



“For Just Such a Time as This”

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Esther 4:10-14

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I want to begin today with the story of Esther. It comes from the Book of Esther in the Bible, from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we sometimes refer to as the Old Testament. The story takes place after the Babylonian captivity, during the time when the Jewish people who had been in exile were permitted to return and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Many Jews remained in diaspora, having spent so long living in other places that they had come to think of these foreign lands as home. Such was the case for Esther and Mordecai, Jews who were living near Susa, one of the capital cities of the Persian Empire. Esther’s parents had died when she was young, and her cousin Mordecai had adopted her as his daughter.

The Persian king at the time was Ahasuerus, thought to be the same king more commonly known as Xerxes. King Ahasuerus deposed his wife, Queen Vashti, and worked out a plan with his advisers to select a new queen from among the most beautiful women in the empire. Esther was one of those chosen. Mordecai warned her not to disclose her ethnicity, since Jews were a minority and not necessarily highly regarded among the Persian population. Mordecai devised a way to keep in contact with Esther by working at the king’s gate, where he could observe the comings and goings and occasionally pass messages to Esther.

Esther was well-liked in the royal household, and she won favor with those in charge. When it was her turn to come before the king, Esther was chosen as his favorite and named queen. King Ahasuerus held a lavish banquet to announce her ascent to the throne. Around that same time, from his position at the king’s gate, Mordecai learned of a plot to assassinate the king. He got word to the new Queen Esther, who informed the king of what she had learned from the man named Mordecai (taking special care not to reveal her relation to him). The king was grateful his life had been saved and made sure it was recorded in the official record books.

Sometime later, a power-grabbing upstart named Haman ingratiated himself to the king and was promoted above all the other officials in the land. Whenever Haman passed by, people would bow down before him in accordance with the king’s command. Mordecai did not, however, because the convictions of his Jewish faith prevented him from worshiping anyone other than the one true God. Haman was furious. His advisers told Haman that Mordecai was Jewish. Haman wanted vengeance, but he determined to exact more than just the punishment of one man. So he went to King Ahasuerus and told him there were people living in the empire who refused to follow the king’s laws. He said their practices made a mockery of the king and that they should be put to death. Then he offered to see to the deed himself, promising to return vast riches to the king’s treasury from the confiscated goods and property of the people he destroyed. King Ahasuerus agreed to the plan and gave Haman authority to act on his behalf. So Haman wrote a decree in the name of the king that all Jews were to be killed – men, women, and children – and their property seized for the king (and for himself).

From his post at the king’s gate, Mordecai learned of the plan and the new decree. Overcome with anguish, he covered himself with sackcloth and ashes and gathered with other faithful Jews in the town center to lament the coming doom. Queen Esther was told of this, and sent her messenger to find out what had happened. Mordecai shared the news of the new decree and begged Esther to intercede with the king.

Now Esther faced a dilemma. She had carefully concealed her ethnicity as Mordecai had instructed her, and she had no idea how the king would react if he found out she was a Jew. On top of that, she couldn’t just go to the king – no one was permitted to do that, not even the queen, upon penalty of death. Only if the king

summoned them could anyone approach. She hadn't been called before him in a month. But she knew if she didn't act, her people would die.

Esther sent word to Mordecai explaining her predicament and her uncertainty. Mordecai's response was urgent: "Don't think you'll escape this. Sooner or later, your identity will be discovered and then you'll suffer the same fate." He expressed confidence that God would help, whether through her or someone else. "And who knows?" he wondered. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Esther fasted and prayed as she wrestled with what to do, and she asked Mordecai to have all the Jews he knew to do the same. After three days, she had made up her mind. Adorned in her finest garments and jewels, Esther went to the inner court just outside the king's throne room. When the king saw her, he was pleased and invited her in. He asked if there was anything she wanted and promised to provide it, even if it was half of his kingdom.

Rather than unveil the plot at this moment, Queen Esther asked instead for the king to allow her to honor him with a banquet and to invite Haman to come with him. The king accepted her invitation and took Haman with him. At the banquet, the king asked Esther again what she wanted and promised to deliver it – up to half of his kingdom. (More intrigue and drama ensued, which I'll skip over here in the interest of time.) Instead of asking for wealth or palaces or luxury as the king expected, Esther asked only for her life and the life of her people. The king was perplexed. Who would dare to threaten the queen's life? Esther then revealed her ethnicity and Haman's plot to destroy her and her people, including the man who had saved the king's life. King Ahasuerus ordered Haman's immediate execution and elevated Mordecai to a position of authority within the king's own household.

It's a great story, isn't it? You can read the whole book of Esther in about 15 minutes. It's just one of many great stories found in the pages of scripture. When you read the rest of Esther, you'll learn the story behind the Jewish holiday of Purim, which some of your neighbors and friends might celebrate. But there's more we can learn from this narrative than Jewish history and a colorful story.

Each of the characters in the story had both opportunities and risks, things that placed them in a position to rise or to fall in power and prominence. Even King Ahasuerus, the highest authority in the land, was at risk from a plot against his life (indeed, he eventually would be killed in just such a plot). How each person acted within the balance of their opportunities and risks determined not only *their* place in the world, but that of the people around them.

At the center of the story is **Esther**. She started out with the least power, an orphan taken in by her cousin. As a woman she had no agency of her own, subject to the misogynistic laws and customs of the time. She entered the king's harem, most likely against her wishes. She was instructed to conceal her ethnicity in order to advance her station and to benefit Mordecai and his family. Over time she did just that, earning the king's favor and having his ear, which enabled her to act to bring about justice. But she incurred great personal risk in doing so.

Mordecai was a Jewish person in the Persian Empire. As an outsider, he wasn't in the favored class so his opportunities were limited. But he was a man and the head of his family, which meant he had more power than Esther. He taught her to work within the power dynamics of the palace and cleverly placed himself at an advantage. By reading the situation and paying attention to what was going on around him, he discovered a murderous plot and used that knowledge to save the king's life.

Haman was clever and wily. He leveraged relationships and curried favor to rise to power ahead of those who were in more prominent positions. He had ambition, a drive to improve his standing and his brand, and he didn't let anyone get in his way. In the end, his pride and his ruthlessness cost him not only his position, but his life.

We don't live in the shadow of a royal palace in an exotic land. And hopefully we'll never face the specter of ethnic cleansing. But we all face choices daily about how to use our voices and our influence, for ourselves and for others, and what we're willing to risk. We don't all have equal status. Not all of us have the

same opportunities. Not all of us face the same level of risk. But we all have something to gain and something to lose. The lines between right and wrong become blurred by self-interest. When faced with a choice, we need to decide where we stand.

A few years ago, Rev. Gregory Kendrick and I took some time to go on retreat, away from the church and the distractions that come from being in the office or at home. Through the generosity of some wonderful church members, we were given use of lake cottage for a couple of days to plan sermons and calendars. It worked out great. We had the gift of time and an inspiring place to pray together, to share and test ideas, and just to be in each other's company. Everything was great until we went to get dinner. I had been in that area before, so I knew there were a handful of restaurants from which we could choose. But as we drove into town that evening, I began to see through different eyes. On the way in, we passed a house with a confederate flag in the window. Turning onto the main street, I realized that I hadn't seen another person of color at all since we left home. Cozy establishments suddenly didn't look so inviting. Would Gregory be welcomed there? Would he be comfortable if he was? How would I respond as his White friend? That simple drive turned into a 30-minute search for someplace we thought was benign and well-lit enough for us to trust. Eventually, we ended up at a Perkins near the highway, which, no offense to Perkins, wasn't exactly the kind of culinary experience we had hoped for. That outing cast a shadow over the entire retreat.

Now, maybe if we'd given one of those local establishments a chance, it would have been fine. But it didn't feel fine. And after driving past countless political signs that day that made their worldview abundantly clear, we weren't inclined to take the chance. Now, why hadn't I thought about that before? Because I could have walked into any one of those places and not drawn so much as a glance. I was ashamed when I realized how blind I had been to my privilege and to what that experience might feel like for someone else.

The point isn't to feel bad. The point is to learn and to grow. Once we've seen it, we can't unsee it. And once our eyes are opened, we have to do something about it. Having privilege in and of itself isn't wrong. Look, we live in a system that is designed to benefit some and impede others. We'll sometimes end up on one end of that system and sometimes on the other, though some of us spend more time on the advantaged end. Opportunity gaps are embedded in the systems all around us. It's what we do with our privilege that matters. Do we leverage it to get ahead, to climb higher on the ladder? Or do we use our privilege to speak up for those who don't have the same opportunities, to lift up the people around us and break down the inequities embedded in our systems?

Acting involves risk. Speaking up involves risk. For people like me, those risks might include surrendering advantage, alienating friends, or losing status. For others, the costs are much higher. Be assured, though, no matter where you fall in the pecking order – justice does not come without cost. You can't play it safe and be an advocate for justice at the same time.

Where do you have opportunity, influence, or voice? How are you using what you have been given? Nothing will change if we're content to stay on the sidelines. Neutrality always benefits the oppressor. If we're not part of the solution, we're part of the problem.

When you hear Esther's story, where do you find yourself? Which character resonates with you? Who would you hope to be like? If you were in that situation, how do you think God would want you to act? Those are good questions, though they only live in the realm of our imagination. Or do they?