

For Such a Time as This
Esther 4:1-17
Matthew 5:13-16

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Esther 4:1-17

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; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 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.

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. 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. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 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. 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.

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.' Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, '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.' Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

Matthew 5:13-16

'You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.'

Esther is not a common book to preach in the middle of Advent, but it has a lot to teach us about having faith. Holding onto faith in times of trial and difficulty.

So let me tell you a story....

It's a few hundred years since our last story, the story of Habakkuk. It's the early four hundreds BC. The Babylonian Exile has happened. The Persian Empire then came along and conquered the Babylonians, and took prisoners back to Persia, or modern-day Iran. Most of the Jews went back to Judah and rebuilt Jerusalem under King Nehemiah. But some of the Jews were kept in Persia. This is the time of the height of Persian civilization and the height of Classical Greek civilization.

So that's where our story is set. Let's set a few expectations here: our story is told as a melodrama. This is a world where kings snap orders and have people killed on zero notice. This is a world where reasonable leaders are in short supply. If you are looking for what we would see as a sense of proportionality, look elsewhere.

OK.

Once upon a time, in the days of King Ahasuerus, the king gave a huge, elaborate banquet to show off how rich he was. Everybody who was anybody was there, and everybody who wasn't anybody was there, too. The men were in one huge banquet room, where everything was gold and marble, with as much wine and fancy food as anyone could imagine wanting. The women were in another banquet room, hosted by Queen Vashti, where it was the same kind of thing.

When they'd been partying like this for seven days, the king sent some servants to fetch the Queen, because he wanted to show off to all these men how beautiful she was. He summons

her to appear before all these men at this banquet, wearing the royal crown, and nothing else. She is the crowning piece of property that the king is showing off.

So Queen Vashti refuses to come.

The king doesn't know what to do. This has never happened to him before. So he calls in his lawyers and advisors, who tell him to banish Vashti and to find a new wife, because otherwise women would stop obeying their husbands, and the world as they know it would end. So he does.

And now he's in the market for a new wife, so he has his servants find all the most beautiful virgins in all his enormous kingdom. This is the "reality show" *The Bachelor*, Royal Edition.

One of these beautiful virgins is a young Jewish orphan named Esther. She tries out for the position, which is pretty much what you think it is, and the king likes her. She becomes Queen. She tells no one that she is Jewish.

Esther's cousin Mordecai, who raised her, is sitting at the king's gate, waiting to hear how she is doing. There is a certain man named Haman who has been newly promoted to nobility. He enjoys everybody bowing down before him. But Mordechai doesn't bow to him, because he's a Jew. He bows to God alone.

So Haman, who really is this petty, plots to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom. He goes to the king and tells him, "There is a certain people in your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws. The king should not tolerate their existence. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand silver talents into the king's treasuries." The king agrees.

The command is sent out to all the provinces of the great kingdom that the Jews should all be rounded up and killed on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, in the Spring.

This is where the part of the story that the liturgist told comes in. Mordecai tells Esther what has happened, and urges her to intervene with the king. Esther knows that the king is so capricious that anyone who bothers him in the inner court without him calling for them may be executed, at his whim. But Mordecai tells her, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

Perhaps she is in her position of wealth and influence for just such a time as this.

So she goes. She risks not only her wealth and influence, but her life. She tells the king that Haman is trying to kill off her people.

I’m not going to tell the whole rest of the story, which is told every year in every synagogue in the world on the Feast of Purim, but suffice it to say that, after considerably more melodrama, there is a happy ending. Haman is killed, Mordecai is advanced to high rank, and the Jews prosper. All because one young woman knew the risks and went ahead anyway.

Esther struggles with some issues that we might find familiar as Christians in our world today.

She sees injustice around her, and she recognizes it, but what power does she have to really make a difference?

Have you ever asked that question? I know I have. The only genuine way to find the answer is to try.

She has to ask herself, what kind of risk is she willing to run on behalf of the most vulnerable and threatened? Esther herself was not in any real danger until she spoke up. No one in the court knew that she was a Jew. But her cousin was in danger. And all the Jewish people in the kingdom other than Esther were in danger.

What kinds of risks are we willing to run on behalf of the most vulnerable and threatened in our world? Are you willing to risk being embarrassed? Are you willing to risk other people thinking of you as soft-hearted, or a fool? Are you willing to risk not having quite so much yourself? These are all questions that we have to answer.

Esther is a woman of multiple identities. She is a Jew. She is a cousin. She is a Persian queen. She is a woman in a world where most power is wielded by men. Which identity will she decide is the core identity, the one that, when she has to make a difficult decision, will ultimately shape her life?

We all have multiple identities. We are Christians. We are children, parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, spouses, friends. We are Americans, and Ohioans. Most of us are suburbanites. In this room we have engineers and secretaries, nurses and teachers, students and retail salespeople and bookkeepers. We have, I'm told, a few Ohio State Buckeye fans.¹

Most of the time, that's fine. We juggle which identity is foremost at any given time.

But, when push comes to shove, as it did for Esther, which of those identities is most important? Which identity will be that core identity, the one that ultimately shapes our lives?

¹ "That's a joke, son." – Mister Foghorn Leghorn.

This is the second Sunday of Advent. We're preparing for the coming of a king. Yes, Jesus will come as a baby. But a king nonetheless.

The oldest Christian creed, or statement of what we believe as Christians, is very simple. If you have ever joined a Christian congregation, this one or any other, or had a child baptized, you've said it.

"Jesus is Lord."

That is a statement of which identity is core, which one outweighs all the others.

"If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not."² No one in Washington DC is Lord. No one downtown at the State House is Lord. They do not have a right to our ultimate allegiance. If their commands conflict with those of Jesus Christ, then the one whom we obey is the one whom we profess as Lord.

"If Jesus is Lord, then the economy and the stock market are not."

"If Jesus is Lord, then my house and possessions, family and job are not." These things create identities for us, don't they? They tell us who we are and what we should say and do. But, if Jesus is Lord, they are not the core.

"If Jesus is Lord, then I am not." My desires, my reputation, and certainly my ego are less important than the will of my Lord.

If Jesus is Lord, then we need to consider the idea that all these things that we have and the other identities that we have were given to us for such a time as this. They put us in positions where truth can be spoken and heard. No one but Esther could have spoken to the king. Perhaps no one but you can speak the truth in the situation you are in.

² The quotes in this section come from Richard Rohr, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*. I'm not verbally identifying him because I am mixing things that he did not say with what he said, and I don't wish him to be blamed for what I say.

If Jesus is Lord, then hold on to faith. Speak truth to power. Love your neighbors. Support things that help your neighbors, even if they don't help you. Call out things that hurt your neighbors. Live your life so everyone can see that Jesus Christ is your Lord, and he is coming.

Because we know that He is.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

AMEN.