

Have you ever wondered how much courage you have? Could you go to jail standing up for something you believe in? Could you enter a king’s quarters and tell him, “You are wrong?” I think it is difficult to answer these kinds of question until we find ourselves in this sort of a situation. Today, we hear part of a Jewish Folklore story about Esther, who finds herself in just this situation, risking her life for the sake of her people.

Many cultures develop Folklore stories. These are stories that may have never actually happened, and yet, they happen all the time. Over the generations these folktales pass along important values and characteristics from a particular place and time which are deemed worthy of surviving into the future. Paul Bunyan teaches us the value of hard work. Br’er Rabbit is a trickster who teaches that sometimes authority becomes corrupt and needs to be subverted. The Maid of the Mist is about Lelawala, a young Native American woman from the Iroquois Nation who finds her, and her people repeatedly saved from self-destruction and threats. John Henry, some believe based on an actual slave in the south, was a steel driving man who could outduel the machinery in driving stakes and blasting rock, his story teaches the value of human workers in an increasingly mechanized world.

The legend of Johnny Appleseed believed to be based on a real person, named John Chapman who worked as a nurseryman in the late 1700s. While his story is not as exciting as the folktale, he owned land from Ohio to Indiana, worked as a Christian missionary, and helped make peace between Native Americans and white settlers.

Folklore stories are enjoyable because for the most part, the “good” people, or the good side, wins. Unlike real life where evil stakes its roots down deep in our soil, and we don’t actually know what will happen. These stories become a sort of self-defense fantasy for a people living in this real world, these are stories of hope in a world where good and evil grow side by side.

If you have not read the book of Esther, it is a page turner. The book is full of parties, reversals of fortune, situational comedy, it even ends with a big massacre. It’s a folklore story of the survival of God’s people when their date for extinction from earth had been set. It’s a heroine story of a young woman saving her people by exercising unbelievable courage. And it is the story behind the establishment of the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim includes costumes, food, drink, a retelling of this story, and gift giving to friends. and especially, to the poor.

It begins with King Ahasuerus. This “King” of the Persian Empire is throwing a banquet, first for his royal court, but later he invites the whole kingdom.

He ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear at the party wearing the royal crown. Was she to wear anything else? We don’t know for sure. But Vashti refused. As punishment for

Vashti's disobedience, King Ahasueras banished her from the palace and decreed that all across his provinces, "Men were the head of the household."

To choose a new queen, the king called for a beauty pageant and chose Esther. He married her. Queen Esther, following the advice of her cousin and foster Father Mordecai, kept her Jewish identity a secret from the Persian King.

In the meantime, the king's ministers plotted to kill him. Mordecai learned of their plot, told Queen Esther, and the Queen reported it to the king. The king ordered the two plotters to be killed. King Ahasueras then chose Haman as his senior leader. But Haman, vying to be treated like a king instead of the Vice-king, commanded everyone, Jews and Persians, to bow down to him. But Mordecai refused because it was against his Jewish faith. This angered Haman so much he set a date to destroy Mordecai, and all Jews of the Kingdom.

News of the decree spread throughout the kingdom, and the Jews were greatly distressed. Mordecai urged Esther to save the lives of her people by approaching the King and asking him to spare them. But entering the King's presence without permission left the King only two choices, he could raise his scepter and invite you in, or he could have you killed. Queen Esther summoned all of her courage and went before the king.

The King extended his Scepter and Esther invited him to a banquet. After some partying King Ahasueras promised to grant Esther anything she wanted. She told him about the plot against her people and asked that it be stopped.

The King granted her wish and ordered instead for Haman to be executed on the very contraption he had built to kill Mordecai and the Jews. So, on the day intended for their destruction, the Jewish people were saved and their enemy put to death. The festival of Purim celebrates their liberation.

Old Testament teachers do not know exactly when the book of Esther was written. Yet, it has become for the Jewish people a "self-defense Fantasy of scattered, oppressed Jews." It's a story of hopefulness for a people under constant threat of destruction. It's a story of courage for a people whose lives seemed constantly on the line. It's a story of victory for a people facing sure extinction. In Jewish history -- be it Egyptian slavery, Assyrian Invasion, Babylonian captivity, Roman Occupation, or the Holocaust -- The people needed stories of victory to sustain them during times of oppression.

We might ask, does it really matter when this story happened?

Genocide, Narrow minded Kings, Power hungry underlings, great courage exhibited by those cast aside from the tables of decision making... sounds like most any time and place, doesn't it? This story continues to support Jewish people and other groups who are displaced forcibly, occupied by foreign regimes, or targeted for their identity. It is a story of hope over despair, good over evil, life over death.

Strangely, if you read the whole story you will see that God is not mentioned in the book. Yet, most scholars believe God is there working behind the scene to be revealed again as One who provides and protects. This is the good news of the book of Esther.

It assures God's people in every place and time that God is at work. Sometimes the Spirit works quietly, hardly noticed in the background. But God is at work in our personal struggles, and our struggles as a nation and a world.

Queen Esther puts her own life on a line to right a wrong. That's not always easy to do. At times, it can be difficult to separate right from wrong. Yet, in the most famous line in this book Mordecai says, "Esther maybe you were put in this royal position just so you could intercede with the King and save your people, maybe you were put here, 'for such a time as this.'" Anais Nin, a French-American writer said the same another way, "Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's Courage." To that I say...

Amen