

For Such a Time As This

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[0 : 0 0] While we're still standing, let us pray. O gracious God, I thank you so much the veil is rent and we can meet with you. Please, through the Spirit and Word, speak to us and make us alive in you so we can participate in your grand purpose of renewing everything under the headship of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, good morning. I think almost everyone at some time or other thinks that she or he is in the wrong place, doing the wrong thing, with the wrong job, and maybe for a nanosecond, if you're married, perhaps married to the wrong man or wrong woman.

But there is a story in the Old Testament that gathers up our stories and enables us to make sense of our lives. It's a story found in the book of Esther, and it comes from about 450 years before the time of Christ.

It's tempting to call this story, Never Underestimate the Power of a Woman. But actually, the story is about this. Never underestimate the purpose of God in whatever situation you are in.

Back in the Middle East, 450 years before Christ, there was the great shifting powers as there are today. First it was Assyria, then Babylon, and then Persia.

[1 : 4 1] The people of God had been displaced, taken into exile in shifts. And so some of these families settled in Susa, which is the capital of Persia, ancient Persia, a few miles from Baghdad, so it's a very contemporary story.

And just as some people come to the University of British Columbia from other countries to study and don't go home, many of these people that had been taken into exile settled down and made their home in Persia.

One of those families was the family of Mordecai and his cousin, Esther, who was an orphan, not having father or mother.

And Mordecai had adopted Esther as his own daughter. Now the king of Persia was Xerxes, and his wife was Vashi. He was an incredibly wealthy person, and it took almost half a year to display all his wealth.

He had a huge party that lasted for a week. And, as the custom was, he had only male guests for his party. But his queen, Vashi, had a women's party for all of the women.

[2 : 5 8] And when he was high on wine, he decided he would like to display his wife's beautiful body to his male guests. It was a kind of stag party.

And Queen Vashi refused to come, which is the first act of female insubordination in the entire history of the human race.

Well, this so infuriated the king and the other nobles that he decided to pass a law. The law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed.

And the law was that every man shall be ruler over his own household. Is that what God wants? Or is it what an ego-damaged king had passed as a law?

You know, I have a lot of trouble getting into the United States. I go quite frequently, but it seems like I think I must look like a terrorist. Because I get interviewed for about an hour, and eventually I always get in, but maybe it's the beard.

[4 : 04] I'm not sure what it is. But as you know, you go through customs into the United States in the Vancouver airport. But not too long ago, Gail and I were going to Colorado.

And you have to fill in an immigration form. And I didn't read the fine print which said the head of the family should fill in one form for the whole family. Gail filled in one for herself, and I filled in one for myself.

And we went up to the desk of this very friendly immigration officer, and we put our two cards down. And he looked at Gail, and then he looked at me, and he said, which one is the boss?

Now, Gail is very fast on the draw. And she said, it depends on what area you're talking about. He said, thank you for answering my question.

And then he tore up my card. And I entered the United States of America under the headship of my wife.

[5 : 14] It does seem that Xerxes may have had some regrets about divorcing and banishing Vashie. But at the advice of his friends, who said, what you need is a new queen.

Why not have a beauty contest for all the young virgins that are beautiful and select a new queen? Can God work through a beauty contest? Or a multinational corporation?

Or a government? Well, this young Jewish woman, Esther, was selected for the beauty contest and had a year of cosmetic treatments.

I can't imagine anything worse. And then she would have her night with the king. And if the king liked her more than any of the others, she would be selected as queen.

If not, she would join the concubines, which was a state of virtual widowhood. But at the advice of her cousin, now her father, she kept her identity as a believer secret.

[6 : 19] Is that a good thing? Is it maybe a good thing to wait for the right time to declare one's identity as a child of God?

Well, the day came for her to be presented to the king. And he liked her better than any of the other women and made Esther the queen.

Meanwhile, Mordecai keeps communicating with Esther by coming into the courtyard every day. And through intermediaries, eunuchs, he was passing messages back and forth.

But in doing that, he discovered there were two officers that had planned to assassinate the king. So he gets word to Esther. And Esther gets word to the king.

And the king dispatches these two officers and writes in his journals that his life had been saved by Mordecai, but does nothing more than make a journal entry.

[7 : 23] Sometimes we feel like there should have been more happen about this, not knowing that God is providentially involved in our lives. And our lives are not a bundle of accidents.

There was an ambitious man by the name of Haman who pushed and shoved his way to become second in command of the whole nation. And he wanted everyone to bow down to him.

The text actually says to kneel down when he passed. Which everybody did except for Mordecai. Either because as a Jew, Mordecai would only worship the Lord God or because he knew what a vile man this Haman was.

This galled Haman so much that he determined not only to eliminate Mordecai, but to eliminate the entire Jewish nation that was settled in that land of Persia.

Persia extended in those days all the way from Pakistan right through to the Sudan in Africa. And persuaded the king to pass an edict that on a certain day when the dice was cast, and that's the pure and the Jews celebrate this in the Feast of Purim, that on a certain day all of the Jews would be annihilated.

[8 : 48] It was a pogrom in approximately one year. So of course the Jews were in sackcloth and ashes and mourning at their future fate.

And news gets to Esther that Mordecai is in sackcloth. She sends out clothes to him, but he refuses them and finally inquires what it is that's bothering her cousin come father and discovers that all of the Jews, including herself, are to be annihilated.

And then Mordecai, in these famous words, when he had first of all pleaded with her to go into the king's presence, and she said, you know, you can't just walk into the king's presence and beg for mercy, because if you don't go invited by the king, there's only one law, which is death, unless he raises his golden scepter.

And it's been 30 days since the king has called for me, which gives you some idea of what it was like. Then Mordecai says, if you keep silence for such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter.

But you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom, to royal position, for such a time as this.

[10 : 18] She asks him and the Jews in Susa to fast and pray, which she does herself. And then she goes into the king's presence.

And he raises his golden scepter, spares her life, and says, what is your request, Queen Esther, even up to half the kingdom? When I'm really pleased with Gail, I say, you know, you could have anything up to half the kingdom.

And she says, I already have that. Now, Queen Esther understands men. So, knowing that a man's, a way to a man's heart is through his stomach, she invites him to a feast.

She's so confident of her plan that it's all ready. I kind of know what that's like because I was a poor, hungry student at McMaster University. And the Bolters had two unmarried daughters.

One of them was Gail. And they used to invite students into their home for Sunday dinner. And I shouldn't tell you about this because it's so close to lunch. But it was roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and roasted potatoes and the most amazing cherry pie with fluffy pastry and vanilla ice cream melting all over it.

[11 : 36] Sorry about that. I really am sorry. And one Sunday I said to Mrs. Bolter, you know, I could never marry your daughter unless she could bake a cherry pie like this.

The next Sunday, the whole family, when we got to the cherry pie thing, started to sing, Can she bake a cherry pie? Billy boy, Billy boy. I said, you mean Gail baked this?

Mm-hmm. That means I have to marry her? Yeah. And I was very pleased to do that. So, at the feast which Esther had arranged to have just the king and Haman strategically invited, the king's no dummy so he says, now, come on, tell me, what is your request?

It's not just to come to a feast. And she said, my request is that you come to another feast tomorrow night at which I will tell you everything. Well, Haman goes home to his family that night and he's boasting that he's the only person in the whole kingdom that was invited to Queen Esther's feast.

And yet, how galled he is that Mordecai will not bow down to him. And so, his family and friends say, well, why don't you eliminate Mordecai now?

[12 : 53] I arranged to have a scaffold built this very night, asked the king for permission tomorrow morning, which very thing he did. Meanwhile, the king is suffering from insomnia. And to lull himself back to sleep that night, he has his journals read and discovers that Mordecai had saved his life.

He asked and attended, what was done for Mordecai? Nothing. So, as Haman comes into the court to ask for Mordecai's execution, the king comes into the court wanting to honor him.

Talk about irony in a story. And the king says to Haman, what should be done for the person the king delights to honor? And Haman says, thinking, it has to be me.

He says, I think that person should have the royal robes of the king and be riding on the king's horse with the emblem on its head and someone to go ahead and say, such is to be done for the person the king delights to honor.

And the king says, you do it for Mordecai. Oh, he walks through the city of Susa saying, such is to be done for the person the king delights to honor.

[14 : 06] He goes home that night and his family says, you're doomed. And then a eunuch rushes them off to the second feast when Esther tells it all. I and my people are sold to destruction.

Who has done this thing? Our adversary and enemy is this vile Haman. The king has suddenly realized that she is a Jew, a believer in Yahweh, the Lord God, and that he has unwittingly passed an execution order for his own queen.

He goes out into the garden probably trying to think, what can I do? The law of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed. Meanwhile, Haman throws himself on the couch of the queen begging for mercy at precisely the moment when the king comes back in and assumes that Haman is molesting his wife and orders him to be immediately executed on the very scaffold, one more irony, on the very scaffold which had been set up for Mordecai by Haman.

and then Haman's estate was given to Mordecai and Mordecai was given the very place of Haman in the court, second in command of the whole nation.

Here we have another Joseph as we had Joseph in Egypt, second in command of Pharaoh, a believer in the Lord God planted in that most strategic place in the kingdom that stretched all the way from Pakistan through to the Sudan.

[15 : 47] and Mordecai and Esther agreed with the king to pass a new law. They couldn't revoke the first but the second law would allow the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who might try to harm them which is the very thing that happened.

There are five things that we learn from this story that make our stories included into the very story of God's wonderful dealings with humankind and with his creation.

First of all, know where you are. Esther and Mordecai were in exile. It was a hard place to be and yet she was positioned in the king's palace.

Every one of us is providentially placed from Monday to Friday in most unbelievable situations.

Offices, businesses, hospitals, medical clinics, universities, schools, homes, neighborhood, not-for-profits, social agencies. And a lot of these places no professional missionary could ever go.

[17 : 02] And yet the church is a rhythm of gathering and dispersion. We gather on Sundays for renewal, refreshment, worship. and on Monday God seeds us into the most amazing places.

My first mentor was Dr. Elton Trueblood who said, churchgoer is a vulgar ignorant term and should never be used. You can't go to church, you are the church wherever you go. And wherever you go this week you're salt and light and you may have an opportunity to put in a good word for Jesus.

We're all sent out. 1 Corinthians 7 deals with a situation where the Corinthians thought that they could improve their spiritual situation by being somewhere else from where they were in some other life situation.

And Paul says, no, there's no great improvement in changing your situation. God's called you where you are and that's taken up into the very calling of God.

In the monastic tradition they had a saying don't ever leave your cell because it's going to teach you everything. So first of all know where you are.

- [18 : 12] Secondly, know what you're doing. Esther was doing queen's work and I imagine that meant receiving international visitors and occasionally giving advice to the king and doing some other things.

Most of us aren't doing queen work but may I suggest that whether you're employed for money or working as a volunteer whether you're retired or gainfully employed that you are actually doing some part of the Lord's work.

The Lord creates. The Lord sustains. The Lord redeems and renews and transforms and the Lord consummates and points to the final conclusion of everything.

And almost all of the good work that is being done by us in this congregation is one aspect of the Lord's work. When somebody tells me they're leaving business to go into the Lord's work, I say to them, well, what were you doing before?

Now, I think it's wonderful if God leads somebody from one occupation into another one in which they have a stated ministry. I think that's great. But it's not leaving something that isn't the Lord's work for something that is.

- [19 : 24] Know what you're doing. Thirdly, know what time it is. For such a time as this. There's two words for time in the Bible and one of them gives us the English word chronological.

It's time that goes on and on and on. It can be managed. It's a bit like a boring lecture in university. It goes on and on until the professor says, today, unbeknownst to you, we're having an examination that will comprise 75% of your last grade.

All of a sudden, chronological time has become crucial time. And you can see crucial time happening in this story. When the king is asking for a way to honor Mordecai and for the queen's presence, Esther, at such a time as this, and indeed in the Anglican Church of Canada, for such a time as this.

I know two people that met on a trapeze artist. You know, she's on the upper one, and she lets go, and he says, oh no, it's chronos time. No, no, it's crucial.

You've got to pick it up just the right time. And the same thing happens when a young man goes out with a young woman, and the relationship goes on and on and on and on and on, and he or she misses the critical time to say, I love you, and I want to marry you.

- [20 : 54] And Martin Luther said, the word of God is like a thunderstorm over the city. And he said, if you heed that storm, if you hear the word, there will be life, but if you don't, that storm will pass.

And maybe, for us this morning, God's word is that thunderstorm that we need to heed and respond to. Know what time it is.

Fourthly, know where you're going. You know, Mordecai said something pretty amazing to Esther. He said, if you fail to seize the opportunity that God has given you in this unique situation, I know, he says, that relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter, another situation, but you and your father's family will perish.

He was confident that God is absolutely determined to bring the whole story to a wonderful end, which, as we now know, is the new heaven and the new earth, where, in resurrected persons, we will be together, worshiping God and being creative in his presence, in that wonderful community.

Know where you are going, and last of all, know who you are. Know where you are, know what you're doing, know what time it is, know where you're going, but know who you are.

- [22 : 37] She knew that she was a child of God. Do you? Paul says that whenever we cry, Abba, Father, in prayer, it is his spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, sons and daughters of God.

Oh, I trust that every one of us has that witness of the spirit in our hearts to know that we're his child, his son, his daughter. And in the first chapter of John, as many as received him who believed in his name, to them he gave the power to become children of God.

Three operative verbs, believing in Jesus, receiving and becoming a child of God. The Duke of Windsor, when he was being raised in the fabulous Windsor Palace by King George V, recalls in his childhood education, that every day his father would say to him, never forget who you are.

There was a documentary recently on the royals which revealed that whenever his father said that to him, he would say to himself, yes, who am I? But I want to change one word.

Never forget whose you are. Amen. Let us pray. Oh, gracious God, we thank you that you crossed the infinity of time and space in Jesus and through the Spirit.

[24 : 22] And you come and knock on the door of our lives. You don't barge the door down, but you give an empowering invitation. salvation. And we bless you and love you for that.

And pray that as we have been opening the door to you again this morning, as we've heard your word, that we can say yes completely and wholeheartedly to you and to your wonderful purpose.

Thank you and bless you. and as we celebrate the Eucharist, we remember it is because you gave yourself through death and resurrection to make it possible for us to have this great rendezvous with you.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.