to say "no" to their husbands too? Well, he couldn't have it, so she was deposed. She was removed from the king's presence and ordered never to return again.

So now the king needed a new queen. As you can imagine for a man that powerful, there were a lot of candidates. In fact, the process was that a woman was chosen from each of the 127 provinces as a candidate for the job, if you will.

The one who won the contest, if you will, was a young Jewish woman named Esther. Esther's parents had died, and she was being raised by a cousin named Mordecai. And when Esther became queen, Mordecai also obtained a position in the royal household.

One day, Mordecai was sitting near the king's gates, and he overheard two of the officers plotting to kill the king. So he told Esther, and Esther warned the King about it – the officers were hanged, and Mordecai saved the day.

Also in the king's service was a man named Haman. Haman was actually really important in the scheme of things, so much so, that when he passed people, they were required to bow down to him. One day, he passed by Mordecai and Mordecai didn't bow, since, being a Jew, he bowed down to no one but God. Well, Haman, who was a rabid anti-Semite because of his heritage, blew a gasket and made a plan to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire because of it. He took his plan to the king, who approved it.

Well, Mordecai was plunged into despair. He tore his robes and put ashes on his head, as a sign of mourning, and though Esther tried to care for him, it was of no use. He was inconsolable. There was only one thing that could help, and so Mordecai turned to Esther and said that she would have to appeal to the King on behalf of the Jewish people, her people.

Well, in that day and age, you didn't just stroll in and talk to the king, even if you were married to him, you had to be asked in first. It was a terribly risky thing

to do, and it could have led to Esther's death. But Mordecai, looking at the worried face of his young niece said, "Who knows Esther, perhaps you are here in this place for just such a time as this?"

His words apparently moved her, for she took on this incredible task. But before she did, she and her servants fasted and prayed for the strength and courage it took to do it.

And this is what she did. She asked the king to have a banquet, which she knew he would love to do, and which he did. Of course, the evil Haman was present as always. And then after that, Esther requested another banquet with the King and Haman.

Meantime, Haman is having gallows constructed to kill Mordecai. One night, the king was having trouble sleeping, and was having stories read to him, and one of the stories was about the day Mordecai warned of the assassination plot against him. Suddenly, it dawned on the king that Mordecai had not been rewarded for that. The very next morning, Haman strolls in to the king's chamber and asks permission to kill Mordecai, but before he could ask, the king asks him, "What should be done for the man whom the king delights to honor?"

Well, old Haman thought the king was talking about him, of course, and said that the man should wear a royal robe and be led through the city streets to be honored. "Fine," the king replied, "then take Mordecai and give him a royal robe and lead him through the streets." Haman was stunned to realize he wasn't talking about him, but about Mordecai, and rushed out of there to his home.

That night, Esther finally got to talk to the king about Haman's plot to kill all of the Jews, her people. He was outraged, and ordered Haman to be killed, and ironically, he was killed on the very same gallows he had erected to kill the Jews, including Mordecai.

After that, King Ahaseurus appointed Mordecai as his prime minister, and gave the Jews the right to defend themselves against any enemy. They had been saved – the Jews had been saved – because Esther was in the right place at the right time, and she did what was right, although it could have cost her her life.

Once again, an ordinary person answering the call to do something extraordinary. Esther's is an incredible, albeit long story, isn't it? It's incredible that Esther was ever even queen; then, it's incredible that events unfolded in such a way that she was in a position, and she was the only one in such a position, to save the Jewish people from extinction. And it's incredible that she had the courage to do it.

So what does Esther's incredible story have to say to us? Well, a few things, I think. For one, none of us ever knows when we might be in a position, in the right place at the right time, to do something extraordinary for God. Moses last week, and Mary and Esther this week, were just going about their ordinary, everyday

lives when suddenly, a call came for them to do something special. And so it might be with you and me. Oh, we might not be called on to save God's people, but it might be that we're called on to do something that will further God's kingdom in the world.

Perhaps some of you saw something I saw this week, a video clip of a little girl by the name of Mari Copeny running into the arms of President Obama. Mari lives in Flint, Michigan and she's only eight years old. And though she's only eight years old, Mari apparently felt a call in her heart to let the President know, a while ago, how horrible the problem with lead contamination in the water in her town was, and so she sat down and wrote him a letter.

This is some of what she wrote: "Mr. President, hello my name is Mari Copeny, and I'm 8 years old. I live in Flint, Michigan . . . I am one of the children that is affected by this water and I've been doing my best to march in protest and to speak out for all the kids that live here in Flint."

When a reporter asked Mari about what she thought was going to happen when she wrote this letter, she answered frankly, "Nothing." But, to her surprise, the President wrote back, telling her he was proud of her for using her voice to speak on behalf of the children of Flint. She had no idea that a few months later he would come to Flint and she would get to meet him in person.

But even before that happened, after she had received the President's letter, Mari said that she had learned a valuable lesson – that "One girl can change the world, even big or small!" (On-line, CBS News, 5/4/16)

Moses, Mary, Esther, Mari, you or me – one person can change the world, big or small – if we answer the call when it comes, whenever it comes.

Let me suggest something else that we can learn from Esther's story – and that is, to trust the people you love and who love you. Esther totally and completely trusted Mordecai, so much so that she answered the call to do something incredibly risky and dangerous. She so trusted in Mordecai, in his love for her, and his confidence in her, that she was willing to do whatever had to be done to save her people.

I know that whenever I have felt the call of God to do something risky, or something that makes me nervous, it is the counsel of family and friends that helps me move forward. When I heard the call to ministry, and was totally unsure of whether I had the gifts I needed to do it, it was the counsel of family and friends that gave me the courage to say "yes."

Finally, and most importantly, I think the greatest lesson we can learn from Esther, Mary, Moses and all of the other "ordinary/extraordinary" people we'll hear about in this sermon series, is to trust God most of all, and say "Yes" when He calls you to do something. To trust that as you answer whatever call God places in your life that God will be with you all the way. That when you step out on unfamiliar

territory, or have to push past your fear and uneasiness, or have to risk alienating people, or have to leave some things behind – you are never alone – that the God who called you is the God who is with you, and it will be okay.

Don't ignore that tug on your heart, God's call in your life. I remember reading a long time ago something the great preacher and professor Tony Campolo wrote about an experience he had in New York one day. He was in a theatre on Broadway watching *Man of La Mancha*, and "Unexpectedly," he wrote, "the woman next to me started whispering emphatically to her husband, 'Stop that! Stop that! You're embarrassing me!'"

I leaned forward (Campolo continued) and looked at her husband. He was a properly dressed man with all the symbols of upper-middle-class prosperity, but he was sobbing uncontrollably. I knew why he was crying. It was because the man on the stage, Don Quixote, was singing the theme song, 'To Dream the Impossible Dream.' He was singing about beating 'the unbeatable foe' and striving with courage to go where the brave dare not go. He was singing to the audience that the world would be richer because 'one man, bruised and covered with scars,' still strove with all the courage he had to reach an unreachable star. The man was crying because he had lost his dreams. Somewhere along the line (Campolo concluded), he had lost his visions." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, "Overhearing More Things About the Work of the Spirit, p. 70)

Oh my friends, may that not be said of you and me. May we not end up crying someday because we lost our dreams, or regretted not saying "yes" when God called us to do something great.

Oh, may we always be prepared, friends, to do something extraordinary for God - because someday, somehow, somewhere, you – ordinary you – might feel that tug at your heart. When you do – when you feel that tug on your heart that God wants you to do something – do what Esther did – pray and fast, turn to your friends and family for counsel, and most of all, trust that the God who called you to it, will be with you through it, and will give you all you need to do it. Thanks be to God.

Amen.