

THE RADIX PROJECT  
*small groups / deep roots*

**COURAGEOUS ANCESTORS OF FAITH:**

**RUTH & ESTHER**

FALL 2023



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL



# THE RADIX PROJECT

*www.saintmarks.org/radix*

Since early 2020, Radix has offered the opportunity for small groups to meet over the course of six weeks to share stories, study scripture, and pray for one another.

A small group is a cohort of people who gather to get to know one another against the backdrop of shared stories, scripture, and prayer. This is not a working group; there is no task to be accomplished. It is about knowing one another, and being known, as we are known by God. And that is the root of spiritual transformation.

The name for this communal effort, *radix*, is the Latin word for “root.” Jesus modeled small group relationships in his life and ministry, and the early Church was structured on small groups who worshipped, prayed, and cared for one another. Those are our roots, and in our time, when so many pressures of modern life leave us feeling alone and isolated, Christian community offers us a tangible way of entering into relationships rooted in trust and mutuality.

The root word, *radix*, also gives rise to the oft-touted word we hear a lot these days—radical. A radical is not one who goes their separate way, doing their own thing. A radical is one who is so well-grounded with deep roots that they are able to stretch out to the fringes of existence and offer us all a different way of being in the world. We speak of radical hospitality or radical welcome because we claim our deep roots of this life in Christ, and we are willing to claim a radical vision for our lives and for the world.

We don't always agree—politically, theologically, and we have different life experiences—but we care for one another, we pray for one another, and the blush of life is more full because of those relationships. It is our hope that as you reflect on these stories, you might discover how God's graceful activity is revealed in your own life as well, and in those of your group members. ♦

# THE RADIX PROJECT PLANNING COMMITTEE

Wendy Clarie Barrie  
Molly Bosch  
Elizabeth Clark-Stern  
Martha Craig  
James Davidson  
Emily Meeks  
Steve Thomason  
Jen Younggren

Please feel free to contact [radix@saintmarks.org](mailto:radix@saintmarks.org) if you have any questions or concerns along the way. Thank you for your participation.

## OVERVIEW FOR SMALL GROUPS

Small groups are designed to gather people of faith in settings that foster trust so that our relationships with God and one another are strengthened. When we meet each other for earnest conversation, sharing, and prayer, we deepen the bonds of affection by which we learn how to love ourselves, each other, and God more fully. In this way, small groups are intentional about providing space for prayerful support and accountability, guided by the One we know as Jesus the Christ.

For our purposes in the Radix Project, we have designed a process for guiding 6–10 people in their season together, designed as six 90-minute sessions, with a plenary gathering before the first session. Each small group gathering is structured to open with prayer, to have time for check-in, scripture reading and reflection, sharing of stories, and check-out with prayer.

# SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

## OPENING PLENARY

Sunday, October 23, 2023  
7–8:30 p.m., online via Zoom only

## SESSION 1:

**RUTH 1:11–22** . . . . . week of October 15, 2023

## SESSION 2:

**RUTH 2:17–23** . . . . . week of October 22, 2023

## SESSION 3:

**RUTH 4:9–17** . . . . . week of October 29, 2023

## SESSION 4:

**ESTHER 1:10–18** . . . . . week of November 5, 2023

## SESSION 5:

**ESTHER 4:7–17** . . . . . week of November 12, 2023

## SESSION 6:

**ESTHER 9:20–29** . . . . . week of November 26, 2023

## NOTE

This Radix iteration, we are asking participants to read the books of Ruth and Esther *in their entirety*. Each week, we have listed the sections from those chapters as suggested pre-reading.

Sunday groups begin October 22 and conclude on November 26. Tuesday and Thursday groups will not meet in the week of Thanksgiving, and will have their final meeting on November 28 & 30.

# RADIX 11: COURAGEOUS ANCESTORS OF FAITH: RUTH & ESTHER

What do we do with lesser-known parts of the Bible? This sacred book is a rich and diverse collection of our ancestors' encounters with the Holy One. In the Episcopal tradition, we trust that the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures (the "Old" and "New" Testaments) are the Word of God because "God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible" (BCP, p. 853). The Bible tells multiple stories of God's movement in history using a variety of literary styles—narrative story, poetry, letters, lyrical prose, law, and more.

In Radix 11, we will encounter two parts of the Hebrew Scriptures that may be unfamiliar to participants—the books of Ruth and Esther. They are the only two books in the Bible named for women<sup>1</sup> and each tells an important story of ancestry that we can claim as our own.

The book of Ruth is a relatively short parable about ordinary people—two widows named Naomi and Ruth and a farmer named Boaz—as they experience famine, exile, grief, and the desire for redemption and renewal. Ruth's commitment to and love for her mother-in-law Naomi is often read in marriage liturgies, "*Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God.*"

The book of Esther is a longer Jewish novella that involves extraordinary, dramatic, people—wealthy and powerful King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti of Persia; evil Haman, responsible for a genocidal plot against the Jews; wise Mordecai, guardian of Esther; and Esther, a Jewish orphan

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1. One other book named for a woman, Judith, is included in the Apocrypha.

who becomes Queen of Persia and saves her people from extermination. It is an over-the-top story of sudden, surprising reversals that established the Jewish holiday of Purim.

Ruth and Esther are revered ancestors of faith because their lives are critical to the lineage of David, and eventually Jesus. Both women navigate the culture of their time—a system in which a woman’s safety and power depends on her family connections and ability to influence the men in her life. Each also marries a man of a different religious background, which brings its own challenges. Their stories may stir up questions about our own culture and experiences of interracial and interreligious relationships, as well as what it means to leave a legacy for future generations.

Unlike other books in the Bible, the stories of Ruth and Esther make almost no mention of God’s presence and actions. They are faithful women, but any encounters they have with the Holy One take place off-camera, if at all. We are left to imagine the content and tenor of their spiritual lives and wonder at how their lives are intertwined with God’s movement in history. All of this leads us to consider how God speaks to us through the Bible and how our own mundane lives may be moving in the flow of God’s healing and redemptive love. ♦

# ESTABLISH GROUP NORMS

In order to grow in trust, it is important for groups to agree to norms for their time together and revisit them periodically as needed. It is important that everyone agree to abide by the same expectations for their time together. Here are some aspects of relational group culture that all groups will want to discuss as they begin their work.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

- ◆ What is allowed to be shared outside the group?
- ◆ What may be shared on social media?

## **RESPECT AND MUTUALITY**

- ◆ Let others finish without being interrupted.
- ◆ Resist the temptation to problem-solve.
- ◆ Mutual respect is essential.
- ◆ Give everyone a chance to speak.

## **LOGISTICS**

- ◆ What are expectations about beginning and ending on time?
- ◆ ...about informing others of an expected absence?

## **ATTENDANCE**

- ◆ Be punctual.
- ◆ Commit to regular attendance and participation.

## **PREPARATION**

- ◆ What, if anything, are group members expected to do to prepare for their meetings?

## **COMMITMENT TO PRAYER**

- ◆ What are expectations that each group member commits to pray for the others daily during this time as a small group?



# ZOOM ETIQUETTE

Keep your microphone on mute when not speaking.

Take responsibility to practice using the technology ahead of the meeting, and ask for help as needed. Zoom resources are available at *support.zoom.us*

## FLOW OF THE SMALL GROUP MEETINGS

A key to the flourishing of small groups is some consistency week to week so folks will know what to expect. A group facilitator will encourage the group to stay on track, but everyone has a part in making that happen. Here is the suggested format for all Radix groups, which are designed to meet for 90 minutes each week:

<b>GATHERING</b> . . . . .	5 minutes
<b>OPEN IN PRAYER</b> . . . . .	5 minutes
<b>CHECK-IN QUESTION</b> . . . . .	.10 minutes
<b>SCRIPTURE REFLECTION</b> . . . . .	.20 minutes
<b>GROUP DISCUSSION</b> . . . . .	.30 minutes
<b>CHECK-OUT INCLUDING PRAYER REQUESTS</b> . . . . .	.10 minutes
<b>CLOSING PRAYER/WORSHIP</b> . . . . .	.10 minutes

# IDEAS FOR CHECK-IN QUESTIONS

*Pick one for each week.*

1. Think of a close friend or family member. What is a quality about them that you admire? Why?
2. Do you know your ancestry? If so, what are some things you learned? If not, what are you interested in learning?
3. What is something that marks the start of fall for you?
4. “We thank you for the blessing of family and friends, and for the loving care which surrounds us on every side.” (BCP, *A General Thanksgiving*, p. 836) Who in your life shows you loving care?
5. What does courage mean to you?
6. Share a nickname or another name by which you may be known.
7. Reflect on a road trip or journey you have taken. Who is someone you met along the way?
8. Describe a recent memorable interaction with a stranger.
9. How do the seasons influence your prayer life or spiritual practices?

## OPENING AND CLOSING PRAYERS/CHECK-OUT

Leading one another in prayer is a responsibility that is meant to be shared among the group—it’s not just for the facilitator. Decide how your group will share taking turns with opening and closing prayers. Prayers may be extemporaneous, or

sourced from the rich variety of resources, some of which are listed below:

- ◆ Thanksgivings, BCP, p. 836–841
- ◆ Daily Devotions, BCP, p. 137–140
- ◆ Compline, BCP, p. 127
- ◆ A brief hymn, chant, or Taizé prayer
- ◆ A poem that connects to a theme in the scripture selection
- ◆ Lectionary-based Prayers from Vanderbilt Divinity School  
<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=154>
- ◆ The Book of Common Prayer Online  
<https://www.bcponline.org/>
- ◆ The New Zealand Prayer Book Online  
<https://anglicanprayerbook.nz/>
- ◆ The Work of the People  
<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/visual-liturgy>  
<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/be-still>
- ◆ Closing prayer is an opportunity for each member of the group to reflect on the time together, articulating what they learned, and to ask the group to hold them in prayer with special intention. That intention may have arisen in the context of the meeting, or it could be that you are asking for prayers for some prevailing part of your life (e.g., my child has surgery next week, or I am retiring from work, etc.). The important thing is that the prayers of the group gather all those intentions up as the meeting comes to an end, AND that each person commits to holding those prayers through the week, until you meet again.

In addition to including a prayer from one of the above resources, consider the following:

- ◆ The group may choose to go around and allow each person to pray for the person sitting to their right, with the facilitator opening and closing.
- ◆ Alternatively, after the intentions are named, sit in silent prayer, centered on God's mercy and presence.



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# SCRIPTURE STUDY GUIDES

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# WEEK 1

**SCRIPTURE** *Ruth 1:1–22*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Ruth 1*

**B**UT Naomi said, ‘Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.’ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, ‘See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.’ But Ruth said,

‘Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!’

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, ‘Is this Naomi?’ She said to them,

‘Call me no longer Naomi,  
call me Mara,  
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.  
I went away full,  
but the LORD has brought me back empty;  
why call me Naomi  
when the LORD has dealt harshly with me,  
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?’

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. ♦

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. The name Naomi means “pleasant” or “happy”, yet she says to call her “Mara,” which means “bitter.” What motivations, do you believe lie at the heart of Naomi’s request? What might this say about how she holds suffering and loss?
3. Ruth is a Moabite, from the country now called Jordan, raised in a culture that worshipped pagan gods. In following Naomi to Bethlehem, Ruth will arrive as an immigrant. What does this tell you about Ruth’s character, the nature of her faith, and the nature of her love for Naomi?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What is your relationship to grief and loss? How does the story of Ruth and Naomi resonate with your own life?
2. The passage reveals Ruth's love for her mother-in-law, who is not a blood relation. Ruth's name means "friend." In his book *Anam Cara*, John O'Donahue writes of a "soul friend," a bond that can be greater than romantic love. Tell about or name someone in your life you can rely on, especially in times of loss and suffering.
3. Think of a time in your life when you made a dramatic transition in your inner or outer life that exposed you to the unknown. What helped guide your decision?
4. In our world today many people are fleeing their home country due to political and climate unrest. How does your own experience, and Ruth and Naomi's story, inform your feelings about these stories and how you might respond?



## NOTES



*Whither Thou Goest*  
by Sandy Freckleton Gagan

## NOTES

*Artist's statement:* “When I begin any painting, I research, pray, and fast. Three years later I was blessed with the concept for *Whither Thou Goest*. Ruth and Naomi faced overwhelming challenges, which become deeply emblematic of our own challenges. Indeed, as we read in the scriptures, the blessing of deliverance came through a closeness and sensitivity to Deity, an acquaintanceship with God, a sanctified strength that can only come through pain and suffering, and acknowledging and confessing our weaknesses. (Esther 12:27). I found the imagery of the journey to Bethlehem deeply symbolic of the journey each of us takes during our mortal sojourn. Ruth, in the extremity of their adversity, reaches up and covers them both with her cloak, just as Christ’s enabling power blankets each of us. In Aramaic the word atone means ‘to cover.’”

1. How is this painting similar or different from the picture you have in your mind of Naomi and Ruth traveling to Bethlehem?
2. How has the artist used the composition of the fabric and the figures to tell her story?
3. Take time to look at the faces of each woman. What do you imagine they are thinking or feeling about their journey ahead, and about each other? What emotions do you feel?
4. How do Naomi and Ruth remind you of soul-friendships in your own life?

## WEEK 2

**SCRIPTURE** *Ruth 2:17–23*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Ruth 2*

SO SHE gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.” Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.’” Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.” So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law. ♦

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. Earlier in Chapter 2, Boaz notices Ruth. What are the ways he shows her favor?
3. What words describe Ruth's work ethic?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Ruth reflects to Naomi about her time in the fields. How and with whom do you reflect on your day?
2. Have you ever lived with a member of your extended family or a close friend for a period of time? What was your experience of coming to that decision? What did you learn in the experience?
3. Naomi shares specific advice with Ruth and Ruth listens. Share a time when you received and followed advice from someone close to you. How did it unfold?



*Ruth the Moabitess*  
by Kopel Gurwin (1923–1990)

## NOTES

A passage from Ruth in Hebrew circles the main figure of Ruth as she gleans in the field. Rich colors and Hebrew lettering were hallmarks of Kopel's style. Known as "Kopel," the artist was born in Lithuania and his family was deeply affected by the Holocaust—his sister went missing and his parents died from typhus after being taken to Stutthof. Kopel and his brother Meshke would eventually end up at Stutthof but manage to survive, including a death march during which many of their friends collapsed or were shot. His gift of art would manifest after moving to Israel. In an interview about his work, he said, *"After having found a subject that touches my heart, I prepare a sketch, not in color but with a pencil. At first I don't sleep for two weeks, but as soon as an idea pops into my head it appears in all its detail. It is as if my brain photographs the finished work. I choose the appropriate colors. I don't prepare a small model, but enlarge the sketch and immediately cut the fabric and sew. At the end of the process I add the text which explains the image."*

1. The phrase encircling Ruth is *"And Ruth the Moabitess said unto Naomi: 'Let me now go to the field, and glean among the ears of corn.'"* Why do you think Kopel chose that phrase from Ruth 2?
2. What words or phrases would encircle a painting of your life?
3. How might Kopel's story and journey to another land encircle his form of artwork?

## WEEK 3

**SCRIPTURE** *Ruth 4:9–17*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Ruth 3–4*

**T**HEN Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses today that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.” Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. ♦

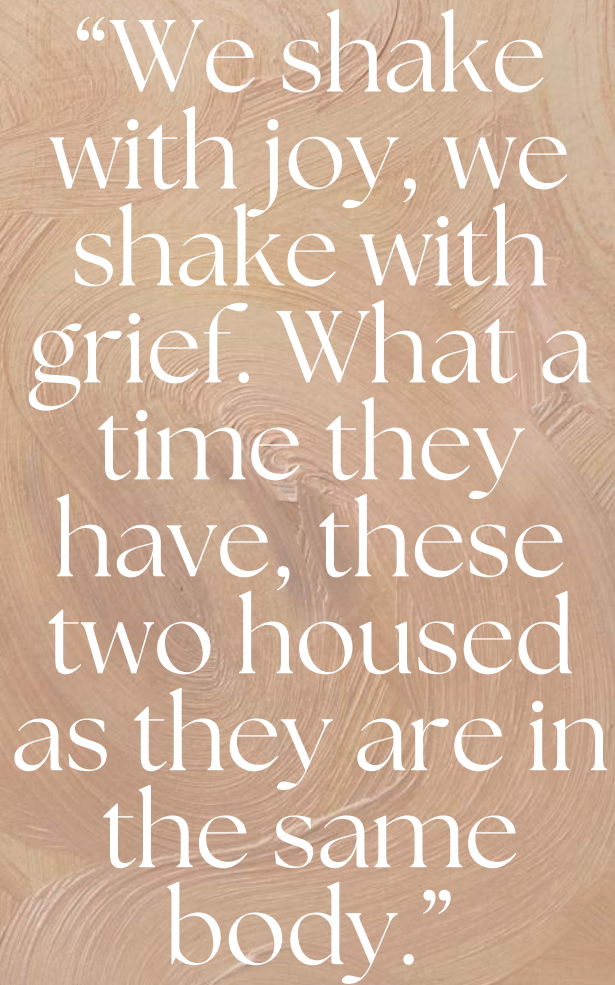


### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. What does the birth of Ruth's son, Obed, symbolize for Naomi and the community witnessing this story unfolding?
3. Ruth is instructed to go down to the threshing floor and lie with Boaz. How does this passage reflect the roles of gender and power?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What themes do you notice in this text? What other feminine characters in scripture, literature or history remind you of Ruth?
2. Where in your life have you seen an outcome unfold that you did not plan or anticipate coming into fruition? How did this influence your faith? Where in your life are you praying for God's guidance?
3. The Book of Ruth begins with funerals and ends with a wedding. In what ways have you observed God in both suffering and joy? How did you maintain comfort and hope amid loss?



“We shake  
with joy, we  
shake with  
grief. What a  
time they  
have, these  
two housed  
as they are in  
the same  
body.”

Mary Oliver

*“We Shake with Joy”*

by Mary Oliver

## NOTES

The poem above was written by Mary Oliver (Sept. 1935–January 2019) and can be found in her personal anthology of poems from her life's work *Devotions*. Mary Oliver was a deeply insightful poet, who has prolific compilations of poetry and prose relating to the natural world and connecting the spiritual pulse of the natural environment around us. Much of her work focuses on finding joy, wonder, and awe when connecting to the life that exists in the wild. Many of her works including this included poem focus on the theme of experiencing joy amidst suffering and being able to approach the world with surrender and gratitude.

1. What connections to the scripture text do you see with Mary Oliver's words?
2. Oliver's words describe an embodied response to holding these emotions together. How does it feel in your body to experience joy and grief simultaneously?

## WEEK 4

**SCRIPTURE** *Esther 1:10–18*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Esther 1–3*

**O**N THE seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him. Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and custom, and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven officials of Persia and Media, who had access to the king, and sat first in the kingdom): "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?" Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath! ♦

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. Why do you think the riches, decor, and luxury is described in such lavish detail? (Esther 1: 4–7) What consequences could wealth have in a sole focus of sustaining a kingdom?
3. The men in this story feared that Queen Vashti’s actions may be emulated by all women. How does their response land with you? What connections to their response do you see in news stories and culture today?
4. The text describes drinking “with no restrictions.” How might substance use play a role in human interactions then and today, particularly in situations of power differentials?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Vashti can be cast as the evil queen or “bad wife” with Esther as the heroine or “good wife” and heroine. How might this categorization reveal tendencies of binary thinking? How might the story land if we embrace aspects of both women in our own nature as human beings?
2. The #MeToo movement adopted Vashti as one of the first documented instances of a woman standing up and saying no to a powerful man, and then losing her job/position/marriage/social status as a result. How does this interpretation of the text land with you?
3. Creating change can occur in many ways—sometimes within a system and sometimes from the outside. How can the decisions and actions of Vashti and Esther inform making changes in response to current issues of power, wealth and gender inequality?



*Queen Vashti*  
by Micah Hayns

## NOTES

Hayns was born in London in 1997. His first word was “again” and from an early age he enjoyed repeating skills or craft until he reached a level of completion or satisfaction. He studied in Florence, Italy and now works out of an art shop in Oxford, England. His work stems from a deep passion to share moments of beauty and life. Through his art, he hopes to “remind people of the riches of creation and the love of God.”

1. In this drawing, what do you notice about Queen Vashti’s expression?
2. Between 2020–2021, Micah Hayns created 40 drawings and paintings to illustrate the book titled *Unveiled* about women of the Old Testament which was written by his mother Clare Hayns—a project he described as a great blessing for his faith. What wisdom might she offer in this collection of Old Testament women?
3. What would it be like for you to partner with a family member on an art project? What expression of creativity might you explore?

# WEEK 5

**SCRIPTURE** *Esther 4: 7-17*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Esther 4-6*

**M**ORDECAI told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions. ♦



### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. What elements of this story strike you as alien to a 21st-century reader, and what elements seem timeless?
3. Esther is ultimately convinced by Mordecai's argument to intercede on behalf of their people. What impresses you about her internal journey?
4. What themes of Esther's story do you see in Christ's sacrifice? In what ways do you see God at work in both?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Have you ever been convinced to do something to help others that might have put your own well-being in danger? What was the outcome? What did you learn from the experience?
2. Esther combines strategic thinking and spiritual preparation in taking on her daunting challenge. Describe a time when you have balanced mind and spirit in facing challenges?
3. How do you experience the Holy Spirit's prodding when deciding whether to take a consequential stand?



*Esther and Mordecai* (1685)  
by Aert de Gelder

## NOTES

Aert de Gelder (Oct. 26, 1645–August 29, 1727) was the only Dutch artist of the late 17th and early 18th century to paint in the tradition of Rembrandt's late style. De Gelder spent his life in Dordrecht, The Netherlands, except for his times as Rembrandt's pupil in Amsterdam. His biblical paintings feature warm color and atmospheric light. In his portraits his bold, broad manner of brushwork and surface texture contrasts markedly with the refined techniques and smoothly finished canvases of his contemporaries.

1. What do you first notice when you look at Esther and Mordecai?
2. How do their clothes and posture influence your understanding of the story?
3. How does De Gelder's use of light affect your reaction to the painting?

## WEEK 6

**SCRIPTURE** *Esther 9: 20–29*

**SUGGESTED READING** *Esther 7–10*

**M**ORDECAI recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. So the Jews adopted as a custom what they had begun to do, as Mordecai had written to them.

For Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast Pur—that is, “the lot”—to crush and to destroy them, but when Esther came before the king, he gave orders in writing that the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head and that he and his sons should be hung on the pole. Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur. Thus because of all that was written in this letter and of what they had faced in this matter and of what had happened to them, the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written and at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city, and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

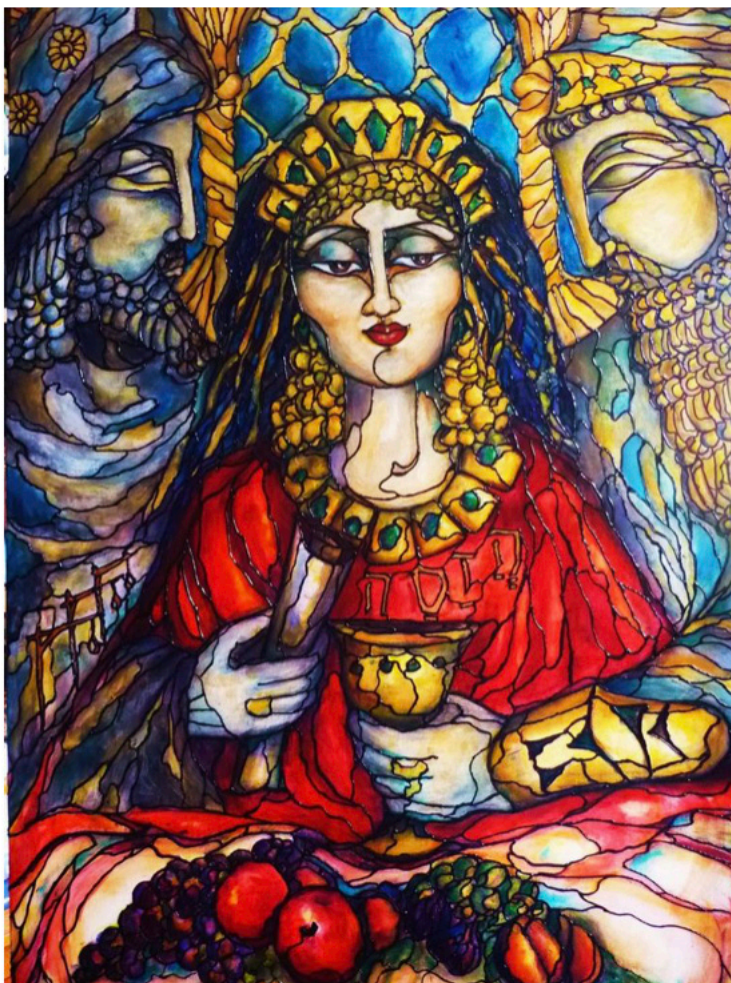
Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail, along with Mordecai the Jew, gave full written authority confirming this second letter about Purim. ♦

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. What word or phrase stands out to you or resonates with you? What questions do you have about this passage?
2. The Book of Esther opens with a king's opulent 180-day celebration of his wealth and power. The book closes with a queen's 2-day celebration of a dramatic reversal of events. What do you notice about the difference between the two celebrations?
3. In this text we learn that the holiday Purim comes from the word Pur—the casting of lots (to determine the day of the attempted destruction of the Jews). The casting of lots, an ancient method for determining providential guidance, could sound like “chance” to modern readers. What do you make of this and where do you see God's presence and guidance in this story?

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. The Book of Esther, read annually during the festival of Purim, has sparked conversation and controversy with many different approaches to how the text is read. How have you heard this story before? How do you experience it now?
2. Having experienced and encountered anew this ancient text, how might we now follow in the footsteps of Queen Vashti and Queen Esther?
3. Thinking back over the course of these six scripture selections, where do you see similarities between Ruth and Esther? Where do you notice differences? Are there elements you would like to learn more about?



*Esther*  
by Rae Chichilnitsky (2017)



## NOTES

A note from the artist: *“But in this painting such ‘happy end’ outcome is still unknown and Esther’s life and lives of her people are still hanging by the thread, as she’s sitting demurely between two powerful men, entertaining them and engaging in intricate diplomacy. The moment is tense. The king isn’t aware of the plot yet. Neither he’s aware that his wife, Esther, is Jewish. How would he react when he’ll find out?”*

1. What do you notice first about the painting?
2. How might this painting represent characteristics of strength and bravery??

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SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

1245 Tenth Avenue East  
Seattle, WA 98102

206.323.0300

[WWW.SAINTMARKS.ORG](http://WWW.SAINTMARKS.ORG)