

OPENING HYMN

"All Are Welcome," verse 5, *ELW* 641

OPENING PRAYER

God, we are grateful for your gift of holy friendships. Thank you for placing friends in our lives to walk alongside us in faith. Strengthen these bonds so we might serve one another with love, courage and wisdom. Help us trust your grace as friendships grow and change. Let us remember that it is by your hand that we are brought together, for such a time as this. Amen.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Bibles (*NRSV*)
- (optional) large paper, small journals or notebooks, pens or pencils

FOCUS VERSES:

Esther 4:12-14

Where two or more are gathered: Flourishing in relationships

Session three

Relationships that push us to grow

BY BROOKE PETERSEN

Relationships aren't always comfortable. At times, we find ourselves navigating the painful work of growing and changing within relationships. How do we draw on the stories of our faith to help us face great challenges in our lives and relationships? In this final session of our Bible study, we'll explore the story of Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai, as well as how vulnerability, trust and faithful friendships help us to grow.

THE DRAMA OF ESTHER

I love reading fantasy novels—especially those that involve magical kingdoms, maybe a dragon or two, and a wizard or sorceress. The world-building in these books draws me in. While I'm reading, I'm wondering about the political and social dynamics, as well as what will happen as the characters fight for freedom or liberation in their magical world. In the Bible, the Book of Esther feels like this kind of text. If you haven't read it in its entirety, I encourage you to do so. However, for this study, we'll focus on just two major passages. To fully understand a text like this, it helps to do some world-building since like a fantasy novel, the Book of Esther is a story of kings and queens, evil plots, heroism, courtly intrigue and revolution.

When the book begins, the Jewish people are living in exile under the rule of the Persian empire.

Their future is uncertain. We learn the costs of this uncertainty in the very first chapter, which describes a party the king hosts for dignitaries and rulers. At one point during the party, he commands his queen, Vashti, to appear, so that he might show off her beauty. But she refuses. Angered, the king consults with his advisors, who encourage him to banish her, strip her of all her rights and property, and command her to never be in his presence again. As readers, we can immediately see that this king is rash, quick to become angry, and obsessed with his own power and the appearance of his power before others. From all appearances, this will continue to unfold in terrifying ways.

Now without a queen, this rash king starts to feel lonely. So that he can select a new wife, he gathers up all the young women in the kingdom. Now we hear of two characters who are at the heart of our study: Esther, a Jewish orphan also known as Hadassah, and her cousin and guardian, Mordecai. Esther is brought to the palace with all the other young women, but Mordecai instructs her to hide her Jewish identity. In contrast to Vashti, who disobeyed the king's orders and was banished, Esther follows her cousin's instructions and molds herself into the kind of woman most desired by the king—a woman with no identity beyond what he desires her to be.

Yet even as Esther enters the court, difficulties rise for Mordecai and Esther within the ranks of the Persian court. When an official named Haman is promoted, other advisors to the king prostrate themselves before Haman. For reasons not revealed in the text, Mordecai refuses. His friends and other members of the court come to him, urging him to lower himself before Haman. In this moment, Mordecai doesn't just refuse; he also reveals that he is a Jew. This information, paired with Mordecai's unwillingness to bow to him, kindles Haman's anger. Haman strikes out with incredible, deadly intent, stating that he will not just hold Mordecai accountable. Haman intends to murder all the Jews

in the kingdom.

To sum things up, Esther, the orphan, is hiding her Jewish heritage. Mordecai, who had held the king's favor, lost it, for his refusal to bow before a new advisor. And that new advisor, Haman, has instigated a decree to kill all the Jewish people in Persia. Now we'll pick up the story, by reading Chapter 4.

■ **Read: Esther 4: 1-11**

Have you ever been in a situation where you felt there were no good options left and no path toward making things right? This is where Mordecai finds himself. His people, all the Jewish people in Persia, are about to be killed by decree of the king. There is no way he can fix this on his own. Like other people in the Bible who feel completely adrift, Mordecai tears his clothes, covers himself in sackcloth and ash, and waits at the city gate, wailing and crying for his people.

Queen Esther hears about his actions. Fearing for him, she sends clothes he can change into, so that he will stop. She doesn't seem to understand why Mordecai is acting this way and what could happen to her people. To Esther, this reversal must seem confusing, even terrifying. Mordecai was the one who told her to hide her Jewish identity. Suddenly, the plan has changed, without her knowing, while she has been growing in stature and comfort within the palace. Mordecai is different now. Even her gifts can't change him back to the person she once knew.

Esther sends a servant to find out why Mordecai is refusing to put on new clothes and acting so strangely. Mordecai lays out the whole story and sends her a copy of the decree, hoping that Esther will go to the king and ask him to save her people. Mordecai provides Esther with the reason to change their approach, as well as the documentation proving that this is a dire situation. Yet even with the paperwork and the story, Esther isn't ready. She sends a message to Mordecai, saying approaching the

king, behavior that is against the law, would mean her death. According to Esther, she is powerless to act and, even if she tried, nothing would change.

HOW WE CHANGE

If you were to peruse *The New York Times*' "Modern Love" section dedicated to love and relationships, you might notice that the question of change comes up quite often. For example: How do you embrace change in your partner? How does retirement change you? What do we do with changing bodies and hormones, and how these make us feel in our relationships? The author of a particularly poignant "Modern Love" article about relationship changes states: "I've had at least three marriages. They've all been with the same person."

Change, it appears, is evergreen. It isn't possible to be in a relationship and not feel changes happening in ourselves, our friends and our partners. But change isn't easy. For many of us, change brings up feelings of loss and fear. What happens when the people we love tell us that we need to change? And that the way we have acted or engaged with them needs to be different in the future? What do we do when our friends push us to do something different or to take a stand when doing so feels hard?

Share aloud or reflect:

1. How have you faced change in your relationships?
2. In what ways did changes to yourself or changes to others impact these relationships?

Author and speaker Rozella Haydée White refers to these kinds of relationships—ones that can hold space for change—as "revolutionary relationships." In *Love Big: The Power of Revolutionary Relationships to Heal the World*, she argues that not only do revolutionary relationships "change the people for the better," but they "have the power to push

people outside of the confines of private relationships in ways that have public implications." These relationships are holy because they are rooted in God's own revolutionary relationship—the Trinity¹. When we give thanks for God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer in worship, we are acknowledging the revolutionary relationship God has with Godself, loving us through the creation of the world, through the liberating action of Jesus, and through the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit. Drawing on this transformative truth, White says that revolutionary relationships with other people are also healing and life-giving, though never easy.

Just as the Trinity is rooted in God's life, so are the relationships we pattern after it. These relationships—revolutionary relationships—involve risk and vulnerability. In our relationships, we are asked to risk speaking the truth like Mordecai, to risk being vulnerable and making mistakes like Esther, and to stay together even when things get messy. Through risk and vulnerability, we invite others into a deeper way of going through life together. We share what makes us happy and sad, what hurts and what heals, and we do this in a pattern of mutuality.

Therapists, when working with clients, often talk about how hard it is to risk sharing feelings, not just facts, with the people in our lives. Committing to vulnerability requires more of us than a list of things we did that day. It means sharing how we feel about those things that have happened to us. I feel hurt. I feel happy. I felt grateful. I felt alone. All of these are starters for risking vulnerable conversations with friends and loved ones, bringing us closer to one another.

Rozella White points out that revolutionary relationships don't just require vulnerability and risk. To be truly revolutionary, they also need forgiveness, grace, diversity and accountability. When we practice grace, this gives vulnerability a soft place to land. When we believe the best about others and ourselves, taking risks becomes infinitely

easier. When we trust in God's forgiveness of us as a model for how we might practice forgiveness of others, we learn to love all of God's broken people. When we let diversity point us to relationships, we care for people who aren't like us, not just racially and ethnically, but in terms of what Rozella White describes as "diversity of thought, economic background, identity, orientation, religious affiliation (and lack thereof), geographic location, educational attainment—you name it!" When we engage in diverse revolutionary relationships, it isn't for token reasons. It is because we've learned that we don't have to "water down, assimilate, or integrate our identities," she writes. We can be the people we truly are when we recognize that we don't have to fear diversity in ourselves or others.

Finally, in revolutionary relationships, we are held accountable for "who we say we want to be, what we say we value, and how we show up in the world," White states. For example, Mordecai held Esther accountable, even when it was painful, so she could have the courage to take a stand for her people. Let's turn to this revolutionary part of the biblical text.

Read: Esther 4: 12-17

The words from this brief passage of Scripture often pop into my head. Remember the game of telephone, where a phrase shifts and changes as it is repeated? I picture Mordecai sending a message to Esther to say: *What if everything prepared you for such a time as this?* So, what about times when our path forward seems hard and unclear, or we feel lost as we look toward the future? My "telephone game" version of Mordecai's message might sound like this: *What if we were being prepared for such a time as this?*

Mordecai hears Esther's response—that to go to the king (without being summoned) would be against protocol. He likely remembers what happened to the king's first wife when she stepped out

of line. However, for the Jewish people, the situation is dire. So, Mordecai, relying on the revolutionary relationship he has with Esther, tries again. Now he tells Esther that if the king is coming for the Jews, he won't stop. She, herself, will not be safe. Somehow, the people might be miraculously delivered, but Esther and her family will be lost. Perhaps God's hand was in the process that brought her into the king's favor, Mordecai says. Perhaps she has "come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Finally, Esther agrees. She tells Mordecai to gather "all the Jews to be found in Susa" and fast, just as she will. Then she will prepare to meet the king. "If I perish, I perish," she says.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Think about those of your relationships that have endured aging, changing political or spiritual views, or other forms of change. What about these relationships helped you to tolerate the difficulty of change?
4. In what ways has change hurt or helped your relationships?

REVOLUTIONARY ACTION IN A REVOLUTIONARY RELATIONSHIP

After days of fasting, Esther goes before the king, who grants her an audience because he favors her. "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request?" he basically asks. "It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom" (Esther 5:3). Even though the king has said this, Esther is still afraid. So, she asks the king to attend a banquet she will give to honor both the king and Haman. When the king agrees, Esther suggests that he come to the banquet with Haman, and if the banquet pleases him, she will then offer her request.

Meanwhile, the conflict between Mordecai and Haman continues to deepen. Haman is angered by Mordecai, who is still at the city gate. Haman

decides to erect a gallows on which to hang him. At this point, we don't know if the wrath of a rash king will be ignited, if Mordecai will hang, or if the Jewish people throughout Persia will perish.

 **Read:** Esther 7:1-8:2

The banquet arrives, and on the second day of eating and drinking, the king asks Esther what she most wants. Without any of the hesitation she exhibited earlier in the story, she tells the king that she is Jewish, and if his decree is executed, she will be killed with all her people. Enraged at even the possibility that his beloved queen might be hurt, the king asks who has done such a thing. When Esther points to Haman as the culprit, the anger of the King is kindled. He orders that Haman, who tried to exterminate all the Jews in Persia, will die upon the very gallows he built for Mordecai.

And the story doesn't quite end there. Esther also reveals to the king who Mordecai is to her: a beloved uncle. Now the king elevates him to an even higher status within his court. Esther then begs for the lives of her people. The king relents, sending out a new edict to all the lands of Persia. The Jewish people, both near and far, rejoice, for Esther has saved them.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

If you've ever heard a sermon on the Book of Esther, you've likely heard passages that lauded Esther's bravery and courage in saving her people. At some level, what we've learned in this Bible study supports that Esther summoned great courage before a rash and chaotic king. And yet, this is a Bible study on healthy relationships. I want to suggest to you that it isn't just Esther that changes the possibilities of life for the Jewish people. It is the relationship between Esther and Mordecai that is most needed to call forth action. Revolutionary relationships are the kind of relationships that allow us to change—helping us to call forward our best selves.

¹ WHITE, R. H. (2019). *LOVE BIG: THE POWER OF REVOLUTIONARY RELATIONSHIPS TO HEAL THE WORLD*. FORTRESS PRESS, P. 109.

² WHITE, V. A. (2023). *HOLY FRIENDSHIPS: NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS THAT SUSTAIN PASTORS AND LEADERS*. AUGSBURG FORTRESS PUBLISHERS, P. 6.

Victoria Atkinson White, author of *Holy Friendships*, defines holy friends as “those who name the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim, and help us dream the dreams we otherwise would not dream.”² She further writes that holy friendships are necessarily different from other friendships. Holy friendships demonstrate that we are held in God's love, and that we are a part of God's bigger, ongoing story in the world.

As we look at the story of Esther, it's clear: the relationship between Esther and Mordecai is a holy friendship, one where they can name sin, affirm gifts, and help each other to dream about what seems impossible. Holy friends hold our past and help us to imagine a future, especially when we feel stuck and confused. Esther didn't know how she could approach a rash king, but through Mordecai's encouragement, she was able to see herself as more powerful than she had dreamed. She could act to save her people.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Can you name someone in your life that has been a holy friend? How has God been a part of this relationship? How has this relationship helped you to flourish?

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, give us grace to set a good example to all among whom we live, to be just and true in all our dealings, to be strict and conscientious in the discharge of every duty; pure and temperate in all enjoyment, gracious and generous and courteous to all; so that the mind of Jesus Christ might be formed in us and all may know that we are his disciples; in whose name we pray. (*ELW Pastoral Care, Prayer for Vocation in Daily Life*).

CLOSING HYMN

“Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song” (*ELW 808*) or “Spirit, Open My Heart” (*ACS 1043*)