

Sermon: For Such a Time as This
Scripture Readings: Esther 4, Mark 9:42-50
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Our first reading from the Old Testament Book of Esther is the basis for the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim is celebrated in the spring and characterized by feasting at home, sending gifts of food to friends, and making charitable donations to those in need. The festival recalls the courage and Chutzpah of a young woman who risked her life on behalf of her people. Esther is dated around the fourth century (Before the Common Era) when the Persians ruled this part of the world. The ancient biblical story begins by telling us how Esther came to be queen. The former Queen Vashti refused to submit when the intoxicated king summoned her after drinking binge. Outraged the King announced a decree in all the land that every man should be master in his house and all the young, beautiful virgins were summoned before him to be chosen to replace Queen Vashti. Esther was selected and kept her Jewish identity hidden. When Esther learned from her uncle Mordicai that one of the King's officers, Haman, issued a decree to destroy all of the Jews, she devised a plan to go before the king and ask for mercy on behalf of her people. Hear now God's Word.

4 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; ² he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. ³ In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.⁴ 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. ⁵ Then 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. ⁶ Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, ⁷ and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. ⁸ Mordecai 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.⁹ Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. ¹⁰ Then 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 into the king for thirty days." ¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³ Mordecai 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. ¹⁴ 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 family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." ¹⁵ Then 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." ¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. Amen.

Our second reading is found in the Gospel of Mark, chapter 9, verses 42-50. As Jesus and the disciples journey toward Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus teaches about the need to protect the most vulnerable among us. Using graphic metaphors, Jesus directs the disciples to cut those things from their lives which cause one to stumble. These metaphors, which seem extreme to us would have been familiar during Jesus' time and not intended to be taken literally. Hear now God's Holy Word.

42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. 45 And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell. 48 where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. 49 "For everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." Amen.

Title of the sermon "For Such a Time as This"

The text: *Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Esther 4:14b*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the gift of Esther, her beauty, balance, strength, substance, and for the comic relief within this story. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

for just such a time as this... These familiar words from this ancient story are spoken by Mordicai to his niece Esther about the position of power she holds at a time when her people are at risk. *Who knows?* Mordicai wonders out loud, *Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*

As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that Esther understands the meaning of these words and believes that God is working in the coincidences and the circumstances of her life. This perspective gives purpose to her position and prosperity and provides an opportunity for her to become an instrument of God in protecting the oppressed.

At some point Esther makes a conscious decision to be faithful to her concealed identity as a Jew, and to her people. She didn't have to risk anything, yet Esther chose to risk her life by approaching this unpredictable, irrational, misogynist king in the inner court on behalf of her people.

Rev. Debbie Blue, co-founder and pastor of the Mercy House in St. Paul, MN writes this about Esther: *I like that it is a book about a woman who---without father or brother or husband, without being pure or holy or virginal ---stands in the eye of an ego-driven, farcical, man-made, nearly catastrophic storm and acts to save her people from destruction. Esther is not your typical saint. She doesn't conduct herself like someone who is zealous about the law, yet she becomes a Jewish heroine.*

Humor is the essence of the book, according to Rev. Blue. It's a timeless sort of farce, full of men behaving badly. The king of the Persian Empire, according to Esther the greatest the world

has ever known, is an ineffectual, pompous buffoon, surrounded by a cadre of advisers who pander to his ego. At the start of the book, he is throwing a preposterously lavish party --- it's six months long—culminating in a scene where the drunken king summons his queen to parade in front of his guests wearing nothing but her crown. She refuses to concede (thank you very much Queen Vashti) and he banishes her in a fit of rage, but soon he is petulant and lonely. His advisers suggest that perhaps a harem of the most beautiful young virgins might brighten things up a bit. They will gather them from far and wide Each night a different virgin will come in to the King, and whichever one he likes best will be the new queen. Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her uncle turns out to be the virgin who pleases the king the most so she becomes queen.

The whole thing would be infuriating if it wasn't so over the top. The book of Esther is poking fun at the Persian elite, mocking the decadence of empire and the absurdity of human pretensions. There is a shorter Greek version of Esther that has a totally different vibe with no comedy. But the Hebrew version is meant to get us laughing—at kings, goyish pomposity, absurd egos.

And so the Book of Esther reminds us once again that humor is a gift...a way to see ourselves more clearly. As Mark Twain said, “Humor is the soft edge of truth.” When we can laugh at the absurdity of our human predicament, we are often empowered to act with courage in the midst of ambiguity. We can see more clearly the One who created us and whose mercy in our lives shapes us.

One cannot help but also notice the subtlety of God in the Book of Esther...whose presence is disguised but who is nevertheless among them, quietly, hidden—yet underneath holding all things together. Mordecai convinces Esther to risk –not by offering an infallible directive from God, but by posing a question: Who knows! Maybe you're in this place at this time for a reason. God is not fleshy or obvious in the Book of Esther. In fact, in the Hebrew text, God is not mentioned at all. Nothing is certain, ambiguity prevails, yet Esther decides to act to divert the coming disaster.

Esther's courage reveals the strength of her character. Esther's choice reveals the substance of her integrity. Esther's timing—knowing when to keep silent and when to speak—reveals the wisdom of her self-preservation. Esther knew who she was, to whom she belonged, and she was faithful to her identity.

Esther's story is a message of hope for those of us, men and women alike, who sometimes struggle to understand God's will in the circumstances of our lives, in the positions of power we have found ourselves. Esther encourages us to act within those circumstances, to not stumble on a misplaced sense of our own importance or security, and to choose the opportunities that are ours to bring hope and healing to people's lives.

In this time and place, as we recognize members on their milestone anniversaries, give thanks for the times and seasons of their lives, and seek to continue the good work of the generations who have come before us, may Westminster and each of us have the substance, the toughness, the chutzpah and the courage of Esther to give voice, to advocate, and to protect those whom we love, those who belong to us, and the “little ones” among us.

*“Who knows? Perhaps we have come together to serve and to lead for just such a time as this.”
Amen.*