

Sermon: For Such a Time As This  
Text: Esther 4  
Date: October 13, 2019  
Context: WWPC  
Stewardship Launch Sunday  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*Our opening text in our 2019 Stewardship campaign. It's text not about money but about something else entirely. Something much more important.*

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying,

‘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 sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.’

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, 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.

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.’

The book of Esther occupies a unique and, frankly, a rather strange place in the Hebrew Bible, and in Judaism more generally.

For starters, the whole story takes place while the Jews are in exile. But that part is not so unusual.

What makes it unique and strange is that God is never mentioned--the only book in the Bible of which this is true.

Same with prayer or worship, neither of these essential and formative liturgical and devotional practices is mentioned even once. It must also be said that there is some horrific retribution at the end of the book.

So it's an unusual book, and even rather disturbing in the end.

And yet the story it tells has given rise to one of the most important and festive religious holidays on the Jewish liturgical calendar. It's called the Festival of Purim -- a story of salvation and deliverance, from the direst of circumstances.

During Purim, the entire book of Esther is read not once but twice -- once in the evening, and once in the morning.

We are not going to do that today. But I would like to summarize the book for you, partly because this remarkable story is not terribly familiar in Christian circles. And also because I want to provide additional context for our text for today, the short exchange from which our theme for this year's stewardship campaign comes.

In what follows, and just to be explicit about this, I quote directly and extensively from a commentary on Esther by Kathryn M. Shiffendecker, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary (published on TextWeek.com), and also, yes, from Wikipedia.

So then, Esther:

*Despite its theological oddities and its moral challenges, the book of Esther is a good story, it has a strong female protagonist (rare in the Bible), it tells us something about God's character and action in history (even though God is not mentioned).*

*King Ahasuerus, ruler of the Persian Empire, holds a lavish 180-day banquet, initially for his court and dignitaries. When that's done, he holds a seven-day banquet for all inhabitants of the capital city.*

*On the last day of the latter banquet, Ahasuerus orders his wife, Queen Vashti, to display her beauty before the guests by coming before them wearing her crown.*

*Like a scene out of the Me Too movement, she refuses. Also like a scene out of the Me Too movement, or a Supreme Court nomination, this infuriates Ahasuerus. Turns out that back then, certain powerful men did not like powerful women any more than certain powerful men do now.*

*His counselors then advise him to remove her from her position as an example to other women who might be emboldened to disobey their husbands.*

*Ahasuerus then decides to choose a new queen from a selection of beautiful young women from throughout the empire.*

*Among these women is a Jewish orphan named Esther, who was raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Or maybe Mordecai is her uncle; it's a little unclear in the text.*

*Either way, she finds favor in the King's eyes, and is crowned his new queen. But she does not reveal her Jewish heritage.*

*Shortly afterwards, Mordecai discovers a plot to assassinate Ahasuerus. The conspirators are outed, apprehended and hanged, and Mordecai's service to the King is recorded.*

*Ahasuerus then appoints a schemer named Haman as his viceroy. One day, Haman encounters Mordecai at the city gate. But Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman and earns his disfavor.*

*Haman then discovers that Mordecai refusal is rooted in his Jewishness. In revenge, like a scene out of Schindler's List, Haman he plots to kill not just Mordecai, but all the Jews in the empire.*

*When Mordecai discovers the plan, he goes into mourning and implores Esther -- Ahasuerus's new queen -- to intercede with the King. But she is afraid to present herself to the King unsummoned, an offense punishable by death.*

*Which brings us back to our text for today and our theme for this season:*

*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 such a time as this.'*

So why this story? How is this old tale relevant to us? On one hand its particulars -- the story of that time -- are totally different than particulars of our time.

And yet in broad respects its themes and its context are eerily similar.

I have shared this story with some of you before but it bears repeating today, because it points to those themes and it brings that context to light.

On the night of the election in 2016, Robyn and I happily accepted an invitation from some friends -- Ned and Babs as it turns out -- to come over for what we thought was going to be something of a party, a celebration.

We came with Champaign not necessarily because we were enthusiastic supporters of the Democratic candidate, but more because we thought the highest glass ceiling in the land was about to be broken.

We both believed this night promised to be a moment of genuine historical significance. I also believed that, had that glass ceiling been shattered, it would also have been a moment of genuine theological significance.

Like the moment when we elected the first African American to that office -- I imagined this would be another clear sign that, as a people, as a country, we are moving toward more equality for all God's children, black and white, male and female.

But then the results started to come in, and they quickly began to point to a different outcome. Our celebration was rapidly becoming a wake. At this point, Robyn literally went and hid and I did not see her again until it came time to leave.

When the final result was announced, I texted Beth Newman, who was on staff here at the time:

“Oh dear,” I typed. And hit send.

Immediately I saw the little bubble appear on my screen that indicated she was typing her reply.

“We’re going to have a lot of opportunities to be church,” it read.

This was a prescient observation. It was also astute. Church and state are not synonymous. These two formidable institutions always exist in tension, regardless of which party is in the White House. Or at least they ought to.

So it was an insightful response. But it was also a dramatic understatement. For many of us, perhaps even most of us, it feels a little bit like we’re re-living the book of Esther -- like we’ve been living in a kind of exile for the last three years. Separated from the values we’ve always known.

It’s been agonizing and painful. And yet I think it is also true that the challenges we have faced, the challenges that these times have visited upon us, have made more of us.

They’ve forced some of us out of our comfort zones and out into the streets to march for women’s rights, and in support of refugees and immigrants. And to give voice for our concern for our planet, as the climate continues to change.

We have collaborated with other faith communities to create sanctuary, safe spaces that honor the humanity and protect the dignity of our neighbors from south of the border.

So it’s been challenging and, frankly, a little exhausting. But here’s the thing: none of this would come as a surprise to the writer of Esther.

At the time of this story, the Jews had been carted off into exile. The Jews. The chosen people whose God was Yahweh, the creator of the universe.

And yet, there they were, in exile. Because it turns out that even for God’s faithful people, life is hard and there are no guarantees. And this includes us.

Which is why I find Esther so helpful -- and so relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an ancient story, yes, but it is also remarkably modern, even post-modern in that God is not mentioned at all.

You could read it out loud on the college campus and it would likely attract an audience of students, rather than repel them, as a conventional religious story might do.

Yes, it's a story about Jews being faithful--Mordecai does not bow down to Haman and Esther's ultimate allegiance is not to the King.

And they enact this faithfulness despite their present circumstances, despite having precisely zero evidence that the God who does command their allegiance -- the unseen, unnamed God in the background-- appears not to give two figs about them.

And yet, they triumphed. That same unseen, unnamed God conspires with Mordecai and Esther, and because of their faithfulness, this conspiracy effects one of the great saving acts in Jewish history.

Now fast forward four hundred years or so. Once again the Jews find themselves on the receiving end of an unwelcome twist in history. They are not in exile but their homeland is under occupation.

That is the context in which the Gospels take place. Jesus' entire life--his birth, his ministry, his death -- all of these things take place at a time when the Jews cannot be fully Jewish.

When a deeply corrupt collusion between the religious hierarchy in Jerusalem and the political hierarchy that answered to Rome has served to blot out the Light of God. When the shadow of Caesar darkens the whole land.

But you know what else happened in that time?

Easter. Resurrection also happened in that time. God chose that moment, those circumstances, to repudiate the power of Empire, to subvert its dominance.

And then, as God did in the story of Esther, God once again conspired with an unlikely band of characters to effect the ongoing story of deliverance and salvation.

My first hope for our Stewardship season this year is of course that we rise to meet our challenge budget. But this is so obvious it's barely worth mentioning.

My larger hope is that these next five Sundays will take us deeper into our shared life, into a shared vision for our world and for ourselves.

For such a time as this, who is God calling us to be and what is God calling us to do as individuals?

As we've noted before, that answer will be different for every one of us. Maybe for you it will involve planting flowers, or making cookies, or making art, or making meals you can share, or writing letters to Congress, or marching in the streets, or teaching in Sunday school or singing in the choir.

For such a time as this, who is God calling us to be and what is God calling us to do together, as a congregation?

Caring for and connecting with one another in our newly formed Caring Groups. Improving the way we greet and welcome visitors. Enriching and growing our children's ministry.

What does it mean to be church for such a time as this? I look forward to exploring that question together. And then living out the answer.