

SERMON: “For Such A Time As This”

November 8, 2009

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: In your providence, O God, we find ourselves in challenging times. Your people always do. Give us the imagination to hear what you would speak to us through your word written, so that we may be inspired to live faithfully in a time such as this; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

O. T. LESSON: Esther 4:10-17

N. T. LESSON: Ephesians 5:15-20

Shortly after the Jewish historian Deborah Lipstadt won an important victory in court over the Holocaust denier David Irving, she went to her local synagogue and heard that night a reading of the scroll of Esther. When she heard the question put to Esther, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” she began to think to herself,

“Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job—maybe we’re all meant to do one something really significant. And some of us do it on the public stage, and some do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we’re all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do.”¹

What about you and me? What is the “something significant” we are called to do, in “just such a time as this”? That is a question we all need to ask ourselves, and one that we be asking throughout our financial stewardship campaign this fall. The theme that we have chosen for this year’s campaign, **“For Such A Time As This,”** comes from the portion of the book of Esther we read a moment ago. We have chosen the theme to address the challenging situation in which we are called to do ministry today. It is “For Such A Time As This”—a time in which we have lost a significant number of the great saints of this church, a time in which our nation’s economy is just beginning to come out of the worst recession in decades, and we face huge challenges at home and abroad—it is in “just such a time as this” that we are called to renewed commitment, personally and financially.

What I want to do this morning, as a way of introducing the theme, is to tell in abbreviated fashion a portion of the story of Queen Esther. Esther is a young Jewish girl who in the providence of God finds herself caught up in a purpose far greater than herself, and who chooses to do the right thing, at the right time, even though it was fraught with danger for herself and her people.

The story of Esther begins some 500 years before the birth of Christ in the palace of King Ahasuerus of Persia. In the third year of his reign the king decides to throw a huge party for all those in positions of authority throughout his empire to show off how rich and powerful he is. He invites them to the capital city of Susa, and for *six* months, they “party hardy.”

But even after six months of partying, the King still was up for more. So he throws another party for all the men in the capital city, rich and poor alike. This “after-party” lasts only a week, but we are told that “drinks were served in golden goblets, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.” There was no limit on how much each man could drink. The king’s only order was that every man should “have as much as he wanted.”

On the seventh day when “the heart of the king was merry,”—after all that carousing I would certainly think so—the king decided to parade his wife, Queen Vashti, in front of the men

¹ Told by Carol Bechtel in *Esther—Interpretation Commentay* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002) p. 1

to show off how beautiful she was. She was to wear the royal crown. Some ancient Jewish commentators have suggested that what that really means is that she was to wear *nothing but* the royal crown.

Queen Vashti didn't think that was such a good idea, so she said NO. No way was she going to prance around in front of bunch of drunken Persians! When she refused to obey the king's command, the king was enraged and all the men around him sobered up in a hurry. How dare she do such a thing! If the queen can get by with disobeying the king, pretty soon all the women in the empire will do the same thing. They will look with contempt on their husbands, and that would not be good! So King Ahasuerus, whose name literally means "Mighty Man," asks his top advisors what he should do, and they tell him to get rid of Vashti and give her position to a woman who is better than she—or at least more subservient. That he does. He banishes Vashti and issues a decree that throughout the kingdom "every man should be master in his own house." He and his men agree that it is a splendid idea.

But now he needs a new queen. So since he has an eye for good looking young women, his servants arrange a beauty contest. The most beautiful young woman in the kingdom will become his new queen.

This is where Esther enters the story. Esther is an orphan who is being raised by her older cousin Mordecai. He tells her to enter the contest, just don't tell anyone she is a Jew. This was not like a Miss SC contest that takes place over in a weekend at Myrtle Beach. Before each woman was presented to the king, she first had to spend a whole year getting beautified. Then she could appear before the king wearing whatever she wanted. Maybe it *was* like a Miss SC contest.

As the story unfolds, Esther is taken to the king, and immediately he is smitten. We are told "the king loved Esther more than all the women" and set the royal crown on her head. Suddenly this young Jewish orphan, this nobody, finds herself the most powerful woman in the kingdom. She is taken to the royal palace to live as the Queen of Persia.

Not long afterward, her cousin Mordecai happens to overhear two men plotting to kill the king. He tells Esther, who then informs the king of the plot. When the matter is investigated and turns out to be true, the king has the men arrested and put to death. And the matter is recorded in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Persia.

Now for the first time the villain of the story comes on stage. His name is **Haman**. Whenever the story is read in the synagogue, every time the name of Haman is spoken, the congregation breaks out in boos and hisses and the children whirl loud noisemakers, called Groggers.

Haman is as ruthless as they come. He is out to grab all the power he can get. He quickly he rises to power—how, we are not told. Soon Haman is the second most powerful person in the empire, behind only the king. The king gives an order that everyone in the kingdom is to bow down to Haman. Every one does...everyone, that is, *except Mordecai*. Whether in pride or in piety--refusing to bow to anyone, except the Lord God--Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman. Haman is furious and determines to have Mordecai arrested and hung on a gallows taller than this sanctuary—"hang 'em high!" Haman tells his henchmen about his plan, and they suggest that killing Mordecai is not enough. While they are at it, they should have **all** of his people put to death. **Genocide!** After all, these people, these Jews, do not keep the king's laws. It is not profitable to the king tolerate them any longer.

So a date is set. All the Jews throughout the empire are to be killed on the 13th day of the 12th month of the year. Haman writes up an order for all the Jews in the kingdom to be killed, and takes it to the king to sign. According to the decree, not only can the people of Persia kill the Jews, they can take whatever is theirs. The king signs the order, which cannot be revoked, and word goes out to all the Jewish communities in the kingdom.

When Mordecai learns of the king's decree, he tears off his clothes and puts on the traditional garb of mourning, "sackcloth and ashes." Soon in every province in the land there is great mourning and weeping. "Oy vay!"

When Queen Esther learns that her cousin Mordecai is making a scene at the king's gate, we are told that she was "deeply distressed." Distressed at what--his behavior, or at the order for genocide? Oddly, she sends him new suit of clothes to wear, but he refuses to take off the "sackcloth and ashes." He knows how grave the situation is, even if she does not yet. To help her understand the gravity of the situation he sends her a copy of the king's decree and urges her to use her position as queen to do something about it, before it is too late.

But how, she asks? What can I do? I cannot address the king without his invitation. The law is clear, If any man or woman goes to see the king without being summonsed, that person must die, unless the king holds out the golden scepter to them. But it has been a month since the king sent for me. I want to help. I really do...but how? Now's not the time. I'm not the one.

I hate to think how many times I have said or thought the same thing. I'd love to do more, or help more, or give more...but now's not the right time. Wait until the market turns around, or until I have more time to get involved. Wait until all the facts or in, or public opinion is on our side. But the time is never "right" for anything truly difficult and dangerous. In a very sense, as Paul says, "the days are always evil." Waiting until the "right time" is never an option for the people of God.

Mordecai sends a stern warning to her. "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?" Mordecai trusts that God will once again deliver his people. He does not know how or by whom, but he trusts that deliverance will come from some quarter.

But trusting in the power of God's deliverance does not exempt us from acting in accord with our best understanding of what God is calling us to do here and now. God does not call us to sit back and do nothing in the face of injustice and evil...going along to get along. In the most challenging of situations God calls us to take seriously the question Mordecai puts to Esther. **"Who knows? Perhaps it is for just such a time as this that you are who you are and where you are."**

Mordecai knows that keeping silent in a time of crisis does not ensure one's safety. Simply laying low, hoping that evil will not find us, never works for long. That's a lesson the people of God have had to learn the hard way across the centuries.

Out of his own experience with horrendous evil, the German pastor, Martin Niemoller, tells how

"First they came for the Communists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up,

because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a socialist; Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a trade unionist; Then they came for me, and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me."

Mordecai was right. "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish." Many did.

Meanwhile back in Susa, Esther is convinced by Mordecai's words and finds the courage to reply, "Gather all the Jews in Susa and hold a fast on my behalf...for three days and nights. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

In a difficult and deadly situation a young woman is moved to act with great courage. Even if it is against the law of the land, even if it could mean her own death, she will do what she knows is right, leaving the outcome in God's hands. "If I perish, I perish."

I wish we had time to tell the whole story. You'll have to read it for yourself. The story goes on to tell of how Esther invited the king and the hated Haman to two banquets that she gave, and how the king was so pleased that he promised to give her anything she asked for, "even half of his kingdom," and how on a sleepless night the king had his servants read to him from the Book of the Chronicles, from the very place that told of how Mordecai had once saved his life. When he learns that he has never done anything to properly thank Mordecai, he honors him lavishly, and has Haman hung on the towering gallows that he had built for Mordecai. And even though the royal decree to kill all the Jews in the land could not be rescinded, they were given permission to defend themselves, which they did quite well.

Out of Esther's remarkable courage and foresight, her people were saved in a time when all the Jews in the land were under a death sentence. No wonder our Jewish brothers and sisters love the Book of Esther, and read it with great delight every year at the Feast of Purim, a kind of Jewish Mardi Gras, celebrated with food and wine—lots and lots of wine--and gifts to each other and to the poor.

The Book of Esther has never been a favorite of Protestants. Luther hated it. Calvin ignored it. But the book has power to make us laugh and cry all at the same time, and most of all it has power to encourage us to reflect on the challenges of our own time and consider how we shall respond to what God is calling us to do here and now.

We, too, are caught up in purposes greater than ourselves. In ways we may not recognize, God is at work in and through us. "Maybe," as Deborah Lipstadt said, "maybe we're all meant to do one something really significant. And some of us do it on the public stage, and some do it by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we're all meant to do something."² What is it that God is calling you to do "for just a time such as this"? And me?

Allen C. McSween
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Greenville, SC

² Told by Bechtel, p. 1. Deborah Lipstadt is professor of Jewish History and Holocaust Studies at Emory University. Interestingly enough, her middle name is Esther.