

A Voice for Justice

“Queen Esther answered, “If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me-- that is my petition-- and the lives of my people-- that is my request.

When I was growing up Disney’s Sleeping Beauty whose name was Aurora was THE princess. If you had asked me back then why she was my favorite, I think I would have said, “because she’s pretty.” I wanted to be like her; pretty and sweet. And, of course, I wanted the Prince—whoever that might be.

My son, Jo, and I have had many conversations about the pros and cons of Disney’s portrayal of the female heroine. Whether she was a princess or a peasant, she was always pretty, always sweet, and gentle and kind, always accepting life’s lot while at the same time dreaming of “a better” life. In Disney’s 1989 version of The Little Mermaid, the young mermaid, Ariel, comes to ask the help of evil Ursula hoping to realize her dream of a “better life” as a human married to a prince. Ursula agrees to help her by taking her voice from her. She sings to her:

*“The men up there don't like a lot of blabber
They think a girl who gossips is a bore!
Yet on land it's much preferred
for ladies not to say a word
And after all dear, what is idle babble for?
Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation
True gentlemen avoid it when they can
But they dote and swoon and fawn
On a lady who's withdrawn
It is she who holds her tongue who gets a man...*

Jo is determined his daughter will not grow up to believe this.

But sadly, the above words of Ursula, are exactly what women for centuries have been taught.

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In the synopsis we just heard this morning from the Book of Esther, Queen Esther breaks with the tradition of the queen only being allowed to enter the king’s presence by invitation. She does this to save, not only her own life, but that of her own people.

However, she is careful to choose the right time and the right place. She is necessarily shrewd so as to be sure to keep in the King’s grace.

The story told in the Book of Esther can basically be classified as a folk tale since biblical scholars, for the most part, have concluded that it is not an historical account.

In fact, it is considered more secular than religious because the only reference to God is by inference since Esther and her people are Jews who are in exile under the rule of the Persians.

This then, begs the question: what meaning does this Jewish folk tale have for Christians—for us, today?

During their exile the dispersed Jewish people were oppressed and dominated by Gentile rulers who often tried to force their belief and worship of false gods on them.

At times they were ostracized and bullied and, as in the story, fearful of annihilation altogether. Even under the rule of so-called tolerant rulers they were still oppressed.

So, Queen Esther is an icon of someone who put their own life on the line to speak up for those with no voice and to give them hope. Because of her bravery, they had a better life under this ruler.

Today, we have people in this country who are equally ostracized and bullied just for being who they are. Even when they try to fit in and be like what they think is an American should be, they’re not accepted because they don’t look like what our white western European dominating culture thinks they should.

And there are people outside the borders of the U.S. who risk their lives and the lives of their families in the attempt to come here for a “better life”. Some sell all that they have to thieves who make empty promises that they can help them. Some give their children to strangers in the hope that they will make it here.

When asked why they are so desperate to come here, the answer is almost always the same. They have heard that in “America”, if you work hard, they can have freedom from fear of hunger, abuse, and rape. They can have an education—including women. And that women do

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not have to be dominated by strict religious codes enforced by men who beat them or even kill them.

They try every angle to get here—even hanging from the outside of a plane hoping the pilot will stop in time—before it takes off and let them in. They try crossing fast flowing rivers. They try every means they can think of. And they try to skirt the laws of immigration. But it is worth it to them to just have a chance to be in a country where people like you and me are not worried or fearful about making it through just one more day.

They come from all over the world, but only a few are accepted in. We once had an elected leader who said the United States did not want people from poor countries—calling these refugees animals that their own country doesn't want—rather the United States wants immigrants from countries like Norway.

This country was founded for and by immigrants. Our own gateway in New York harbor proudly invites those who are “yearning to breathe free.” Some of our immigrants came forced through the slave trade. Some came to work for a little while and found they loved it here so much they chose to stay. Some of us were native to this land but had to immigrate new customs and government.

The point is, that this country, which claims Christianity as its dominant religion—claims Jesus as its Lord must, therefore, follow him who said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”. Jesus, who himself was an immigrant.

Globally speaking, these people we see on the news trying to come here for a better life are much like the Jews in Persia for whom Queen Esther put her own life on the line. How much more so, with Jesus as our example, our guide, our Lord should we.

Coming up this next week I will, for the first time, put my very nervous voice on public record in speaking out for the humane treatment of those at our borders yearning to breathe free, and for a comprehensive and straightforward pathway to legal immigration.

Like Queen Esther, who spoke the truth to power with grace and respect, this next week, I will be putting my own faith, my ordination, and my concern as a Christian and as a mother on the front line speaking to two of our elected U.S. Senators here in the state of California.

I ask you to pray for this meeting remembering your baptismal covenant and most especially the part where we say, “we will strive for justice and peace among all people”, as you pray. May I speak with boldness, clarity, and truth with respect.

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This, brothers and sisters, is not a lot of blabber.

Let us pray: *O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

**In loving memory, I dedicate this sermon to my dear friend Meigs Ingham.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.