

## “For Such a Time as This”

Esther 4: 1-17

(Esther has found herself to be Queen of Persia, and she realizes that her hidden Jewishness may be helpful, for she may be able to persuade the King to halt the intended slaughter of the Jews—but there is risk.)

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John and I first started dating each other in mid-December. I know you don't care about this fact. However, I needed to tell you that in order to say that Christmas arrived shortly thereafter, and we needed to give each other some small present. From what we gave each other, it was clear that marriage had not entered either of our minds, for each of us gave the other something that we already possessed. He gave me the Peter Paul and Mary *Reunion* album that he liked. I gave him two little textbooks—on psychotherapy. We still occasionally enjoy our *two* Peter Paul and Mary albums, and John did manage to politely read the psychotherapy books I gave him.

One of the books I gave John was Erik Erikson's *Life History and the Historical Moment*. Erikson is known to many people for naming, for our culture, 8 life stages, from infancy to older adulthood. What I loved in that particular book *Life History and the Historical Moment* was an observation that I find truly spiritual. Erikson named the cog wheeling of our lives with our contexts. Think about this—at particular times in our lives we become capable in certain areas. Sometimes who and what we are matches exactly with what our particular context needs. It may be that we become old enough to take the Red Cross Babysitting class just when our neighbor needs a babysitter. Or, like Rosa Parks, we become exhausted with standing in the back of the bus, and spiritually able to risk sitting down, exactly when Birmingham, Alabama is ripe for dealing with segregation.

A wonderful bishop, Emerson Colaw, frequently told us pastors that he often heard from churches that a newly appointed pastor was considered “too old” or “too young.” Bishop Colaw had concluded from his years of experience that there are only 8 hours in a minister's career when we are exactly the right age for a congregation—and usually that happens when we're asleep.

The life-stage of a person cogwheels with their context—what we are *called* to do, what we are “*allowed*” to do, and what we are desperately *needed* to do is affected by when and where we are.

Our daughter waited impatiently to be 6 years old, because then she could play soccer. But the very September she turned 6, the Dayton Area Soccer Association opened a new division, Lollipops, for 4-5 year olds. To make matters worse, her younger brother's first 4 yr old game actually came earlier in the week than hers. He played soccer before she did.

Nurses used to be plentiful; now the whole world desperately needs nurses. Sometimes a baseball team needs a left-handed batter, and lo and behold a guy gets a break and plays in an important game. Someone goes to the Olympics because a teammate gets sick.

At this point I need your help: The first draft of this sermon had 15 more minutes of examples of how we are needed--or not--in precise settings and times. So, with one half of your brain, think of examples yourself, while you listen with the other half.

Our Bible passage today is compelling. It is a legend that is read once a year in Jewish contexts, for it is the basis of PURIM, one of the five major Jewish festivals. The account tells of a woman whose moment in time cog wheeled with a drastic need of her context. *Esther*. That's the name of the woman and the book. It's a relatively short book in the Bible; you can easily read all of it in fifteen minutes. The poignant elements are in the middle of the story, though I warn you the end gets plenty bloody. It would probably make a successful Hollywood production.

The context is Persia, which is now Iran, and the King is Asherus. His wife is Queen Vashti. A feast has been going on for seven days and the King is rather drunk. He asks Queen Vashti to parade around to show the princes her beauty. To his shock and dismay, she refuses. She says "NO" to the King. That was not acceptable. So, the King deposes her and looks for another Queen, using a beauty contest to find one. He chooses Esther to be Queen. To understand the uniqueness of this choice we need to back up. You see, Esther is Jewish. Her parents had died and she had been adopted by her older cousin, Mordecai. Mordecai advised her not to tell anyone that she was Jewish, when she entered into the contest to be Queen. So the King does not know that his new wife, Queen Esther, is Jewish; neither does he know that she is related to Mordecai.

At one point the King appoints a man named Haman to be a chief official and orders the people to bow down to Haman. Mordecai (remember that's Esther's cousin) will not bow to Haman, because as a Jew, that would be breaking the law to honor only God. Not surprisingly, Haman becomes furious and we might say "overreacts." Haman builds gallows on which he intends to hang Mordecai. Also, when he discovers that Mordecai is a Jew, Haman writes an order that all Jews are to be killed, massacred, and the date on which this is to happen is decided by throwing lots, called "pur." The name of the festival the Jews celebrate is called PURIM, after the "pur" they threw to decide the date.

Today when this book of Esther is read in Jewish contexts, I am told that the listeners often hold musical instruments, and whenever the name "Haman" is read in the scripture, everyone playfully drowns out his name with the noise.

Mordecai has a plan when he hears that the Jews are going to be slaughtered. He walks through the streets wailing. When Queen Esther hears all the wailing, she wants to know what is wrong, and through various people who carry messages, Mordecai manages to inform Esther about the planned slaughter of the Jewish people.

Mordecai sends Esther a message that included this famous advice: **Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" For such a time as this.**

What is Esther to do?

Esther prays and fasts for 3 days and asks that all the Jews in the land pray, too. Then she decides. Though she knows that anyone who takes initiative to go to the King unbidden may be killed, she does go. For "such a time as this," she clearly has decided to say "yes." The King is surprisingly respectful. Esther tells him that she has a request, and without even hearing the request, the king says he will grant it. Esther says that before she makes the request, she would like Haman and the king to be her guest at dinner. She

actually serves them dinner two nights in a row. Finally when the King asks again what her request is, she explains that Haman intends to hang Mordecai and also to slaughter all the Jews. The King acts immediately, writing an edict to override Haman's plan, and even proclaims that the gallows would be used to hang Haman instead.

Unfortunately, the King does not exactly say that the Jews *would not* be killed, but rather that the Jews had the right to defend themselves on the day of the proposed slaughter. On the appointed day when there is an attempt to annihilate the Jews, the Jews, with the help of others, defend themselves but kill many non-Jews.

To this day Jews celebrate what they call PURIM in February or March, and there's a delicious reminder of the upcoming feast in many bakeries. Because Haman was said to wear a three cornered hat, bakeries make what are called "hamantaschen," which means "Haman's hat." These are pastry dough, made into triangles and filled with apricot or prune or poppy seed filling. Really good.

It's a long story. I don't like the ending; why sparing one minority requires the killing of thousands of the majority is not clear to me.

However both Jews and Christians focus upon the book of Esther for the MIDDLE Section, Chapter 4, which we read today, especially for the very strong comment by Mordecai to Esther: *Perhaps you are here for such a time as this. For such a time as this.*

After three days of prayer and fasting, considering the risks and her unique position of power and abilities, Esther said "YES."

In your various contexts: your home, your neighborhood, your work, your extended family, or at this church, do you sometimes wonder, "Perhaps you are here for such a time as this?" Your particular life stage and abilities may cog wheel precisely with someone's needs.

Esther *gave out of love* because she realized she was needed. Hers was a drastic situation. Many of our cog-wheeled connections with our settings are less dire. For example, perhaps some of us are needed in the third pew for the person in the fourth pew to greet weekly, to inquire about, and to smile. That's not far-fetched. Elena Meeker, who is not able to come to church now, just reminisced this past Monday with me about how she used to enjoy sitting in the pew behind "those two wonderful women--Virginia and Nan--they were so nice to me."

Maybe we're needed to be the one who gives money that makes its way to provide a Thanksgiving meal to a family that does not have enough money this year. Maybe we are the ones who need the meal, and we're in the right time and place to receive the gift. Eamon Frasher responded to our urgent call to produce videos for us exactly at a time when he himself could use the experience. This past Wednesday we heard the stories of various veterans, and almost all of them spoke of some event for which they were needed at a particular time in history.

Redlands First UMC *as a church* cogwheels with the needs of our neighborhood. We have said yes to feeding hungry, providing showers, praying with thousands of people, offering beauty to our community through so many arts and worship. It's true that as individuals, we discern how our prayers, presence, money, and service cogwheel with our church, but also we as a church seek to discern what we are to do in our community FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS.

In just two weeks Advent begins, and we'll soon dwell upon Mary's saying "Yes" to God, as she grasps that she is to give birth to and nurture Jesus, who would transform the world by saying "Yes" to God who was seeking to find a way to pour out Love for all.

Just think, Christians throughout centuries have said "Yes" to Jesus' call to love! Most of us don't have dramatic positions of power, yet I imagine that EVERY person here has some context in which our particularities match in such a way that our Yes or No matters. The goal is not always to say yes to every request or need, but to DISCERN: Am I here, in this context FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS?

It may take us 3 minutes, 3 days (like Esther), or 3 years, as we pray, fast, walk a labyrinth, read more and more of the Bible, talk with wise people, pray, pray, pray, and eventually do or do not say "Yes." Remember the queen who started all this? Vashti was the queen who said, "No," on the seventh day of the feast. Her "No" required a lot of courage as well. Plenty of "No's," to injustice or inequality are really a bold "Yes" to taking a stand, and they sometimes mesh with a historical moment to truly transform a culture. Jesus said "No" to looking down on anyone, and we today are still hearing his "No" as a "Yes" to affirm and love all.

May we, individually and collectively, notice when we are needed, whether that is someone needing our smile or whether we are needed for a goal that occupies our energies for years. May we take time to go within, to discern. And may we experience God's support, every step of the way.

I'm grateful to cog-wheel with all of you in this time and place, for I believe that we are indeed here "for such a time as this."