

"Courage in Oz"

Esther 7:1-10

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First Congregational Church of East Hartford

Rev. Kelly Jane Forbush

Please Note: These are notes to a lively speech hopefully more akin to poetry or spoken word than a lecture or academic paper.

Physical movement and delivery cannot be captured on the page, but I hope this gives you a glimpse of what was shared in worship.

This fall we have been looking at ways to tie into the Divine,  
ways to connect to God.

Connecting with God and trusting God can take some courage:

God tends to lead people on crazy adventures

(ex. Israelites through the desert, Jonah in the belly of a big fish, Jesus to the cross)

This morning we look at some courageous people who took a leap and trusted God.

They looked at our imperfect world and they saw a problem.

Then they took heart and reached out to God.

In their stories may we hear ways we can take courage and follow God in the healing of the problems we see in our world.

## PRAYER

In 2012 I met a stout white man that looked a bit like santa claus, but with a shorter beard.

Turns out this man jumpstarted what is now the largest and most effective

gang rehabilitation and job training program....

In the 1980s, LA had the largest # of gang members per capita in the nation.

25 years later the scene has changed, in large part because of Homeboy Industries.

In 1988 Fr. Greg Boyle and the Dolores Mission Parish started a "Jobs for the Future" mission.

They gave jobs and job training to young people trying to make it out of the gangs.

The idea is rather simple - in an environment with few options and little hope for something else, Homeboy Industries provides a way out of gang violence.

Over 200 people each year are employed as interns at Homeboy Industries -

everything from culinary arts to silk screen printing to administration.

Individuals are paid enough to support their families, but they get a whole lot more than a paycheck.

They find a community of support - often with members of rival gangs;

and they receive a number of social services:

tattoo removal, mental health counseling, parenting classes, etc.

When a person finishes the internship, a case worker works with them to find a permanent job.

All of this started because a congregation took courage and decided to work with gang members.

They began with a single bakery that taught recently incarcerated people job skills.

When 2/3 people go back to prison, this bakery gave people another option,

a way out of gang violence,

a way into becoming active members of society.

There is not a week that goes by when I do not talk to someone here in East Hartford in need of employment.

We do not have the intense gang violence LA was facing the 1980s,

but we do have plenty of folks in need of employment.

What kind of courage would we need to open up a bakery and provide job training to recently incarcerated people here in East Hartford?

Do we start with a bakery? or a coffee shop? or a thrift store? or a silk screening store?

or something entirely different?

[Info on Homeboy Industries found at [homeboyindustries.org](http://homeboyindustries.org)]

It takes

Courage to provide job training to gang members in the gang capitol of the nation, LA.

It would take  
courage to provide job training and opportunities to people here in  
East Hartford.

It took  
Courage for Esther to speak up in a patriarchal world in which her  
people were the oppressed minority.

(abridged) Story of Esther:

The King of Persia is looking for a Queen.

He holds a beauty pageant for all the virgins in the land.

Esther enters the beauty pageant.

Esther is a Jew, a disliked minority in the land of Persia.

Esther wins the beauty pageant and becomes Queen.

She is a cautious Queen, because the King is rather

fickle.

Time passes and the King's right-hand man, Haman, gets a bit  
too prideful.

He orders all people to bow down to him.

Well, Esther's uncle Mordecai will bow to none but God.

Haman gets mad and decides he will punish Mordecai by  
ordering all the Jews to be attacked on a certain day.

Haman gets the approval of the King.

Mordecai then comes to Esther in despair:

you must intercede and end this decree to kill all  
the Jews.

Esther is scared to go before the King: the King is  
rather hot-headed

and to appear before him unsummoned risks  
death.

Mordecai encourages her to intercede - the life of her  
people are on the line.

Esther musters the courage:

but she does so with caution;

her courage is not reckless.

Her first request is for the King and Haman to come to  
dinner.

They go to dinner and she makes a second request:  
come to another dinner.

At the second dinner, the King asks yet again:

What do you want?  
Esther asks for her life and for her people;  
she asks with words that are just right.  
The King agrees and the Jews are saved.

Courage can be big like Esther's - save the people.  
Courage can be starting something new, risking failure, and working  
with those people society has given up on - the people Jesus called  
to dinner - people right out of prison or on the streets.

But,

Courage is also needed for...

- leaving an unhealthy relationship

- facing a bully

- speaking in public (for some)

- being baptized in a society that no longer sees that as a given.

  - to do so is to claim an identity as Christian.

In fact, all these examples of courage are grounded in revealing and  
claiming an identity.

- Brene Brown in Gifts of Imperfection: courage is sharing your  
heart and being real;

  - root of courage is the latin cor = heart

  - the original meaning of courage is "to speak one's mind by  
telling all one's heart.

  - leaving an unhealthy relationship or facing a bully claims your own  
life as valuable.

  - speaking in public claims your words and thoughts as valid.

  - becoming baptized is a way to claim an identity as Christian.

  - Esther's courageous act was a claim to her Jewish identity.

  - The courage of Fr. Greg Boyle and the Dolores Mission Parish to  
start Homeboy Industries was a claim on being Christian AND a way  
to claim hope for a people who had largely given up hope.

  - Courage involves claiming an identity and living it out.

  - As such courage is not something you receive like a medal,

    - it is something that we hold inside us and let out.

Esther grows through the story - she builds her courage.

- In the beginning she resists Mordecai's request to go to the

king.

it is in that moment that we get one of the most famous lines of the story:

"perhaps you are here for just a time as this."

In the Wizard of Oz, the cowardly lion has the inner courage that comes out:

he had it all along, but didn't believe in himself.

My favorite scene with the lion is when the lion, tin man and scarecrow are outside the wicked witch's castle.

It is well-guarded and looks daunting.

Dorothy is locked inside awaiting her execution.

The scarecrow says - I have a plan and you, lion, will lead us.

The lion gives a great big speech:

Cowardly Lion: All right, I'll go in there for Dorothy. Wicked Witch or no Wicked Witch, guards or no guards, I'll tear them apart. I may not come out alive, but I'm going in there. There's only one thing I want you fellows to do.

Tin Woodsman, Scarecrow: What's that?

Cowardly Lion: Talk me out of it!

The lion tries to walk away, but the tin man and scarecrow hold him there and tell him he has got it.

And he does. The three of them break into the wicked witch's castle.

The lion did not act alone - his buddies helped him onward.

The lion's courage was something he had inside himself that needed to come out.

He makes that speech - but he needed a little support from a friend to get going.

When we are in need of courage,

whether we are facing a bully at work or jumpstarting a job training initiative,

may we both look inside ourselves and allow our buddies to give us that nudge.

We are in an imperfect world.

A world with wicked witches in need of melting.

A world with gangs.

A world with too many people unemployed and without hope.

A world with oppression and hatred.

A world with wizards that make promises they can't really keep or live up to.

A world that needs our courage.

May we take a look inside ourselves for what God might be calling us to.

May we also look around and ask, "has God put me here for such a time as this?"

And if our reflections lift up a scary possibility, which it probably will:

entering the witch's castle, building a job training program for previously incarcerated people, speaking out in front of the king (or mayor, or bully at work)...

May we link arms with our friends and march through the forest together. Amen.