

For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:12-16

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People often ask preachers, “What is your call story?” That is, how did you know that God has called you into ordained ministry? Someone asked me this just a couple of weeks ago. How did you know that this is what God means for you to do with your life? Was there a still, small voice, whispering in your ear? A sudden bolt of lightning?

This question of calling is for all of us, actually. In the Reformed tradition, we understand that God has a calling on all our lives. Some of you were called by God to be teachers, for example. How did you know? Did you just somehow fall into the educator preparation program in college because you didn’t have a better idea? Did you grow into your calling over the years? Or, did you feel a deep desire to work with children, even before you had tried it out? Perhaps someone said to you, “You should really be a teacher. You’re great with kids!” A calling can come in all of these ways.

Whether we know it or not, God has a vocation for us all, and sometimes we are called to do things that are really challenging because God needs them to be done. That is the story of our scripture for today. I preached about the Book of Esther last year, so I am sure you all remember the story, but just in case you have forgotten a few details, let’s review:

A large group of Jews is living in Persia, what we would call Iran. There is a young and beautiful orphaned girl named Hadassah, who is being raised by her older cousin Mordecai. One day a call goes out to all the land that the king is looking for a new queen, because the former queen displeased him. The king’s advisors hold a great beauty contest. All the virgins in the land are to come and try out for the royal vacancy. Hadassah is in that line of young women. We are not sure who brought her, how she feels about it, or if she even understands what is happening. Her cousin Mordecai tells her to hide the fact that she is Jewish.

From all the young women who come to apply to be queen, the advisors choose the prettiest ones. They are already beautiful, but they are given a year of beauty treatments before they are allowed to see the king. Then they each have one night to impress him. The one he likes the best will become the queen, and the rest will be assigned to his large harem for the rest of their lives, whether they want to be there or not. Hadassah is chosen from the long line of beautiful young women, and her transformation begins. She loses her Jewish name. Now she is called Esther. She loses her own beautiful face through a year of beauty treatments. Because she is hiding the fact that she is Jewish, she loses connection to her people. Finally, after a year of preparation, Esther’s turn comes, and she is taken to the king for a one-night stand that will determine her future. Lo and behold, the king chooses Esther to become the new queen of Persia! That’s a lot of change for a young person to absorb, isn’t it? Just a year ago, she was Hadassah, an orphaned Jewish girl, looked down upon by the society around her, and now she is the queen. That would be enough to turn her head, I would think.

Then, through a whole series of plot twists, good times turn to bad. The king’s counselor gets angry at Esther’s cousin Mordecai and decides to even the score by ordering that, on a certain day in the coming year, all the Jews in the kingdom will be killed. It is to be a pogrom, an organized slaughter of an ethnic minority, and all the Persians are called on to participate in killing their Jewish neighbors on the

appointed day. This planned slaughter is not a secret. Orders are sent far and wide in the king's name. Naturally, the Jewish people are distressed. Who can possibly prevent the slaughter?

Mordecai knows. He gets word to Esther of what is going on, but she doesn't see how she can possibly do anything about it. The former queen had been banished for disobeying the king in a seemingly small way. And everyone knows that there is a death penalty for going to the king without an invitation. Besides that, it has been a month since the king has sent for Esther in the night.

Mordecai famously responds, "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house that you are the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from somewhere else; but you and your father's house will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this." Hearing this, Esther says, "I will fast for three days to prepare myself. You and all the Jews in this city do the same, and then I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. If I die, I die."

Though her own position in the court is precarious, she is the only Jewish person in the land who can possibly intervene and prevent the slaughter. God is calling her to this task, whether she wants the call or not. God is calling her to save all the Jews in Persia, even though no one in the court knows she is a Jew. God is calling her to intervene, even though she attained this position of privilege specifically by pretending NOT to be Jewish. Mordecai asks, what is the purpose of having all this privilege, unless you use it to save your people?

So, Esther fasts for three days, and the Jews of the city fast with her. It is a cleansing ritual, a way to rid herself of all the falseness she has adopted, a way of returning to what is sacred. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," our choir sang a moment ago. If Esther is going to risk her life to save her people, she needs a clean heart for this sacred task.

There is an end to this story. Esther does save the Jews of Persia, and the evil counselor to the king loses his life instead. But the point of the story is not its ending, it is this turning in the middle, when Esther must choose. It is this moment when she risks all she has gained to save the person she was born to be, this moment when she finally understands that her privileged position in society is not hers by right, but hers to use to help others.

None of us is a queen. None of us lives in a palace. None of us has the ear of the ruler. But we are all people of privilege. By the standards of most of the world, we are all wealthy beyond believing. Not everyone in our nation, even in our state, is so fortunate. There are people in our world who live in very real fear of violence, who are always under threat, just for being who they are, as the Jews in today's scripture were under threat. Pogroms did not stop happening in Esther's day. Do you remember the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh? Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston? The Pulse nightclub in Orlando? Pogroms happen today, in our land. Hunger happens, too, and homelessness, and natural disasters. Our scripture today asks, "Why do we think God gave us all this privilege, anyway?"

None of us can solve all the problems in our world. But we each are in a position to do something to make things better, maybe even something a little risky. Our privileged position in the world is not ours by right, but ours to use to help others. I don't know how you are called to use the privilege that God has given you, but God knows, and one way or another, God will press that call upon your heart. May God grant us all clean hearts and sure courage for this sacred task. Amen