

Scripture: Esther 3:13-4:17 (selections)

Sermon Title: *For such a time as this*

Esther 3:13-14,4:1-17

¹³Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. ¹⁴A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day.

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; ²he went up to the entrance of the king's gate...

When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. ⁵Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. ⁶Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him... ⁸Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

⁹Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.'¹²When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. **¹⁴For 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 family will perish. **Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.'** ¹⁵Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.'¹⁷Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

For Reflection

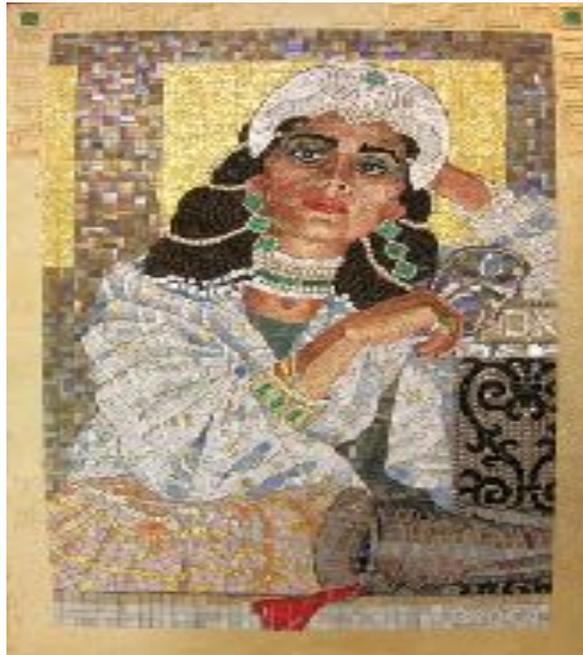
May you remember that all politics and all platforms and all legalities and all borders and all leaders are temporary...May God grant you grace to affirm the humanity — the image of God —

in every political candidate and leader, and civility to impartially and energetically embrace any pursuit of genuine human flourishing they propose.

-From Sojourners Magazine, “A Benediction for Election Season”

We just heard a piece of Esther from the *NRSV*, but if you are like me, you likely need a bit of a refresher on this story. So, let me give you the *MSP* translation of the story, the Marcus

Schlegel-Preheim translation:



Once upon a time there was a king who ruled over the world from India to Ethiopia; his name was Ahasuerus. He was having a great weeklong party and at the end of that seventh day, he wanted his wife to come and show off her beauty for all present. But she refused, Queen Vashti was her name (if you ever wondered where Vashti Sommervill’s name comes from, it is from this strong Queen of Persia who said ‘no’ to her husband – the ruler of the known world at the time). Queen Vashti said, “no, I will not come and be an object of lust for your friends.” The king did not appreciate this, and so he got rid of her – tossed her out as Queen.

Now King Ahasuerus needed a new queen, so he ordered that the most lovely women from his 127 provinces be brought before him that they might choose the loveliest as his new queen. He chose Esther.

Though the king did not know it, Esther was an orphan, a Jew in the care of her uncle, Mordecai who took her in after her parents had died. Mordecai advised Esther that she should marry the king, even though he was not of her faith or her people. Esther, we come to see, is vulnerable in three ways. In a culture where family provides protection and identity, Esther is an orphan. In a culture defined and controlled by men, Esther is a woman. In the powerful Persian Empire, Esther is a Jew.

And so, the story of Esther starts off a bit like a Disney fairy tale: an orphan – one of the main Disney story lines; a king seeking a bride, so he sends for women from all over his kingdom – another Disney type; a commoner becoming queen – Disney gold!

Esther is queen. Now, in the king's employ, there was a wicked toady fellow named Haman, who wasn't only a bureaucrat, but the worst type of bureaucrat, one always looking to make a name for himself and rise up the political ladder. Haman plotted to have all the Jews in the king's lands killed, seeing these foreigners as troublesome aliens who would never be loyal subjects. Haman sees a vulnerable people that he can sacrifice for his own gain.

And so, in good little toady, kiss-up fashion, Haman slithers up to the king and says, "Dear king, it has come to our attention that there is a certain ethnic group in your kingdom who consider themselves above your laws. They do not see their primary identity as being Persian; they do not salute you as other Persians do; they do not sing your anthems and praise. Although multiculturalism and ethnic diversity is an otherwise good thing, a rule is a rule. I am no racist,"

says Haman, “but this group of people breaks the law. Allow me to help my king by simply destroying them.”

The king – who is easily swayed by his advisors – agrees and orders that on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, all Jews would be slain.

When news began to spread, the Jews were, to say the least, greatly distressed. Mordecai sent news of the plan to his niece Esther, the Queen. Mordecai ran to the palace gate and begged her for help. “Who knows?” asked Mordecai, “maybe you have been put in the palace for a moment such as this.” “Maybe this fairy tale is not just for you, maybe it is not just for your benefit that you have this place of privilege and power – maybe it is for this specific time, for this specific occasion.”

Now a brief word about palace etiquette. In those days, it was hard to get to see the king, more than hard actually, it is pretty much impossible to see the king without an appointment – even if you were a wealthy international businessperson with a fat donation check for the king’s reelection fund, you couldn’t get in. Not without a preapproved appointment. Even the queen had to ask permission. If anyone, the queen included, showed up unsummoned by the king, they could be killed for such an intrusion. Esther reminds Mordecai of these rules. You bother the king when he doesn’t want to be bothered and you could be a dead queen. But, Mordecai reminds Esther that she is the only hope her people have.

Esther is afraid. Like all Biblical heroes, she is not sure if she should do this, she is not sure if she has the strength or necessary skill. But she does not let her fear stop her. She tells her uncle to send word to all the Jews in the region to spend three days in fasting. She too will fast. Then she will go to the king. “If I die,” she says, “I shall die.” She will try to save her people.

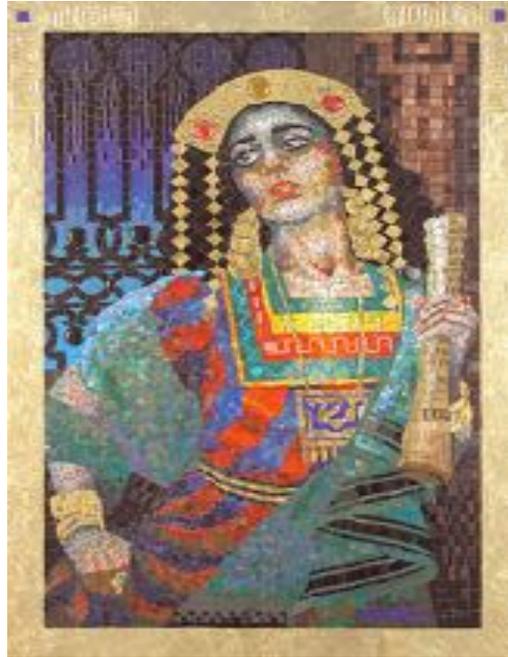
Esther entered the throne room. She was terrified – this could be her last act on earth. But it is not, the king extends his golden scepter, signifying that she may speak. She asks him for a

favor.



The story goes on, eventually, through a series of brave, skillful and wise actions – she saves her people. After finding great favor with the king, she reveals to the king that she herself is a Jew – that Haman’s plan to wipe out the Jews is a plan to wipe out her and all her people. She unmask to the king what is really happening underneath this policy of Haman, a policy designed to oppress, disenfranchise, and kill a minority group – a policy that exists to place blame on a minority group. She helps the king to see that Hebrew lives matter. That no lives should be used as political pawns, no lives should be offered up for political gain. Hebrew lives matter.

This is Esther’s story. The story of a woman putting her own life on the line for the sake of others; the story of a ethnic and religious minority having to navigate life in a dominant and strange culture. A story of reversal. This is no Disney story, perhaps a bit closer to real life today than the version created in the Magic Kingdom.



The book of *Esther* was one of the most debated books as to whether or not it should have been in the Bible, it was not until the late fourth century that it was officially included, for good. One of the reasons for this is the fact that God does not show up in this book, at least, not explicitly. God does not speak or act directly in the story. There are no burning bushes here; not even a messenger from God sent to Mordecai to warn him; nor any sign given to Esther that God will be with her if she takes this great risk – no voice to say, “Do not be afraid.” The people do not cry out to God for deliverance – they do fast, which might stand as a larger sign of the people seeking God when tragedy is about to come their way. But the name of God is never mentioned. God never directly intervenes...in this way, it seems much more like our life and times than a Bible story.

Esther’s story reminds us that, while the powerful appear in control – while those at the top may seem crooked and warped by their power and wealth – there is an unseen hand at work in all things, leading to great reversals. Though God is never explicitly cited, this story points to

a greater power at work throughout. God has not abandoned God's people. No matter how bad things get for Jews under the hand of foreign powers, God is still God, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last.

Is it coincidence that a Queen stands-up to her husband, refuses to be put on display? Or is this a strong woman being faithful to who she is – to her own dignity and sense of value. Is it coincidence that Mordecai has worked to get himself into a place of prominence within the government, where he can have a pulse on what is happening, or is this Mordecai being faithful to who he is, where he believes he should be at work in his part of the world? Is it coincidence that Esther, an orphan and a Jew, is able to become Queen in a foreign land? Is it coincidence that she is able to leverage her position and place of privilege to save a religious-ethnic minority from genocide?

There is an old saying that, “a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous.”

I have heard it put another way, that “Christians don't believe in coincidence, we believe in the Spirit of God at work in the world.” Indeed, much of the time it can seem like God is subtle to a fault. And yet, if we have eyes to see and ear to hear, we often see where God has been at work or where God, at such a time as this, is nudging us forth to act as God's hands, or God's voice.

The section of the book of *Esther* that is the most well-known is Mordecai's speech, where he says to Esther that all this has perhaps taken place in her life *for such a time as this* – that she has become Queen of Persia for such a time as this. And this is where our story is not

like a Disney tale at all – in a Disney movie becoming Queen or King, that is the end of the story, that is the fullness of the story – Prince Charming finally finds the one on whose feet the glass slipper fits. This is the climax. Getting to a position of power. Getting to marry the love of our life. This is the end of our American fairy tale.

But in this Jewish tale becoming Queen is only chapter two. Getting to a position of power or privilege is not the climax of the story – it is not the outcome of the story. The true question that moves the plot along in this story is not “Will Esther become Queen?” It is “now that she is Queen, what will she do with her wealth and privilege?” “Now that she has some power and influence, how will she use it?”

It reminds me of part of the vows that we say on our wedding day, at least if we use the traditional vows from the *Mennonite Minister's Manual*. The final line of these vows we say to our spouse is, “and to join with you so that together we may serve God and others, as long as we both shall live.” Disney tells us that finding our true love is the end of the story, the climax. These vows remind us that finding that true love is only chapter two, that in joining with that spouse, we ask “how will now serve God and others as a couple (as a family)?”

And so Mordecai's speech suggests getting to a certain position is not the climax of the story, but just another chapter. Getting to a certain position – be it a promotion, a political appointment, retirement, becoming a parent or a grandparent, getting married, having an increase in your income, winning an election – is not the climax. Mordecai's words suggest that when person, position, and circumstances all come together, we can make a decisive difference. We can make an impact – in someone's life, in a particular situation, in the world. Mordecai calls this “such a time as this.” In Galatians (4:4), Paul calls this the “Fullness of time.” Faithful

action in the fullness of time – it can change everything for all time and people. The convergence of person, position, and circumstances – some call this fate, others coincidence. We call this the Spirit of God at work in the world.

It is risky of course, as it was for Esther, to speak to power; to use our influence; to see our position not as an end in itself but as a means for being God’s hands and feet in the world. There are people right now, putting themselves at risk right now, for such a time as this.



Perhaps you are here for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are raising a child, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are retiring, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are changing jobs, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are in Boise, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are preparing for college, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are in a particular friend's life, for such a time as this...



Perhaps you are here, for such a time as this...



“For just such a time as this...”



For such a time as this.