

“For Such a Time as This”

Esther 4:5-17; Romans 8:26-30
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Today as we begin our Stewardship season (series) we begin with the Story of Esther... Esther... is one of the historical books in the Old Testament- and it is one of my favorites because it is one of only two books in the whole bible named after a woman. It also has this odd detail of being the only book in the Bible that does not use the word or mention God once - which is a literary tool by the author to makes us squint and search for God while reading the story.

In the Jewish tradition the book of Esther is read every year during the festival of Purim - Purim meaning “lots” or the “role of the dice” and this theme of “lots” or things “happening by chance” is an important question in the book of Esther... a question to ponder? Do things happen by chance or is this God working behind the scenes?

But I’m getting ahead of myself... because I cannot preach from the book of Esther without filling you in on the backstory... the narrative of Esther is just too important.

In Esther we find folks from the Kingdom of Judah living as refugees in the Persian Empire capital city of Susa. Many years before this book the Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by Babylon and the people were taken away as exiles. Now, Babylon has been destroyed by the Persian empire and some folks from Judah are living in Susa. Two of these refugees are Mordecai and Esther.

There is a convoluted story at the beginning of the book in which King exiles his Queen because she defied him in public. The king has her banished and begins looking for a new queen. To find his new queen, the king holds an empire wide beauty contest and Esther, who is Mordecai's niece, wins the beauty contest and is elevated to the Queen of the entire Persian Empire. But her uncle Mordecai implores her to keep her identity as a Jewish person a secret, and so she does.

Shortly after Esther wins the beauty contest, Mordecai "by chance" hears two royal guards plotting to kill the King. Mordecai unveils this plot to Esther, who then tells the king, which in turn saves the king's life, and so Mordecai is elevated to the council of the king. So quickly at the beginning of the book of Esther, both of our main characters *by Chance* are elevated to places of privilege and prominence.

Another important character in this story is Haman. Haman is not a refugee from the kingdom of Judah, rather Haman is a Persian lord and sits as 2nd in command to the entire Persian Empire. Haman is the villain of this story. Haman is disturbed both by Mordecai being on the King's council and the Jewish people living in Susa. He does not like Mordecai because Mordecai will not bow to him and he does not like the Jewish people because they keep their own customs and laws (in other words they are not assimilating into Persian culture) and so Haman convinces the king that these people need to be eliminated. And so, by the role of a dice, Haman chooses an upcoming date by which the Jewish people will be eliminated.

And this is where our text picks up today. Mordecai is weeping and grieving by wearing sackcloth and ash because he has just heard this genocidal decree issued by Haman.

Esther who is quarantined in the castle has not heard the decree by Hamman, but hears that Mordecai is mourning and grieving outside the castle gates, and so she sends word to find out what why. Mordecai sends back news of the genocidal decree and implores her to go and talk with the king. Esther says I can't do that! I could die (for some reason no one can visit the King if they have not been invited; to do so could end in death) so understandably Esther is resistant to this idea.

Mordecai responds saying "if you keep silent at such a time as this *relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter,*

but he goes on to say.... "*Perhaps... you were made queen for such a time as this.*"

Because Esther is queen, we as readers expect her to be aware of her own power and willing to use it on behalf of her people. But we also need to remember that as a woman with no autonomy Esther does not see herself as a player in the King's political circles. *In the background of this text we hear Esther say: "Who? Me? I don't have any power or authority. I'm just an orphan who doesn't even belong at court, barely able to fake my way through each day. Can't some passionate prophet step up and do it?"* Esther does not see herself as one who can help anyone. She does not see or recognize her privilege in this situation. But now Esther's own Identity, so carefully hidden at court, now comes into play. Is she most deeply Jewish? Or a niece? Or a Persian queen? Or simply another woman whose life is determined by others in power?

And, so, Esther decides who she is. She gathers her courage and decides to use her privilege to protect her people. She responds to Mordecai "If I perish, I perish " And she begins to hatch a plan. It is not a straightforward plan at all' it's a behind the scenes political chess game with Haman. Her plan includes a series of banquets and series of "lucky per chance" happenings ... *like the king having insomnia just at the right moment... or the king reading the right book at just the right time...*

But before any of this plotting and political chess game can happen, Esther implores Mordecai to gather their community to fast and pray for three days while she and her handmaids fast as well.

In my research for today's sermon I came across a Rabbi's teachings on Esther, and he said this turn of Esther's to fast and pray is an important detail that we cannot over look. Because the book of Esther is the only book of the Bible that does not ever use or mention the word God. Over time folks have interpreted that to mean that the book of Esther is all about how even when God is not mentioned, that God is background bringing all the details together for God's purposes. But the Rabbi points out that though that is indeed true, this move of Esther to turn to God in prayer and fasting is a way of Esther and Mordecai becoming partner's or co-conspirators with God. For Esther is about to take on the King of the Persian Empire, the most powerful force in her world, and she is not about to go it alone; rather, she only takes on this challenge with a divine partner.

I encourage you to read Esther because it is a fascinating book with many twist and turns that I do not have time to dive into today, BUT, I can tell you that Esther and Mordecai are successful. Mordecai eventually is elevated to 2nd to the King and the genocide of the Jewish people decreed by Haman does not happen, but rather the Jewish people are allowed to defend themselves and defeat their enemies. One can hear echoes of Mary's Magnificat in this story "God has lifted the lowly, filled the

hungry, and sent the rich away empty.” Esther and Mordecai’s co conspiracy with God works out. The per chance happenings throughout the book are not by luck at all; rather they are God’s handiwork and partnership with Esther and Mordecai to pull this whole thing off.

As I prepared for this sermon, I have wondered if Like Esther and Mordecai, we are called “for such a time as this” to co create and co conspire with God to make our world “the best it can be.” A **Quote from Rabbi** “God asks us to bring all of our creativity to bear, to grab life by the throat, and invest every ounce of effort into making our world the best it can be. God asks us to see problems and try to solve them, to see tyrants and try to stop them, we turn to God and say we have done what we can do, will you please be our partner.” There can be a debate that suggests that if Everything is under God’s “Control” or Sovereignty then we don’t really need to worry about much; just let God take care of it. But The book of Esther suggests that God’s providence does not negate our call to participate in the work of the God in the world. Rather the two go hand in hand. Mordecai and Esther plotted and schemed and worked together for the liberation of their people, but they also had a powerful partner, God, who made their plan possible.

As the Apostle Paul tells us: We know that all things work together for good* for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose, it is not luck, it is God.

Mordecai’s words ring true here for me. He says to Esther... if you keep silent “at such a time as this” God will find another way... and I think that is true... if we do not follow God’s call to co create and co conspire with God, God will find others to bring about God’s plans in the world... but “perhaps we to find ourselves at time such as this... to follow after God’s purposes in the world and to be amazed at what happens”...

And so we, Lewinsville Presbyterian Church, we are called to co create and co conspire with God in our world... For such a time as this...

How might the “courage of faith” fuel us to take risks in our world... our neighborhoods, schools and workplaces. How might we speak truth to power? We need Esther’s who will step into hard places of fear and vitriol, to speak a word of life. Like this unsuspecting queen, or a babe in a manger, we, too, are part of God’s story, right here, right now.

Many of us received out Stewardship letters this week- and in the letter it states: The Lord has created and called Lewinsville Presbyterian Church *for such a time as this*. We are living through a time of enormous cultural transition in our world, with institutions and organizations everywhere going through wrenching change. It is a time of discerning the right balance between *traditions* that need to be upheld and *advancements* to be embraced in this moment. We are living through an era of intense polarization, when differences are perceived not as gifts, but threats. Ours is a time of a great, and overdue, reckoning on racial injustice. We are living in a time of ecological disruption and disagreements about immigration. So many people in our community are lonely and anxious and isolated...and all of this is unfolding in the midst of a global pandemic. And it is not per chance that our congregation is placed at a moment and time in which we are poised to respond and act in this moment... Lewinsville Presbyterian Church has been called “for Such a Time as This.”

and you might be sitting there thinking “Who? Me?” What can I contribute...? Maybe someone or some other church needs to step up” But I hear Mordecai saying.... If you don’t step up, God will use someone else... but Perhaps- you Lewinsville Presbyterian Church are positioned right here, right now... for you to partner and co conspire with God to address the many needs of our world.

One part of this partnership with God is the giving and pledging of our money to the work of God's kingdom. I understand that as the "new pastor" in town... it is a not the most comfortable conversation to have in my second sermon... to talk about money- eek! But I also know we cannot tip-toe where we sense the need to step firmly which is why the theme and conversation of stewardship is necessary to be discussed from the pulpit. Stewardship, the pledging and giving of our money for the work of the church is intricately connected with our ability to respond to the world's needs. We cannot have conversations about privilege and justice without also talking about money. And so I ask you to prayerfully consider your pledge this year- and to discern if the Holy Spirit is asking you to maybe pledge for the first time, or to increase your pledge to increase this church's ability to partner with God "For Such a Time as This"

The PCUSA book of Order states that: The Christian life is an offering of one's self to God. In worship the people are presented with the costly self-offering of Jesus Christ, are claimed and set free by God, and are led to respond by offering to God their lives, their particular gifts and abilities, and their material goods.

Every Single Gift Represents an important investment in the life of our congregation.... And your pledge for the upcoming year will be used to support the many faith filled ministries of this congregation. To name just a few....

- We are called for Such a time of this to welcome the stranger- the many Afghan Refugees who have found themselves in our community (in Northern Virginia) – our church is in the process of discerning now how best do this... But God is surely calling for us to Partnership on welcoming these folks to our community.
- We are called for such a time as this to respond to our brothers and sisters around the globe who have experienced a natural disaster – we know due to climate change the frequency and intensity of natural disasters will only continue.... And we have many folks in the church that are well equipped to help folks all over the world- after so many years of Summer Mission Project, this congregation has a work force that is equipped and able to help. Recently our congregation sent gift cards to the Presbytery of South Louisiana following the devastation of hurricane Ida. The Executive Presbytery from the Presbytery of South Louisiana sent me note thanking the congregation for our "compassion and solidarity"-
- We are called for Such a Time as this to Continue helping our community heal and recover from an unprecedented global pandemic.
- As our building renovations are almost complete, we are called for such a time as this... For all the ways this congregation will be able to use this building... For the the variety of purposes that this new space can promote God's kingdom in our world.
- We are called for Such a time as this to continue as a Matthew 25 congregation ready to address racial reconciliation within our congregation and wider community.

Friends, it is not a chance happening that we a called and ready to respond to our world... so let us stand up and meet the challenge, let us partner and co conspire with God.... Let us be about the work of doing justice and righteousness... and may we be amazed at the handiwork of God in our midst. Amen

Let us Pray: God of justice, you sent your servant Esther into a life of privilege so that those without would be taken care of. In our privilege, show us how to advocate for those who have less, so that your world might be peaceful and just. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.