

© John H. Young, 2024. This sermon may be reproduced, in part or in whole, and by any means, for personal use, group study, or similar non-commercial purposes without charge or further permission. Credit should be given for group use. Commercial reproduction and distribution are prohibited except with the written permission of John H. Young.

Bridge Street United Church
September 29, 2024
Readings: Esther 4:1 – 5:4, 7:1-10; Psalm 124

Before I look more specifically at the passages Moira read for us, I want to provide a little more background to today's reading beyond the introduction I asked Moira to read.

While the book's written form is later, its story is set in the Persian Empire about 475 (BCE). Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding area—the kingdom of Judah as we read about it in the Bible—were taken forcibly into exile in Babylon in two waves about six centuries before Jesus' birth. After a period of time, the Babylonian Empire was defeated by the Persian Empire, based in what is now Iran. About four generations have passed since the time of that forced exile of Jews from the kingdom of Judah.

In the book of Esther, the Persian king, Ahasuerus, has deposed his wife, Queen Vashti. He deposed her after she refused his summons to appear at a multi-day banquet he was having for the officials of his kingdom, a banquet at which he and other officials were well inebriated by the time he ordered her to appear. From our modern perspective, we would think well of her refusal. Doubtless Ahasuerus wanted to show off his wife to this drunken lot for them to admire her beauty, ogle her would be a more accurate description. One can imagine the commentary, the cat calls. Good for her, we might say, that she refused his call to come. We might well admire her decision. Ahasuerus did not. He deposed her disobedience and, probably, also because she had embarrassed him in front of the officials of the empire when she had refused to come when called. He then had his officials “gather [and “gather” is the verb used] beautiful young virgins” from throughout the

empire. They were brought to the harem at the royal residence in order that King Ahasuerus might choose a new wife from among them.

Among the young women brought to the palace for this purpose was a Jewish woman named Esther. After the death of her parents, Esther had been raised by an older cousin, Mordecai. Mordecai raised her as if she was his own daughter. When Esther and the other young women were picked up, Mordecai told Esther to keep her Jewish identity hidden. The Bible never gives us a clear sense of the nature of Mordecai's connection to the royal establishment, but he has one, for he is regularly around the gate of the palace.

After Esther and the other young women had been in King Ahasuerus's harem for a year, each was selected to spend one night with the king until one of them pleased the king sufficiently that he chose that young woman as his new queen. After his night with Esther, King Ahasuerus chooses her to be his new Queen. Esther is Jewish. King Ahasuerus does not know she is Jewish. Let me be clear. These young women had no say in becoming part of the king's harem, nor would Esther have had any say in becoming the new queen. There are aspects of this story, albeit it comes from a different time and culture, that offend, indeed deeply offend, our sensibilities.

Mordecai has a mortal enemy, Haman, a high level official in Ahasuerus's administration. Through a subtle act, Haman persuades Ahasuerus that a dangerous people exist within the Empire, and that they should be destroyed. Haman does not tell Ahasuerus that this "dangerous people" are the Jewish citizens of the empire. Ahasuerus, who comes across in the book of Esther as none too bright, gives Haman the go ahead to do what he has suggested, telling him to write to the officials in all the provinces of the Empire to do what is necessary.

Today's lesson is what follows at this point. Mordecai, having somehow gotten a copy of Haman's instructions, dresses in sackcloth and ashes, a sign of mourning. He sits at the palace gate. Knowing he is there, but not knowing what the problem is, Esther sends a messenger to Mordecai.

As you heard in the reading, Mordecai tells her the problem, and asks her to intervene with King Ahasuerus. She rightly points out to him that she, like everyone else, is forbidden to approach the king in the inner court unless sent for. One can risk approaching, but unless the king holds out a golden scepter, the one approaching the king in the inner court unbidden is put to death. If this rule seems like an odd one, in that ancient day and place, an unbidden entrant to the king's inner court could well be someone intending to do the king harm. Mordecai then tells Esther that she is no more likely than any other Jew to escape Haman's planned eradication of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. He adds "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." To finish the story, Esther, after three days of praying and fasting, and figuring out a plan for how to raise the matter with King Ahasuerus, approaches the king. After some twists and turns, Haman's plot to kill all the Jews is countered and Haman himself is executed, as we heard in that reading from Esther, chapter 7.

While we Christians may have less familiarity with the book of Esther, in the Jewish tradition it is very well known. In late February or early March of each year there is a two-day religious festival in Judaism called Purim. During this religious festival, the entire book of Esther is read, for that festival is a celebration of the successful overcoming of that effort to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire of that day. Given the frequency of persecutions of Jews in western history, this annual celebration has had special meaning for Jews, for it celebrates an occasion when one such effort was countered through the courage and thoughtfulness of Esther.

Interestingly God is not mentioned at all in the book of Esther, nor does one see reference to rituals and practices of the Jewish tradition. That said, many Jewish and Christian interpreters of this book over the years, including in the present time, have seen God "in the background," so to speak. One place where that background presence comes into play is in Mordecai's words to Esther

in today's reading: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

"For just such a time as this." "Being in the right place at the right time," we might say, but we tend to say that more casually. For example, seven or eight years ago, as I was out walking our dogs early on Christmas morning, a farmer stopped his truck as he passed me on a side road. He called me over to the side of the truck. He reached over into the passenger seat beside him, gave me a jar of honey from a box on that seat containing a dozen jars of honey, and wished me "a Merry Christmas." When I got home, I said to my spouse, Caroline, as I put the jar of honey on the kitchen table: "Boy, I was in the right place at the right time this morning." But the reference here in Esther is to much more than that. A number of Christian and Jewish interpreters have seen it as an example of God's providence, that is, God's unceasing care and love for the world God has made and God's actions arising from that care and love, that this world might be the world God wants it to be.

Of course there is a lot more at stake in this story from Esther than a jar of honey. Behind Mordecai's question is the wondering whether God, through a variety of circumstances, has led Esther to be in this key role at this key time. When I talk about "providence," I want to be clear that I do not mean the idea that God controls everything that happens. That notion of God controlling everything is how some people understand providence. But that understanding cannot go with the fact that we human beings have free will to make choices, even as other created entities have a freedom of will appropriate to their kind. We have two cats at home; they most certainly exercise free will. If you are unsure about the concept of freedom of the will, get a cat. It will soon teach you! That notion that God controls everything we do also cannot take account of the evil we human beings inflict on one another, unless we see God doing it, something I don't think any of us would want to say when we think about the holocaust of World War II, or Rwanda, or Ukraine, or what we see going on in Gaza and in Lebanon at the present time, to name but some of the examples that

come quickly to mind. By providence, I also do not mean a fatalism that says whatever is going to happen will happen, and there is nothing I can do about it. The effect is similar to the notion that God controls everything, but instead of God controlling things, it is a matter of fate.

A more helpful way to think about providence, and something that fits with these words of Mordecai, is to see God, in love and care for all God has made, working to create the greatest possibilities for good and the least for evil in our world, without overriding our free will. It is to see God, in love and care for all God has made, giving each of us particular gifts and talents that we might use. Whether we do use our gifts and talents is, of course, up to us. It is to see God, in love and care for all God has made, active in our world, not determining when I drive home later today along Highway 37 whether I drive at 80 km/hour, or 90 km/hour, or 100 km/hour before I turn off on Phillipston Road, but encouraging me, you, each of us to engage in certain actions and to refrain from others. I think of providence as a way of describing God's ongoing activity in our world that seeks the best for this world God has made, even while respecting our creaturely freedom.

I think it is not accidental in today's reading from Esther that after Mordecai's words to Esther she not only engages in a three day fast but also in prayer during that fast. Her prayer was a seeking on her part of wisdom, of guidance, a seeking to see what God would have her do. It is a good habit for us, in our time, to seek such wisdom, such guidance, in the situations in which we find ourselves.

"For just such a time as this." I want to share a story I find powerful in relation to this Scripture passage. It is a story I shared here once before in a different sermon about a different passage, so some of you may remember it from that time. However, I repeat it today because it fits especially with today's readings from Esther, for reasons that will become apparent.

In 1996, a British historian named David Irving, who had written extensively denying that the Holocaust ever happened, sued an American Jewish historian named Deborah Lipstadt for her

critique of his work in an historical work she had written about the Holocaust. Irving's suit in a British court failed. Shortly after that court decision, Lipstadt went to her local synagogue for the annual celebration of Purim, that Jewish festival at which the entire book of Esther is read. Lipstadt recounts hearing those words from Esther 4:14, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." She writes, "I heard that"

and it made me think: Who knows if not for this very reason I got the education I got, I got the upbringing I got, my job—maybe we're all meant to do one something really significant. And some of us will do it on the public stage, and some by helping a child. Nobody knows of it, nobody sees it, but we're all meant to do something. And maybe this is the something I was meant to do [Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY), 2002, p. 1].

Maybe each of us is meant to do something really significant, not necessarily something high profile in a public arena, such as Deborah Lipstadt, but for many of us much more like the other example she named. "For just such a time as this." In this time, this challenging time, to practice Christianity in our culture, may we be open to what God is calling us to do, how God is calling us to use our God-given gifts and blessings. It might be some action in the public sphere. It might be a quiet word with our neighbour, or a conversation with a grandchild on the phone, or . . . , and the list goes on. May we be open to what God may be calling us to do in this time and place. And to that God, who has created us, to the one through whom we have come to know that God most fully, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that God with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, this day and forever. Amen.

Resources

Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4 (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2009).

Bechtel, Carol M. *Esther*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2002.