

New Hope Sermon Sept. 6 | YOUR VOICE

INTRODUCTION

Marti's new directive for our book has prompted another sermon! This week it was on using our voice. Her observation was that in other nonfiction books she has edited for Baker Publishing, there were not many extensive quotations from others. But there were many rather long quotes from others in *Thinking Outside the Box*. Her suggestion is that we cut those down and/or paraphrase many of them in our own words. Her counsel is that this is a book you are writing with Alex. Use your own voice – not just synthesize and work off of the insights of others.

Find and use your own voice.

Aha. What thoughts does that trigger for you?

Specifically, why are we often reticent to have our own voice heard?

Then, what is the message God has given you to share with others – your unique story, your perspective, your corrective or admonition that challenges and exhorts others, your words of comfort and hope?

And, how can that voice fulfill God's purpose in others' lives?

Let me answer the question of reticence first.

WHY ARE WE RETICENT TO USE OUR VOICE?

In my case, it has been an approach to research and scholarship. In my academic work, it was always helpful to find excellent sources and bring together disparate voices on a topic of research and combine them with my own perspective. I have used those quotes to illustrate or reinforce my own work. And I was doing this with this book. But I have been challenged to rethink.

I think others (in my experience this has been mostly women) have not been given the confidence and empowerment to use their voice. Perhaps it is a cultural value of support rather than leadership. Perhaps it is an ideal of women who are what the culture values as meek, soft-spoken and subservient – those who back the men in their lives. Perhaps it is because they have not seen models of other women who had the courage and calling from God to step up and be counted.

Or, perhaps it is fear of reprisals when they speak out words that upset, dismantle privilege or challenge power. As a Japanese saying goes, "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down" (Megumi Wilson June 2018). Perhaps it is a Christian witness in a Muslim dominated context. Or a Chinese pastor whose underground house church is in violation of Communist rules.

The Bible is full of stories of those who spoke out despite the threats against them and inherent fear of reprisals. I think of Peter and John and the early disciples who were forbidden by the Jewish authorities to speak about Jesus as Messiah, crucified for the world, yet slain by these very leaders.

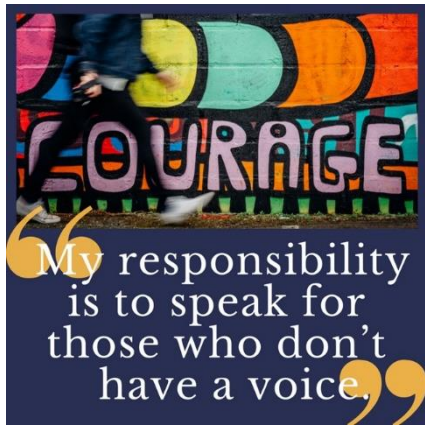
Their fear of reprisals was very real. They were forbidden to speak by the very men who had just had their own leader Jesus killed. They could easily be next. Yet their testimony when they were commanded "not



to teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus” was “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20). They were courageous to speak because of what they had experienced with God and the command from Jesus Himself to be His witnesses to all nations. And their stance laid the foundation for the birth and growth of the early church throughout the Roman Empire.

ESTHER’S CHALLENGE

But the Biblical story that first came to mind as I was thinking about using our voice amid the fear of reprisal was Esther. So, this week I have been meditating on the lessons from Esther’s story. If anyone had a fear of reprisal if she used her voice, it was Queen Esther. She had been chosen as one of the king’s harem and then ultimately as the Queen because of her beauty. No one knew she was Jewish in this Persian kingdom. At the same time, one of the king’s advisers, a man named Haman, was elevated in the kingdom to “a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king’s gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him”(Esther 3:1-2). All but Mordecai, the Jew. He stoutly refused. This enraged Haman and he decided not only to kill Mordecai for that refusal but “to destroy all Mordecai’s people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes (Esther 3:5-6). By slandering the Jewish people before the king, he got the king to issue an edict to destroy them.



When Esther’s uncle Mordecai heard about this edict, he “put on sackcloth and ashes and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly” (Esther 4:1). Esther heard about Mordecai’s great distress and sent one of her attendants to find out “what was troubling Mordecai and why”(4:5). Mordecai sent back to her the copy of the edict for annihilation and urged her to go to the king to use her voice to plead for her people. He basically told her it was her responsibility to speak for those who don’t have a voice. She was to approach the king in the inner court, reveal the extent of Haman’s treachery against her people, and ask that the king nullify the edict he had signed with Haman.

The problem with Mordecai’s request was that only the king issued orders for who could approach him and who could not, and Esther had NOT been summoned to approach him. The penalty for approaching the king without an invitation was death (Esther 4:11).

When she wrote back to Mordecai and explained why this was impossible, his response reveals a key principle behind using one’s voice:

²⁻¹⁴ When Hathach told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai sent her this message: “Don’t think that just because you live in the king’s house you’re the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this (Esther 4:12-14 The Message).

For such a time as this.

That, beloved, is when God’s guidance and our voice come together. And at that point, when our voice will be essential in saving or delivering people, we need to speak and turn our fears over to the Lord.

And that’s what Esther did. She agreed to approach the king but asked Mordecai to gather all the Jewish people in the capital city of Susa to fast for 3 days before she would go to the king and pray that he would hold out the golden scepter to her and let her speak.

She agreed to go and resolutely responded to Mordecai: “If I die, I die” (Esther 4:16). But, when she appeared in the inner court in her royal robes, the king saw her and held the royal scepter out to her. In the two subsequent banquets she had for the king and Haman, she was finally able to speak about the slaughter Haman had convinced the king to impose. The king was furious and ordered Haman and his sons to be hanged for their evil plotting, He then issued a new edict that saved the Jews and advanced Mordecai and Esther in power throughout the land.

Interestingly, the book of Esther ends with a tribute to Mordecai for using his voice: “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews”(Esther 10:3). Men as well as women need to use their voice!

Although few of us have the threat of death hanging over our heads if we don’t speak, all of us have the same opportunity to obey the call of God to use the place and position and power we are in to be heard and make a difference.

MALALA’S COURAGE



Sometimes, just one voice IS all the difference. I think of Malala in Pakistan who has steadfastly advocated for the rights of girls to have an education, even after she endured an attempted assassination in that process! She surely had no idea her efforts would gain world acclaim and ultimately result in her being granted a Nobel Peace Prize at age 17 – the youngest woman to ever achieve such a global honor. Through her voice and her courage a world movement

has started that has been critical in gaining education for girls in her country of Pakistan, throughout the Middle East and beyond.



POWERFUL WORDS

So, how do these biblical and contemporary stories apply to us, beloved? This is not just an issue for women. Both men and women need to learn how to obey God with the words and passion He gives them to act upon. Who around you do you need to speak for, as Malala does, who does not have a voice in their culture? What is the message you need to bring?

But there is more. As Alex and I were talking about this issue this week, he added: “It’s not just about having a voice. It’s about men and women speaking appropriately – in attitude and words. Having an attitude of humility and words of peacemaking and cooperation among peoples. Christians need to speak as Jesus would speak to others; we need to divest ourselves of pride which says ‘my way is the right way.’ Instead, we need to see the good in others – not just focus on the problems. We need to be guided by Scripture and pray before and after we share God’s words with them.” Many people speak volumes in their culture, but they are not words of nurture, or building up others; their words tear others down.

Ephesians 4:29-30 says: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” When the Holy Spirit is empowering your words, then they will “impart grace to the hearers” as the NKJV translation says. Grace builds up, grace is kind and full of God’s love, grace is timely and Spirit-directed and speaks directly to the heart. These are the kind of words we need courage to speak.

But the words I am thinking of in this sermon go beyond what many others would also say in the same situation. They are the words that are uniquely yours. The words that flow out of the passions and gifts and calling God has given to you.

And that was Marti’s point to me. Yes, the words of many others I have researched for Alex and my book are relevant and will help reinforce our message and purpose. They can certainly be quoted appropriately. But they must not overshadow the words and message that is uniquely ours.

be a
voice
not an
echo

For you, too, don’t let others’ words eclipse the words, the message or the calling that is given to you by God for others. Be a unique voice, not an echo. Let God empower your voice to bring His words of hope or direction or encouragement or comfort or salvation to others.

For such a time as this.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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New Hope Bible Fellowship 9/2/20