

*Holy Spirit, we take these moments now to invite your presence to invade the recesses of our hearts, and the walls of this space. Day to day life sometimes demands more than we have to give, and moments of decisiveness call us to a courage not humanly possible. And yet this is precisely where the risen Savior shows up with faith defying power and peace that passes all of our understanding. And so this morning, Lord, in whatever moment of decision we face, no matter how large or small, I pray that you would fill it with your Spirit, and that we might have the courage to call upon your name. And we pray this not in our own strength, but we do so in the strong name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord, amen.*

I want to invite you to open your Bibles, either the one we've made available to you or the one you've brought with you – even that smart phone you may use for your Bible – open to the book of Esther, chapter 4 beginning at verse 12. When I'm done reading, I'll say, "This is the word of the Lord," so that if you believe it you can say, "Thanks be to God." Listen now, we're reading God's Holy Word.

**And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."**

Where does decisive, death confronting courage come from?

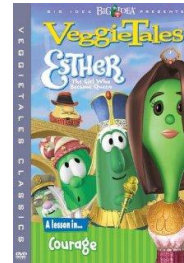
This last June, as summer classes were beginning at Seattle Pacific University, a confused and troubled young man walked onto campus and began firing. And in this moment of chaos, a college student named John Meis—watching this horrific scene unfold—waited until the shooter stopped to reload, and then tackled and subdued the shooter.

As we have watched this week, sadly, our nation has once again entered into another war with a powerful and evil enemy, one can't help but recall that fateful September morning in 2001. One of the stories that emerged that day was that of Flight 93. Terrorists took control of a plane heading for DC, with the White House in their sights, but for the courage and resolve of a man named Todd Beamer (Graduate of Wheaton College), who along with a few others mustered the courage to stand up to their attackers. The story of Todd Beamer will be forever immortalized by the phrase "Let's Roll."

Where does decisive courage come from?

This morning, we are looking together at the story of a woman from the Bible who was faced with a decisive moment. Her entire nation's fate rested upon her shoulders, and she had to decide between one of two options: retreat back to a place of safety and watch her people suffer; or place her trust in a God who is not named, and believe that through her courage her people would be saved.

Now I'd like to say to you that I learned the book of Esther by spending a semester in Seminary pouring over the original Hebrew text in an exegesis class. I'd like to say I picked apart its nuances and turned this biblical gem around to behold its many facets. I didn't. How I learned the story of Esther is through the mouths of cartoon Vegetables. To me, Esther will always be known to me as a green onion.



This morning, we read from chapter 4, but if you'll hang with me for a moment, I want to give you a down and dirty synopsis of the first three chapters.

The story of Esther takes place in the mid 400s BCE, under the reign of a King, whose name in your Bible sounds like the noise you make when you sneeze. And rather than calling him King Sneeze, let's go with his Greek name, which is Xerxes. Xerxes' palace was in a town called Susa, which is modern day Iraq, and it was part of the Persian Empire. This is the point in time where the Jewish people have been taken into captivity by the Babylonians, and so they are captives.

Xerxes decides he wants to through a series of blow out parties to show off the splendor the generosity of the King. So all the officials would come to Susa, they'd have a good time, and in doing so Xerxes would secure their allegiance. As a part of his party, Xerxes decided that he wanted everybody to see his wife. Or as Ricky Bobby calls her in Talladega Nights, his *smokin' hot wife*. So he called Queen Vashti out just to show off what a beautiful woman he had by his side. Problem was, Vashti didn't like this idea, so she didn't come.

Now so that there wouldn't be more of this behavior in the empire, Queen Vashti was deposed; she was sent to the back of the line. And the King decided it was time to find a new woman to be by his side.

There is a rather horrible TV show right now, maybe you've heard of it, it's called the Bachelor/Bachelorette. I've never watched it, but for some incomprehensible reason, intelligent capable women I know do watch it. What King Xerxes decides to do is hold an ancient version of the Bachelorette, and all sorts of women are brought before the King. But the one who caught his eye, the one who he chooses is a young Jewish woman named Esther. So King Xerxes says to her, "Esther will you accept this rose?" And she becomes the new queen.

The King has a right hand man named Haman, and wherever Haman goes, people bow and honor him, except for a young Jewish man on the outskirts of the city named Mordecai. Mordecai will not bend the knee, and this makes Haman nuts. So he goes to the King and says, “King, there is a people who are not loyal. In fact, they’re subversive to you, they will not honor you.” Haman gets the king to issue an edict for the destruction of the Jewish people.

What we learn is that this man Mordecai is a cousin to Esther. In his grief over what he hears is going to happen to his people, he goes to Esther and says, “You need to intervene with the King on our behalf.”

And that’s where we are now in Chapter 4. Esther sends back to Mordecai these words beginning at verse 11: **“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.” And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”**

Esther is a model of heroic courage and faith that is willing to Leap. What we read today is perhaps the most familiar few words from this entire book. Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this? That phrase gets at what we think of and understand when we think of courage. The wherewithal to be able to see that you are placed in a situation, at just the right time, with just the right skills, and then asked to act decisively.

That’s what John Meis had; that’s what Todd Beamer had. Certainly at one time or another in your life, that’s what you had in front of you, as well. A decisive moment where you were asked to act in faith.

But as I mentioned right off the bat this morning, how do we get that heroic faith? Where does it come from?

This week, I was reading an article entitled “Would you tackle the gunman?” by a man named Jonathan Parnell. In it, he reflects on this question: Would I have the courage to act decisively? His basic premise is that decisive courage doesn’t come from grandiose pride. People who talk a big game, usually are the first to flee. Rather he says:

“The big moment of courageous action doesn’t occur in a vacuum, but has behind it tiny moments of simple sacrifice that have been trending that direction all along. In other words, if we can’t wash dishes and change diapers, we shouldn’t kid ourselves with the idea that we’d step in front of a bullet. If we are stingy with our time and money toward those in need, we’ll be stingy with our lives when a gun gets pulled on innocent people. Stories like Jon’s should make us pause and ask whether we’d respond like he did. But the question isn’t what we’d do in a particular situation; it’s about what we’re doing now.”

Moments of decisive courage come from tiny moments all along that lead us to the big decisions. But to take this a step further, where do we get the courage or the decisiveness for even the small decisions? And for this, we are brought back to the book of Esther once again.

I learned something really quite fascinating as I was preparing for this message. Did you know that the name of God, or the word prayer or anything specifically religious is unheard of in the book of Esther? No God, no prayer, no miracles. In fact, the book itself is actually a pretty controversial one. Martin Luther disliked the book saying there were all sorts of heathen unnaturalities in it, Luther thought it shouldn’t have been included in the biblical canon. John Calvin never wrote anything about Esther either.

But there is a theme at play here in Esther that is so important for our lives. Even though God is not specifically named here, there is no doubting that God is quietly at work behind the scenes, guiding and shaping events and people for his purposes. The sixty dollar word we use to describe this from our Reformed theological perspective is *providence*. Even in the midst of situations where God doesn’t appear to be present, we believe as the Apostle Paul would later write that **for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.**

The things that take place in our lives, good and bad, are not accidental, they’re not coincidence. Your life today is in God’s hands. That’s where courage comes from.

When we speak of providence, what we are proclaiming is that in some mysterious and inscrutable way, God governs the people, circumstances and results without the intervention of the miraculous. God is just guiding your life, that his providence is at work for you.

There may be something going on in your life and you’re thinking to yourself, “I just don’t see it.” You may feel like God is absent, there is no discernable presence and you’re wondering what in the world is going on. Be of good courage, that’s not something you have to muster up on your own.

Courage is grounded on the providence of God, on God’s good decision to rescue us when we were at our lowest as a human race. As just the right moment, or as the Bible says, “in the fullness of time God send his son to redeem the world through his death and resurrection.” Even if it feels like he’s not there, he is. And he’s working your life out for

good. How do we know that? Because when faced with the decision to either rescue humanity or abandon us to our own devices, Jesus Christ said *yes*. So be of courage. If it doesn't feel like he's there, he is, and his answer to you is always and ultimately "yes." Amen.