

“ESTHER: Heroes and Villains”

Romans 5:1-11 • Esther 4:1, 4-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 23, 2020

One of the most compelling themes in literature and movies is heroes versus villains. Perseus versus Medusa. Dorothy versus the Wicked Witch of the West. Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader. The stories of heroes versus villains are really stories about good versus evil, which is why they capture our imagination. They resonate with truth.

It doesn't take us long in life to discover that bad things happen. Unfortunately we also discover that there are bad people who make many of those bad things happen. And so we are drawn to the stories where someone overcomes evil with good.

The story of Esther that we have been studying is at its heart a story of heroes and villains. But one of the things that makes it a great story is that it's a story of an unlikely hero against a most vicious villain. We're going to look at that in a few minutes but first we need to talk about what defines a hero and a villain.

We hear the word hero used a lot these days. The word hero is sometimes used to describe anyone from football players to individuals who hold certain political views. In the same way, even though they may not use the word villain, the concept is applied to people who hold opposite political views. Now not to take away from any of those people, I don't think that fits the definition of hero.

Here's the definition of a hero that I prefer: a person who willingly makes a personal sacrifice for the benefit of others." Notice what that includes. A heroic act is voluntary. It's not something required or even expected. A hero goes above and beyond the call of duty. Second, a heroic act is performed selflessly in service to others who are in need. Third, it's done recognizing the personal risks and possible costs. And fourth, it's performed without the expectation of any kind of reward. Heroes puts others needs ahead of their own, including ahead of their own safety. In fact, these are the

requirements for awarding the Congressional Medal of Honor to men and women in the armed forces. A recipient must have "distinguished himself conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty."

So if a hero is willing to sacrifice to benefit others, then a villain would be just the opposite. A villain sacrifices others in order to advance his own interests. So looking at the story of Esther there are really two characters that we can classify as either hero or villain. Most of the characters are neither one. Mordecai is good but he doesn't risk himself for others. Vashti stands up to the king but it's for her own purposes. She's not trying to help anyone else. Even King Ahasuerus, with all of his bad qualities, is presented as rather inept and is not the main villain and certainly not the hero of the story.

The villain in the story is clearly Haman who is using his position as the Prime Minister to build his wealth and advance his own personal agenda of pride and hatred. Haman can't stand Mordecai who won't bow down to him. So he devises a plan to wipe out all of the Jews in the entire kingdom. That's how great his hatred is toward anyone who would get in the way of his ambition. He's willing to sacrifice others to elevate himself.

On the other hand, the hero is obviously Esther. But she is really quite the unlikely hero, which is the point of the whole book. When Mordecai learned about the decree to annihilate the Jews, we're told he tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and cried out with a loud and bitter cry. This is another one of those thin places where we can almost see God in the story, even though He's not mentioned. The reason is that everywhere else that the Bible mentions sackcloth and ashes it includes prayer and repentance. Later on Esther will ask the Jews to fast before she goes to see the king. Again,

fasting is always accompanied by prayer in the Bible and so it's implied here as well.

Mordecai went and sat at the gate of the palace and Esther's attendants came and told her what he was doing. Esther tried sending him some nicer clothes so he could change but he refused them. So she sent one of her attendants to talk to Mordecai and find out what was wrong. Mordecai explained everything to him and gave him a copy of the decree to show Esther.

Esther's reply is interesting. She basically says "you know that nobody can just show up to see the king without being invited. The penalty is either banishment or death." Esther is basically saying that she would be risking her position as queen if she tried to talk to the king.

Do you see what the problem is? Esther has arrived at her current position through a series of personal compromises. She has hidden her Jewishness. She has used her looks and her body to get to the top. She has slept with a man who wasn't her husband. She has not kept any of the Jewish food laws. At this point in the story, nobody reading this thinks she is a hero. In fact, most people are offended. Tim Keller says this highlights the most important question of the book: "In such a morally, culturally, spiritually ambiguous situation such as this, does God still work with us? *Can* God still work with us? *Will* God still work with us?"

The rest of the book of Esther clearly says YES! What we discover is that God doesn't just use people like preachers and missionaries. He uses ordinary people to accomplish the extraordinary. God uses people like *you* to advance his mission.

After Esther makes her excuses Mordecai warns her that even though there's a risk if she acts, the result of not acting will be certain death. She will be found out. This is where he implies that God has put her there for this situation. When confronted with that choice, something changes in Esther. She was brought to a defining moment in her life. Up until this point she has been passive in the story. She didn't initiate any

action. She was controlled by her circumstances. But now she acts. Esther is transformed from a beautiful young woman with a weak character into what one commentator describes as "a person with heroic moral stature and political skill." When faced with the circumstances she becomes a hero.

What Esther must do to save her people is to be identified with them, which will bring her under the same condemnation. But by being identified with the Jews she could mediate their rescue. She had to be willing to sacrifice her self. Does that sound familiar? In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul says that Jesus lived in the ultimate palace. He is the eternal Son of God. But he willingly "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Jesus didn't say, "If I perish I perish." He said, "*When* I perish I perish." Jesus identified with us and then was able to mediate our rescue by taking on our condemnation. He paid the price of sin so that you won't have to.

So what do we take away from this today? Well, first, God used Esther in spite of all of her major shortcomings. All of her poor decisions were part of who she was and God used all of that to bring about his purpose. Wherever you are in life chances are good that you have compromised somewhere along the way. You've made decisions that you regret or that at least you *should* regret. Maybe you think that disqualifies you from serving God. It doesn't God can and will use you. And the first step is your willingness to be identified with the people of God. That was the turning point in Esther's life and it will be the turning point in yours.

Second, we see that love is always self-sacrifice. Our culture's idea of love is more like King Ahasuerus' idea that it's found in a beauty pageant. But the Bible shows us that love is about giving yourself completely for another. That's what Jesus did for you and for me on the cross. So, most importantly, Esther is not the real hero of the story. And you are not the hero of

your own story. Jesus is the real hero who willingly sacrificed his own perfect life to pay a debt he didn't owe so that you and I could be rescued.

Amen.