

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 1: Superheroes of Faith
2017 Fall Kick-Off Series

Esther: A Biblical Wonder Woman

Esther 3 & 4: selected verses (9/09 & 9/10/17)
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When I was a little girl, I *loved* Wonder Woman. I was born in the late 1970's when the Wonder Woman TV series starring Lynda Carter was on. When I was still a toddler, I was Wonder Woman for Halloween!

Now, as a grown, 39-year-old woman, I'm a bit too modest and self-conscious to don full Wonder Woman attire. (Many of us grown women who love Wonder Woman likely feel similarly!) Yet, whether or not we'd be brave enough to wear her costume, Wonder Woman is a female superhero who stands for love, truth, and justice, and so she continues to be an inspiring figure to women of all ages.

And, of course, this past summer, the big, blockbuster *Wonder Woman* movie was released... so Wonder Woman reemerged into our culture in a new way, and for a new generation.

In fact, a couple of months ago, soon after we'd settled on this *Superheroes of Faith* sermon series for September, I was out shopping and I found myself wandering through the toy department. Lo and behold, I came across this Wonder Woman tiara and bracelet set. (Hopefully these items won't prove to be too distracting as I preach the rest of this sermon.)

Now, in case you are completely unfamiliar with Wonder Woman, she is a comic book superhero who first appeared on the scene in 1941.

As a character, she was born within the World War II era and she is heralded as a defender of love, truth, and justice.

Her origins are mythical in nature, having been created by fictional gods, thus, giving her superhuman strength – as well as some fabulous, crime-fighting accessories.

(She possesses a “lasso of truth” that, when wrapped around a bad guy makes it nearly impossible for them to lie. *And* her bracelets deflect bullets in a pretty awesome way.)

I *love* Wonder Woman. I love that she is an inspiring figure to girls and women of all ages. But, really, she's meant to be an inspiring figure to *people* of all ages. After all, shouldn't we all be champions of love, truth, and justice, regardless of our gender?

Comic book superheroes have been inspiring millions of people for generations. In a world so often filled with violence, crime, chaos, and fear, the superhero concept is quite compelling. We love the idea of a hero who swoops in to save the day, don't we? And most of us can recall moments or entire seasons in our lives when we would have welcomed a hero swooping in to save us from the mess.

Fictional superheroes serve an important function in our lives and in our culture: they call attention to evil in the world, they work to eliminate evil, and they inspire us to do the same, in our own, particular way. For these reasons, I'm grateful to the many fictional superheroes who have captured our attention over the years.

However, as people of Christian faith, we should also make sure we're attentive to the many “superheroes” we meet through the Bible. Of course, Jesus Christ himself is the best and most important example – I mean, we believe he *actually* saved the world. But, frankly, Jesus can be a bit daunting as an inspirational – and as an *aspirational* – figure.

Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh. He is Lord and Savior, king of heaven and earth. We can follow him, but we know we can never fully aspire to be *like* him. That's why we *worship* Jesus.

With that in mind, while the presence and power of Jesus will fill and bless this *Superheroes of Faith* series, we'll be focusing on a couple of *other* biblical superheroes.

And, for fun, we'll make some connections to a few *fictional* superheroes.

So, here we are this weekend, kicking-off this series with a look at the fictional superhero Wonder Woman... *and* getting acquainted with Esther, a *biblical* wonder woman.

Nestled-into the Old Testament of the Bible is the ten-chapter book of Esther. The two main protagonists in the story are Esther, herself, and her uncle – and adoptive father – Mordecai.

Esther and Mordecai were Jews. And the Jewish people – the people of Israel – have a long history of being “the underdog.” Since they became a people millennia ago, they have been smaller than other groups and have often struggled to hold onto the land they believe God promised to them through their ancestor Abraham.

The Jewish people have a long history of having been defeated by outside militaries and governments, as well as a long history of being discriminated against by people of other ethnic and cultural groups. It is extremely important for us to keep that in mind as we think about Esther's story.

As I just mentioned, the Jewish people believe God gave them the land we call Israel as part of a promise God made to Abraham and his wife Sarah. In the Bible, this promise is made early in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. And much of the story of the Jews is a story of how they have, or have *not*, staked their claim on that land.

Well, back around the turn of the 6th Century before Christ – around the year 600 B.C. – the Babylonian empire began to invade and occupy Israel. Then, starting in about the year 590 B.C., the Babylonians began systematically deporting members of Israel's leading class, forcing them to leave Israel and to move into other parts of the Babylonian empire.

Now... there *was* a time when the deported Jews were invited back to their homeland to live again among their people. This happened when the Persian Empire overtook the Babylonians around the year 540 B.C. However, since more than a generation had passed, many of the exiled Jews chose to stay put, outside of Israel, finding a way to live as a cultural minority among foreign people.

The story of Esther is a story of Jews who chose not to go back to Israel, choosing, instead, to live as a religious and cultural minority group in Persia.

So, that was all some important history to help frame the story of Esther. We heard just a snippet of the story a few minutes ago, but the whole story is critically important. Here's how it goes...

The story of Esther occurs, largely, within the city of Susa, the Capital City of Persia. At the beginning of this story, the Persian king, Xerxes, banished his Queen because she publicly disobeyed him.

King Xerxes then held a competition of sorts to see who his next queen should be. Contestants for this “Queen competition” were young women who were gathered up from throughout the Persian Empire, likely *not* by their own choosing... and, from within this mass of young women, the king would pick his favorite. Esther had been gathered up to “compete” in this Queen competition.

Now, as I said, Esther and her uncle Mordecai were Jewish... they were part of a religious and cultural minority group in Persia. Yet, as the story goes, Esther was King Xerxes' favorite and *she* became the new Queen of Persia.

And, as fortune or providence would have it, while Esther was at the palace “competing” for the crown, Uncle Mordecai was appointed to become part of the palace guard. (Though no one in the royal household or staff knew Esther and Mordecai were related.)

A bit later in the story, King Xerxes appointed a guy named Haman to be his top advisor. Haman was descended from a powerful, ancient king, so Xerxes made a rule that everyone in the palace guard had to bow down to honor Haman whenever he approached. All of the guards complied – except Mordecai.

As a Jew, Mordecai was not to bow down to anyone or anything other than God Almighty, so he refused to bow down to Haman. Haman got so mad about this that he developed a plan to have *all of the Jews* in Persia killed. (Overreact much, Haman???)

Haman went to King Xerxes complaining that the Jews refused to assimilate into Persian culture and that Persia would be better off without them. King Xerxes was apparently a pretty easily influenced sort of guy, so he told Haman to make appropriate plans to carry out this genocide.

Now... while it was clear to all parties involved that *Mordecai* was Jewish, no one knew that Queen Esther was also Jewish. (Again, they also didn't know Esther and Mordecai were related.)

In fact, when she had been gathered up to compete for the role of Queen, Mordecai warned her not to tell anyone she was Jewish. So, now, thanks to Haman's superiority complex, all of the Jews in Persia were to be killed – and, unbeknownst to Haman *and* King Xerxes, this genocide would include their Queen.

(However, for whatever reasons, Queen Esther had not actually been informed of Haman's evil plan, so she was initially oblivious to it.)

Well, when word spread throughout Persia of this plan to kill all of the Jews, Mordecai got in touch with Esther. Through a servant, Mordecai told her about Haman's plan and he begged her to talk to the king. At first, Esther said “no” because she was afraid it was out of place for her to do so.

In response, Mordecai offered the most famous words from the book of Esther:

*“If you don't speak up now, we will somehow get help, but you and your family will be killed. It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!”*¹

“It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!” I've also read it put more generically: “Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created.”

“Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created.”

¹ Esther 4:14 Contemporary English Version (CEV)

Esther was compelled by these words and she agreed to talk to the king, even though she knew she would be putting herself in danger.

When Esther spoke to King Xerxes, she revealed her Jewish identity and begged him to stop Haman's planned genocide of the Jews. The king was furious at Haman for his plot that would have killed his beloved queen. Xerxes then ordered that Haman be hanged... and it was done.

The story goes on, but all of that is what's most important: Esther became queen at a particular time and, through her royal position, she was able to change the course of an evil plot... thus saving her people.

Though the story is not exactly told this way in the Bible, Esther had a call from God to seek love, truth, and justice for her people – and her uncle, Mordecai, helped her understand that calling. Esther was, indeed, a biblical Wonder Woman!

Now. There is a calling from God on each of our lives: we don't have to be a Queen or a King... we don't have to be politician... and we certainly don't need to have superhuman powers that enable us to magically fight for love and truth in a world full of injustice.

Wonder Woman had a lasso of truth and bullet-defying bracelets.
Esther had a queen's crown.

We, on the other hand, have police officer's uniforms... we have scrubs... we have lab coats... we have mechanic's shirts... we have the outfits we choose to wear while leading in classrooms... we have suits and robes and blue jeans and leggings and sweaters.

“Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created.”

We have whatever we're wearing when the opportunity arises for us to bring more love and truth to a hurting world.

At the very end of the new *Wonder Woman* movie, Wonder Woman says, “I used to want to save the world. To end war and bring peace to mankind; but then I glimpsed the darkness that lives within their light... And now I know that only love can save the world. So... I stay, I fight, and I give... This is my mission.”

“Now I know that only love can save the world. So... I stay, I fight, and I give ... This is my mission.” That's a pretty powerful mission!

Here and now, we have a similar mission – a similar calling: to fight with love, and to give to a world in need. And, even more powerfully than Wonder Woman herself, we get to live into this calling through the grace of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. I don't know about you, but I want to say “yes” to that calling.

A few days ago, I learned about one of our McCabe members who gave a sleeping mat to a homeless man. This woman's name is Irene and she's part of a group of people at McCabe who make these sleeping mats. (She also gave me permission to tell this story, by the way.)

The mats usually get sent elsewhere to be distributed through agencies that work directly with people who are homeless. But Irene recently encountered this particular man and she thought, “Why not give one of our mats to someone who is *right here?*” So, she gave him one, and, as far as we know, the man has been sleeping on it ever since.

Additionally, Irene and our Parish Nurse, Jane Morgan, have decided, the next time they see him, they'll give this man a prayer shawl knitted by the same group of McCabe women who make the sleeping mats. Grace and love abound...

God called to Irene – God gave her an opportunity to put more love into our hurting world – and she said, “yes.” God may not give others of us that exact opportunity, but God *does* give us plenty of other opportunities on any given day. And when God does, maybe those words from Esther chapter 4 will run through our minds...