

November 4, 2018 (Sanctuary and Journey services)

TEXT: Esther 4

TITLE: Big Themes, Little Books: Powerful Voices

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Words shape the way we think. Cognitive Scientist Lera Boroditsky argues that the structure of a language shapes thinking. She speaks of an Aboriginal tribe in Australia with whom she worked. They “don’t use words like ‘left’ and ‘right’ and instead, everything is in cardinal directions: north, south, east and west....You would say something like, “Oh there’s an ant on your southwest leg.” Or, “Move your cup to the north-northeast a little bit.” In fact, the way that you say ‘hello’...is you say, ‘Which way are you going?’ And the answer should be, ‘North-northeast in the far distance. How about you?’ She argues that it is then no surprise that this group of people are very good at orienting themselves.”¹

Words shape thinking in our text for today too—and not only the words we read this morning but the words surrounding this chapter. Words send ripples. Throughout the entire story of Esther it is evident that every word spoken or written has a dramatic impact.

Frankly, it almost does a disservice to read only one chapter of this biblical book. The nine chapters are a unified story from beginning to end. It bears the honor of being the only scripture that does not include any mention of God, yet still points us toward Divine initiative in the midst of human action. There are two versions of this book too—the one in our Protestant Bibles is the one shared by our Jewish siblings, while Roman and Orthodox Catholics have apocryphal additions to the text they hold as canon.

It is no surprise that within the Jewish tradition, the book of Esther is read aloud together annually in celebration of Purim. It’s no surprise that the text is read interactively, with boos and cheers, noting the human villainy and heroism within a text of God’s deliverance.

But from start to finish, in the book of Esther, words matter. They change lives and shape destinies.

Esther, we learn, was a Jew in a time of exile. She was also an orphan brought up in her cousin Mordecai’s home. She was a woman living in Persia in an era where women had little power or agency. And we know that although she was queen, she was chosen to replace Queen Vashti who was ousted after refusing to obey one of the King’s orders. Esther was selected to be queen simply because of her beauty, a woman paraded in front of the most powerful man in the land and chosen on appearance.

When we meet up with Esther for today, we learn that a lot has gone on since she moved into the palace. After an incident in which Mordecai refused to bow down to

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky

Haman, the king's right hand man, Haman has convinced the king to issue a decree that will result in the slaughter of the Jews.

Mordecai is terrified, and rightly so. He is in mourning for what might be. He recognizes that Esther is his only hope. So he challenges Esther to decide if she will risk her life and advocate for her people, or if she will sit back and let matters take their course. He appeals not just for himself, but for her welfare too. After all, Mordecai reminds her, not even she will be spared if the Jews are slaughtered. Even a queen cannot escape her birthright.

And Esther takes his words to heart. She invites Mordecai and her people to a season of prayer and fasting. After this, she will appeal to the king, even if doing so costs her life. And without spoiling too much about the end of the story, it works. Esther courageously and persuasively is the instrument of God's deliverance. The edict is withdrawn and the one behind it was hung from the very gallows he built.

Like it or not, words evoke action. They shape choices. They influence. They convince. They comfort and they wound. They teach and they confuse. They negotiate and they overpower. Words evoke our emotions, form our ideas. Words shape individuals. Words shape societies.

I am reminded of this as the words I utter are mirrored back to me by a toddler trying his hand at spoken language—and I realize now that I must be mindful that my words might be spoken at daycare the next morning. I am reminded of this as I read an email from my Mother-in-law, forwarded from four friends from her Unitarian Universalist church in New Jersey letting her know that they while my in laws were visiting last weekend, their friends participated in an interfaith prayer service at the Reform Temple nearby, in which more than 500 people came together across faith lines and state lines to mourn the tragic shooting in Pittsburgh last week.

Words matter.

We live in a society in which there is a density of words, which we must decipher at lightening speed. We don't just sit back and read our newspapers anymore—we scroll through multiple online news sources, twitter feeds and Facebook walls. We don't just watch the nightly news, we flip through multiple news channels—each one broadcasting the anchor's message, with tickertape scrolling across the bottom with more information. How do we digest it all?

We live in a world in which rhetoric shapes ideology and ideology shapes action.

We acknowledge this just eight days after a mass shooting in our own community. We acknowledge this just 11 days after two African American persons in a Kentucky Kroger's and just two days after a shooting in a yoga studio in Florida. All were hate crimes—targeting Jews, African Americans, Women. We acknowledge this after a group of Idaho elementary teachers were suspended for their collective Halloween

costume depicting Mexicans and a wall. We know that hate speech is on the rise at all levels within our nation. It has become more acceptable and is streaming into our culture with force.

Yet we likewise acknowledge this as persons throughout our city erect billboards and signs and monuments stating that this is a city committed to loving our neighbors, as we stand in solidarity with those who have suffered tragic loss, as Christians and Muslims hear and heed the invitation to attend a Friday Shabbat service in local synagogues, and each synagogue was filled so there was standing room only. We acknowledge that there are many who are actively striving to navigate the deep political and ideological divides that plague not only our city but our nation and world.

And as we celebrate those from within our congregational family who have passed away over the year, we acknowledge the way that we have been shaped by one another's words: by Joe Kennedy's hand-written notes or Joe Heckle's challenge to do justice. Maybe we remember Gail Noden's stories of being a docent at the zoo awaiting the birth of a baby elephant, and saw her tireless commitment to care for all of God's creatures. Or maybe we remember being greeted by Sara Weber-Striplin when we got to church late, and she followed you to your pew to make sure that you got a bulletin. Words matter.

So what do we learn from the trajectory of words that play out in Esther?

Well, we see that in God's economy words are the instrument of deliverance. In spite of the cultural introduction of words that oppress or persecute, the words that propel and highlight God's initiative are words of life. They are words that liberate the oppressed. They are words that root out evil. They are words that invite others to action. They are words that save.

This should come as no surprise. For we gather each week to worship Jesus. Scripture tells us that in Jesus God's Word took on flesh and dwelt among us—teaching good news to the poor, marginalized, outcast and abused; healing the sick and broken hearted, freeing us all from sin and reconciling creation to one another and to God. In Christ, we rejoice, God saves.

So what words will you live by? Words that condemn or oppress? Words that help and give hope?

As we come to the Communion table, may we believe the words of our faith—that in Christ there is no east or west; no north or south. That all are welcome. That all will be fed. That all are loved.

So let us live into this truth. Let us live into love.