Faithful Women

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Texts:
 1 Samuel: 16:1-13
 John: 9:41
 Ephesians 5:8-14
 Psalms 23

In our scriptures for today, the Lord told Samuel to go out and look for a new King. In spite of Samuel's fear that King Saul would find out what he was doing and kill him, Samuel went — and he found David.

The blind man allowed Jesus to put paste on his eyes and did as Jesus instructed and went and washed his eyes — ridiculous, huh? And then the formerly blind man could see, and the citizens around him could finally see him! They said, “It is not him; it is someone else.” The formerly blind man said, "No, it's me. I am that man!” His whole world changed because he believed and acted faithfully.

And Paul admonishes the Ephesians: "So no more stumbling around. Get on with it! … Figure out what will please Christ and then do it."

Our scriptures this morning have a common theme: faithfulness in the face of danger and ridicule. AND, God's faithfulness as well.

In honor of International Women's Day, which was March 8th, and Women's History Month this month, I would like to talk about two women in the Bible who showed exceptional courage and faithfulness. Before I do, let me just list a few women in the Bible — out of many — who have often been held up as women of courage and action. Many, as mothers, played a crucial role in the life of their husbands and children.

* [Sarah: Wife of Abraham — some say Mother of the Jewish Nation](https://www.learnreligions.com/sarah-wife-of-abraham-701178)
* Rebekah: Intervening Wife of Isaac — mother of Jacob and Esau
* Rachel: Mother of Joseph
* Hanna: Mother of Samuel who as we read in the scripture this morning was sent by God to find David to become the new King
* Deborah: the Prophetess and only female judge in the history of Judaism
* Miriam: sister of Moses
* Ruth: Loyal daughter-in-law
* Esther: Who stood up to the King
* Mary: Mother of Jesus
* Mary Magdalene: A Devoted Follower
* Elizabeth: Mother of John the Baptist
* Mary and Martha: faithful followers
* Lydia: the successful businesswoman

And there are many more. Esther and Ruth are the only women in the Bible to have books named after them. I would like to talk about these two incredible women.

Let me talk first about Esther.

Esther lived in exile. She and a significant number of the Jewish people lived scattered throughout Persia after the Babylonian exile. Although they had been granted freedom to return to their homeland, many of the Jewish people stayed in exile rather than go back to a war-torn Jerusalem. She was a stranger in a strange land.

Esther was an orphan. She was raised by her older cousin, Mordecai, who worked for King Xerxes at the palace. Scripture says that the Persian King, Xerxes, was displeased with his wife and sought her replacement. So he made a decree in order to collect suitable virgins in the region so he could in effect test them out as potential Queens. Esther was one of those taken to the King's palace.

We read in Scripture that Esther was young and exceptionally beautiful. She didn't have much say in the matters that unfolded. She was young, she was pretty, and she was taken.

The virgins, who were all quite young, were escorted to the King one by one for him to sleep with. The next morning they were taken to live with the King's other concubines (that is, sex slaves without wife status). No other man could ever be their husband, and they never saw the King again unless he called for them. Having "tested" all the virgins, he chose Esther to be the new Queen — quite an amazing development. Meanwhile, you need to know that Esther's cousin Mordecai had advised Esther to keep her Jewish heritage a secret.

Sometime later, one of the King's advisors, Haman, got mad at Mordecai for some reason and so he convinced the King that the Jews were troublemakers and needed to be killed. He got the King to decree that everyone had to bow down before him. Mordecai refused to bow because according to Jewish law, Jews do not bow to anyone but God. Of course, Haman did not know that Queen Esther was a Jew nor that Mordecai, the man Haman despised, was Queen Esther's uncle.

Esther was then pushed to center stage. Mordecai sent Queen Esther a message, telling her to throw herself before the King and beg for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people. This wasn't as easy as it may have sounded. Esther knew that anyone who approached the King without first being summoned was killed — unless the King was in the mood to spare their life. What Mordecai was asking her to do could have easily been the last thing she ever did.

But Mordecai said, “Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this.” In other words, perhaps this is your calling in life.

After much prayer, Esther went into the inner court to see the King. She told him she was a Jew and she persuaded him to retract the order to annihilate the Jews. The King loved her so much that he offered to give her half of his kingdom. Esther asked only for her people to be spared. Notices were sent out to all the provinces allowing the Jews to live. And when the King heard about Haman's plot to deceive him in order to kill the Jews, Haman was hanged, and his estate was given to Esther.

I remember hearing this story as a 12-year-old at a summer church camp and being captivated by it. Here is a girl who had been brought to a place where her decision could change the lives of a great many people. Here was a young woman who stood up for what she believed, even in the face of death. Even at the young age of 12, I knew that I wanted to be like that person.

God chose a woman who had everything taken from her — her parents, her freedom, her virginity — and He gave her everything. He used someone who, due to gender, culture, and circumstance, was powerless and invisible and made her a heroine.

Esther's story is a powerful reminder that God can bring about new life, redemption, and freedom, even when it seems an impossible feat.

Now, let's talk about Ruth. Actually, it is almost impossible to talk about Ruth without talking about Naomi as well. Their story begins with a tragedy. Naomi's husband and her two sons die, making widows of Naomi and both of her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpha. Naomi is devastated and convinced that the Lord has turned against her. She decides to return from the country of Moab to her homeland in Bethlehem. All three set out for Bethlehem, but then Naomi urges Ruth and Orpha to turn back. She says that she is an old woman and won't have any more sons to marry them. [Back then the remaining sons were obligated to marry their sisters-in-law if a brother died.] Even if she could have more sons, it's unlikely Ruth and Orpha would wait until they were grown. Naomi also probably thought that the people in Judah would not welcome two Moab women. Orpha reluctantly agrees to go back, but Ruth refuses. Her words are poetic:

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die-there I will be buried.

This passage has been turned into a song and, interestingly, is sung at many weddings — including mine!

And so Ruth travels to a strange land where she knows no one. It is a breathtaking leap of faith. Once Ruth and Naomi get settled, Ruth goes out early in the morning to "glean among the ears of grain." By Jewish law, the farmers had to leave the edges and corners of the field unharvested so the poor could come and collect some food. One day Boaz, a rich landowner, sees Ruth. He tells his men to follow her and let her safely collect what food she needs. She asks him why he is being so kind to her. Boaz praises her for her kindness to her mother-in-law, leaving her own father and mother and her native land to care for her. He says: "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel under whose wings you have come for refuge." The relationship develops and eventually Ruth and Boaz marry. They have a son, Obed who becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David and an ancestor of Jesus. Ruth's extraordinary act of compassion and generosity becomes the foundation of a family of vast importance to Jews and Christians alike.

Both Esther and Ruth showed themselves to be brave and strong in very dangerous situations. They showed incredible trust in God and amazing faithfulness. Defying all odds, these women left permanent footprints.

These stories remind us that we are called to be faithful to the work He is giving us today. And that God is with us in our journey.

After I finished writing this teaching I thought of Bill Mefford and his faithful, courageous leadership as we remodeled and re-envisioned the Festival Center. I thought of Kim Montrol and others who have supported the birthing of Recovery Cafe. I thought of Carol Martin who managed the Dayspring Retreat Center for over 25 years. I thought of Jim Knight and the burdens he carries as Executive Director of Jubilee Housing. I thought of David and Marja Hilfiker and their work at Christ House and Joseph's House. I thought of Carol Bullard-Bates and her ministry at Bethany House. I thought of Sito and his commitment to write poetry in the midst of a very busy life. I thought of Ann Barnet and her faithfulness starting and supporting The Family Place. I thought of Eve Tetaz and her incredible work as a peacemaker. I thought of my sister who at age 27 journeyed to Hong Kong, a foreign land, learned the Cantonese language and ministered there and in China for over 30 years. I thought of my brother who went to prison because he was unwilling to lie and implicate others for his own salvation. I am so blessed to be among all of you who have taken God's call on your life seriously, just like Esther and Ruth.

We are not alone. As the Psalmists promises:
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil,
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

May it be so.