

For Such a Time as This

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Esther 3:7-11; 4:1-3, 9-15; James 5:7-12; Mark 9:38-50

Text: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."
-- Esther 4:14b

The book of Esther, from which this morning's text is taken, is one of those very Jewish books of the Hebrew Bible into which most of us Christians rarely venture.

It's nine chapters explaining the festival of Purim, which some of you may have had the opportunity to celebrate with Jewish friends or relatives. Purim commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from a Persian pogrom or, as we would be more inclined to say today, from ethnic cleansing. And unlike most of the other stories of deliverance in the Hebrew Bible, the story of Esther and her uncle Mordecai and the villain Haman and the rather pliable king Ahasuerus is remarkable in its relative silence concerning God.

God isn't mentioned by name in the book, and God doesn't perform any spectacular miracles to save the Jewish people, like igniting a bush or parting a sea or raining manna from heaven. God stays in the background, leaving it to these devout Jews themselves to get themselves out of their desperate situation. The book of Esther is the parade example of that old adage we learned from our grandmothers that God helps those who help themselves. The story of Esther is about faithful people using the resources God has given them – their looks, their brains, their power, their money, their influence, their position in society, everything they've got – to keep the community of God's people alive in their time and place. The story of Esther is perfect bedside reading, in other words, for people like us.

It's also perfect reading for a stewardship campaign, because stewardship campaigns, while they are about the money, are about a great deal more than money, a point I will return to momentarily. But first, let's look closely at the text and ourselves.

Christianity, we should acknowledge right up front, is not going to disappear any time soon. We should not draw the superficial parallel between the book of Esther and ourselves by saying that just as Esther and Mordecai saved Judaism in their day, so are we engaged on the valiant and desperate task of saving Christianity in ours. That's simply not the case, despite some of the stuff you see floating around the Internet from time to time.

Christianity remains the dominant cultural religion in America and that's not likely to change even if our public schools no longer start the day with prayer and a reading from the Bible. You have to look much harder and longer to find a synagogue or a mosque or a temple in any of our cities, large or small, than you have to look to find a church, and neither synagogues, mosques, nor temples are opening as fast as churches are closing. The right-wing paranoia demanding that we Christians pray to our Christian God before sessions of Congress and civic ceremonies and football games is just that, paranoia. Christianity is in no danger of vanishing from America or the globe, and neither was Judaism at the time of Esther.

But Esther's story and our story is a bit more specific than this. Neither we nor Esther live on the universal level; we live and must live locally. We're aware, of course, of our interconnectedness with the rest of the planet – its people, its plants and animals, its

soil, air, and water – but we live here, in northeast Ohio, our little patch of God's green earth, in this moment of history. And that's where our story and Esther's story meet.

God put Esther in a particular place at a particular time facing particular challenges, and God gave her – without unnatural, miraculous, conspicuous intrusions into the ordinary, everyday struggle to survive – God gave Esther everything she needed to help see her people – the chosen people, God's people – through perilous times.

And God has done the same for us. God has given us everything we need to be successful faithful people. God has given us all the resources we need – and more – to preserve that message of love and redemption, that “treasure in earthen vessels” that has been entrusted to our care and spreading. We don't need miracles to survive and flourish; we simply need to trust that God has already provided everything we need to meet the challenges of our time and our place.

That has been God's promise from the beginning to those who respond to God's call, and it will be God's promise at the end. God has promised to be with us, to provide for us, and to equip us, as Ephesians says, for the work of ministry.

Now most people don't believe this. When you say that God will provide, most modern people will dismiss you out of hand as a deluded dreamer or peddler of pious pablum. We are self-made people and we provide for our own needs and wants. That's the American myth. The land was here, Columbus discovered it, we developed it, God had nothing to do with it. Bill Gates didn't become Bill Gates on his knees in prayer; he became Bill Gates tinkering with electronics in his family's garage. Hard work, genius, and luck made Bill Gates the richest – and, therefore, by most standards, the most successful – person on earth, and we needn't drag God into it. Better, in fact, to leave God out of it.

That's not the way we look at things in the church. We have a different understanding of the way history works, and we believe that God is in the midst of history, not outside of it looking in. But we don't believe that God's participation in history means that history goes as we want it to go. History often goes terribly badly, and people then ask, partly in confusion and mainly in anger, “Where was God?”

Where was God when planes slammed into buildings and thousands of innocent people perished?

Where was God when a wall of water swept thousands to their deaths around the Indian Ocean in 2004?

Where is God when young parents die, leaving children and spouses behind? Where is God when young children are born with conditions that will drastically reduce their lifetimes, causing them and their families suffering even during those few years? Where is God as thousands die needlessly in places like Darfur while the international community stands by, wringing its hands?

It's easy – more than easy, in fact – to pile on the instances when God seems to have abandoned us; when God doesn't seem to care what happens to us, when God seems to offer no help, no guidance, no relief. We all know of such moments.

And perhaps that's why the word God doesn't appear a single time in the book of Esther. Perhaps that's one of the important lessons we're meant to take from this very Jewish book in the Christian Bible. Perhaps the book of Esther is a sobering reminder from the heart of religious teaching that religious people should not wait for God to do for them what they can and should do for themselves.

The people of faith in the book of Esther seem very much on their own, a minority population in a strange and often hostile environment. They didn't ask to be there; their ancestors had been carried into captivity and scattered from their homeland centuries before, and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren were doing their best to hang onto

the best in circumstances not of their own making. They were indeed, to paraphrase the title of a famous science-fiction novel, strangers in a strange land.

But they were not alone. The Jews driven from their homeland carried into the diaspora – those lands into which they had been scattered – the inestimable gift of their faith, their faith in a God of justice, righteousness, mercy, and peace. The Jewish people clung tenaciously to that faith – and cling to it today – in the face of sometimes staggering evidence that such a God is a fantasy, nothing more than a projection of their own wishful thinking.

Perhaps God is very much a projection – I'm pretty certain that God often is – but I'm not going to try to convince you this morning that God exists. That's a challenge for another sermon and another day. What I'm going to attempt today, rather, is something much more difficult. I'm going to try to convince you that *you* exist. That you exist, right here, right now, in this historical time and in this historical place and in no other, and I am going to try to convince you to live – really *live* – the life that God has given *you* and no one else.

I'm going to try to persuade you, in the few moments remaining to me, to crawl out of your fear, to abandon your grumbling and gossip, to shut down your personal pity party, and stop whining about how things used to be or ought to be and *live* in the midst of things as they are. Live for *this* world and all its needs and troubles and possibilities. Live for *this* time, which has never been before and will never be again. Live for *these* people, who are lost as only they can be and who can be found only if you look for them and not for others.

That's what I'm going to try to get you to do this morning. I'm going to try to convince you that God has put you here on this earth, as Mordecai said to Esther, “for such a time as this.” You, with all your quirks and idiosyncrasies. You, with all your faults and limitations. You, with all your baggage and contradictions. You, with your damaged self-esteem and tortured family history. You with your broken dreams and frustrated aspirations. You, with your shaky health and even shakier finances. You, with your hidden sins and obvious imperfections. You, with your crummy job and unpromising prospects. You, with your imperfect parents and your imperfect parenting.

You are the one God has created for this moment and this place, and you and you alone must live the life this moment and this place need. God doesn't need or want you to live in the past or in some imaginary future. God wants you to live here and now. God doesn't need or want you to live in some imaginary town where crime is lower, home values are higher, and the children are all above average. God wants you to live right here, right now, in this place of rusted out industries and corrupt county officials and schools struggling to fulfill their mission.

God has not called any of us to neverland; God has called each and every one of us to this land – to use our gifts, our skills, our resources, our very lives for the sake of here and now. This is the only life you and I will get in this world, and as sportswriter Christine Brennan's father used to tell her, “this ain't no dress rehearsal.”

So stop planning, stop worrying, stop whining, and stop dithering; in other words, stop committing what our theological tradition calls those sins of omission. Don't pave another inch of the road to hell with one of your good intentions.

Instead, be like a Nike ad and just do it. Roll up your sleeves and get to work. Take a good hard look at yourself and the world around you and ask yourself, What difference, for the sake of God's love in the world, am I making? What difference am I making in my family, my neighborhood, my community, or my church? What difference am I making in my country or in the world? What am I doing with my life that makes God's love a little clearer and brings it a little nearer to those who need it? And what will

be the footprint that I eventually will leave behind?

And don't think small, think big. Really big. You don't need to be Bill and Melinda Gates to establish endowments that provide lasting benefits for decades to come. Virtually every one of us here this morning owns property that will someday be of no use to us whatsoever; what are we planning to do with it? Are you planning to parcel it out among family and friends, or have you decided that what remains after you is to be put to God's service no less than your life is devoted to that service now? Let your legacy, no less than your life, be for God.

There's nothing gloomy or morbid about those sorts of questions, my friends. They're the sorts of questions we need to be asking ourselves every day so that we don't fritter our time away in Walter Mitty dreaming and squander the precious gift of life God has given us. The stewardship campaign we launched last week is a perfect opportunity for us to ask such questions of ourselves, because that's what real stewardship comes down to – making a difference with what we have and who we are, right here, right now.

Yes, stewardship is about money, because money can make a difference, and sometimes a big difference. Ask anyone who's poor – really poor – and they'll tell you the difference money makes.

But we're not poor, you and I, the way most people in the world are poor. We here in northeast Ohio may be less rich than we were a decade ago, as the paper reported recently, but when more than a quarter of all of our households have three or more cars in the driveway, we're not poor (*Plain Dealer*, 9/22/09, B3).

Is that the legacy a quarter of us will leave behind – that we could afford to put three cars in our driveways? Is that what we rolled up our sleeves for? Is that what we think God put us in this time and place to do?

I hope and pray not. I hope and pray that visions are broader than that, that aspirations are loftier than that, that goals are more noble than that. The times we have been given by God are ours and no one else's, and God will not take them from us; they are our responsibility. God has given us our times, a time such as this, to make of it what we will. What are you making of yours?