

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

Esther 4:13-14

(see *God Stories* by Stephen Shoemaker for sermon idea source)

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The story begins with these words, “Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus.” Most likely, he’s the Persian king that we know as Xerxes I. The story begins with a party. There are parties throughout this story. At almost every moment, at every turn in the story, it seems like Xerxes is bibbing on some wine, throwing a party. He didn’t have to have a big reason – he just liked to throw a party.

This first party lasted six months – 180 days. It was a party for the officials and ministers at the palace of Susa, his winter home. He then threw a follow-up feast for all the citizens of Susa, both great and small, rich and poor. The feast for everyone, unlike the feast for the finest, lasted only seven days. Everybody was there. All the men were in one hall – kind of a stag party arrangement. And the women were in the other hall with Queen Vashti.

On the last day of the feast, the king was – look at verse 10 – sloshed, merry with wine. Sloshed. He commanded Vashti, his queen, to come out before him wearing her royal crown so he could show off her beauty. Like a stuffed deer head on a trophy mount or like a big-mouth bass pinned to the wall, she was going to be displayed as his finest catch of all. He sent seven eunuchs to get her, probably the amount needed to carry her upon her royal couch.

But the queen decided she wasn’t in the mood for modeling. She did the absolutely unthinkable – she told the king “no.” The king exploded in wrath. He gathered together all the advisors and asked them, being humiliated by his woman, what he was going to do.

Well, the chamberlain told the king he couldn’t dare let her snub him. Besides, if the queen was allowed to snub the king, then all women, everywhere, might think they didn’t have to obey their husbands, and wouldn’t that be a terrible thing. All the men agreed. They decided that if Vashti wouldn’t do the prance of the peacock for her prince, then she was going to get the old heave ho, and they would find a queen even more beautiful than she was, a queen who would strut her stuff.

The advice pleased the king, and he ordered it done. Now Xerxes, in this story, doesn’t seem to be a real thinker. He orders done what anyone suggests. They began what I call “the great queen hunt.” They had a beauty contest throughout all Persia (think “The Bachelor”). There were officials going to and fro throughout the whole land who were going to bring the loveliest ladies to their lord. Why, it was set up just like the Miss America pageant. There were semifinalists, who would receive a year’s beauty treatment – Mary Kay every day for a year. Then, after a year of soaking in the sauna, caressing and cosmetics, toning and tanning, they were going to narrow it down to the seven finalists. The envelope, please.

Esther didn't tell anybody she was a Jew. Her uncle Mordecai was something of her foster father, because Esther was an orphan. Every day Uncle Mordecai went to see how Esther was doing in her beauty treatments. He'd strictly forbidden her to tell anyone she was a Jew. It wasn't a real popular thing in Persia.

The lovely ladies lined up for the lord. His majesty, the king, checked them out – each one. But the moment Esther appeared, the contest was over. Xerxes loved Esther above all the other women, and he made her queen right then and there, on the spot.

And you guessed it. This king threw a party – Esther's party.

Meanwhile, old Mordecai, her beloved foster father, kept his post at the king's gate. He had become a shrewd observer of life at the capital during that year. He had overheard a plot to kill the king being arranged by two of the king's trusted men of the inner circle – Bigthan and Teresh. He told Esther. Esther told the king. In the investigation that followed, the leaders of the coup were arrested and hanged. They jotted down in the king's chronicles that Mordecai was the one who had saved the king.

Meanwhile, the king needed a right hand man. Besides, if he was going to party all day, somebody had to be into politics. He chose Haman to be his chief prince. Bad choice, Haman. He was such an evil character that a Jewish tradition is that every time the story of Esther was read and Haman's name was mentioned, the children hissed his name. Ha - man. Ha - man.

Now, Haman was megalomaniacal. Put another way, he'd never met anybody he loved more than himself. His head was so big it wouldn't have fit through a double set of doors. When Haman pranced through the kingdom, everybody was supposed to bow down to the number two man.

But Mordecai, Esther's foster father, refused to do so. He was a Jew, and he only bowed down to God. He wouldn't bend the knee to Haman. That made Haman furious. He really thought he ought just kill Mordecai on the spot but decided that if somebody wouldn't bow down to him, he probably ought to kill their whole race – a race that refused to worship him.

The evil in his heart, like evil always does, overreached, and if unopposed, will end in a holocaust.

It was a plan to exterminate all the Jews of Persia. A day was set to exterminate the Jews. He sold the king on the whole plan. "King, there is a certain people," he said with a slur in his voice, "that are scattered throughout the kingdom. Their laws and customs are different from everybody else's. They do not keep the king's laws. They are dangerous to the kingdom. It really doesn't profit the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, I think they should be destroyed. Let's issue a decree and pay 10,000 talents to the ones who will carry out the king's plans."

It was a masterpiece of political paranoia and racist innuendo. The idea, of course, pleased the king, who was putty in the hands of anybody who flattered him or alarmed him sufficiently. He took off his ring and gave it to Haman. "The job is yours. Do what you want to with these people." The king wrote a decree, sealed it, irrevocably, with his royal seal. The letters were an

authorization to destroy, kill, and annihilate all Jews – young and old, women and children – in one day, the 13th day of the twelfth month of Adar.

The couriers swiftly fanned out the king’s resolution, as the decree was at the same time proclaimed from the city’s citadel. Meanwhile, the king and Haman settled down to drink, while the city was struck dumb (3:15).

When Mordecai, Esther’s foster father, heard the decree, he tore his clothes. It all started with him because he wouldn’t bow down to Haman. He put on sackcloth and ashes and began publicly mourning. He went through the city crying loudly and bitterly. Esther’s maid came and told her what her foster father Mordecai was doing.

Now Esther, the Jewish queen (it’s a secret she’s a Jew, don’t forget), had not heard the decree. She sent Mordecai some new clothes and begged him to take off his sackcloth and ashes, his clothes of mourning. But Mordecai refused to be comforted. Finally Esther sent a maid to see what was so distressing her foster father. Mordecai sent back a copy of the decree and begged her to make intercession before the king on behalf of her people.

Esther received the message and sent this response. “Everybody knows that if you disturb the king without his invitation while he’s in his inner chamber, you will be killed unless the king holds out his golden scepter to spare your life by his mercy. It’s been 30 days since I’ve been called to see the king.”

Mordecai knew that Esther was on the fence. He knew that she was backed into a corner. He knew that she was at that moment of crisis in her life that would reveal who she was. That’s true. When we have a crisis in our lives, it reveals exactly who we are. Was Esther going to be quiet and save her own self? Or was she going to stand up for God’s people?

Look at chapter 4, verses 13-14. Notice the harsh words of Mordecai.

Do not imagine that you in the king’s palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty – there it is – for such a time as this?

Until this point of the story, the only thing we know about Esther is that she is one good looking girl. She’s not the queen because of her courage. She’s the queen because she’s cute. No longer could she sail through the sea of life because of her beauty. Now, she had to have courage. Now, she had to show her Jewish faith.

But will she? What type of character will emerge in this time of crisis? Will she only be beautiful? Or will she be brave?

Stephen Shoemaker recalled what pop culture wizard Andy Warhol said in his now famous line that everybody has “fifteen minutes of fame” in life – one short moment when the world is watching and the spotlight is on. I’m not sure about the fame part, but he identifies something real. We each have slender moments of opportunity, crisis moments, times of decision when

something crucial in our lives and the lives of those around us is at stake. At that moment, will we respond with our best self? Will our truest character come forth?

The stories of the faithful from scripture are meant to be a training in character so that in those 15 minutes of fame, in those times of crisis, our best can come to the fore. Our virtues of character will shine. Flannery O'Connor wrote, "The one in the violent situation reveals qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him."

Esther rose to the challenge. Taking a bold initiative, she sent this word to Mordecai. "Go gather all the Jews in Susa. Fast for me. Don't drink. Don't eat for three days. And I, and my maidens, will fast alongside you. Then I will break the royal law by going uninvited into the king's inner chamber. If I perish, I perish."

Yes, it was for such a time as this that God had placed her in the palace.

On the third day, she put on her royal apparel and stood in the yard of the king's inner court. The king saw her, and she found favor in his sight, and he held out the golden scepter and spared her life. She drew near. The king was moved. Was it her beauty? Was it her startling courage?

"What do you desire, Queen Esther? Whatever you request I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

The queen said she couldn't tell him right then, but if he and Haman would show up to a party (my, how he and Haman loved a party), she would make her request. She knew how to get the king in a good mood.

The honor was not lost on Haman, we can be sure about that. He was going to be with the king and the queen at the same time, partying at their palace.

After the first party, she said she really couldn't make her request at that time. Would they come again the next day for another banquet? Then she would reveal her wish. Haman and the king left. Haman was, no doubt, ecstatic. He knew her request would bode well for him, else why was he invited? Then he walked through the gate and there was old Mordecai, the Jew, refusing again to bow down to him. He was eaten up with anger. He went home and revealed his pathetic soul to his wife and friends. He recounted all his accomplishments – his riches, the number of his sons (I guess he forgot to mention his daughters), all his political promotions up to the chief prince, and, now, the honor of dining with the queen. His wife and his friends, I imagine, rolled their eyes at each other. They were all tired of Haman's big head. The constant recitation of one's resume does get wearisome.

Having given his recitation of his resume, he said, "It doesn't matter. I don't enjoy any of my wonderful accomplishments – though they are many – as long as I see Mordecai sitting at the gate, refusing to bow down to me." Haman, like a lot of us, found it impossible to be happy with what he has. He's made unhappy by everything he doesn't have. He lets the reluctance of one man spoil his feast. The sidelong glance has ruined him.

His wife came up with a wonderful solution, or so she thought, for her pouting prince. “Build a gallows 50 cubits high. Then in the morning, go ahead and hang old Mordecai on it. Everybody will see what happens to those who refuse to bow down to you.”

He had it built. You have to understand this thing was 50 cubits high. What a gallows! Noah’s ark was only 30 cubits high, if that gives you any idea of the tower he had erected to hang one man.

That night the king couldn’t sleep. He tossed and turned, and there is nothing better to make you sleep than reading the boring chronicles of the kings. It was sure to cure any insomniac. As they read the king’s chronicles, wouldn’t you know they read the part about the time Mordecai had spared the life of the king by reporting the treasonous plan.

“What have we done to honor Mordecai?”

“Nothing,” replied the servant.

About that time, Haman had come to ask the king’s permission to have Mordecai hanged.

“Haman, what would you do for a man the king would wish to honor?” Haman thought the king was talking about him.

“Oh, king,” he said, “I’d put your robe on his back and put him on your horse. I’d have a big parade and let him ride through the city with a spokesman proclaiming, ‘This is done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.’ Could life be any better?”

“Good,” said the king. “Take the king’s robe and horse, as you’ve said, and prepare it all for Mordecai, the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate.”

Mordecai, Haman thought to himself. That’s the man he’d come to get permission to hang. So Haman had to go before the parade declaring, “This is the man whom the king wishes to honor.” He went to his house, pouting, and about the time he was beginning his pity party, the king’s servants arrived to carry him to the second night of Esther’s banquet.

Finally, Esther revealed her request. “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given to me, and the lives of my people.” She now unveils, for the first time, her identity. “My people and I are sold to be destroyed, killed, annihilated” (7:4).

“Who has done anything like this?” asks the king. Esther replied, “A foe and an enemy, who is now sitting with us.” She pointed a finger at Haman. The king got up, went out to the garden, in the midst of his anger, to think. And Haman went over and began to beg the queen that she would spare his life. He could tell the king was plotting his death. About that time, the king came in and found Haman fallen over the queen’s couch. He exploded. “Would you force even my queen to be with you in my house?”

One of the servants said, “King, you know we’ve got those really, really, really, really, really tall gallows available.” That was the one that Haman had built for Mordecai. So it was. They would hang Haman on his own gallows. He turned ashen faced as they took him out and hanged him for all the city to see.

“What about the Jews?” Esther pleaded with the king? Now, the Persian law was the Persian law, and even the king couldn’t revoke himself. He had sealed it with a ring. All he could do was counteract it by signing another decree that granted the Jews the right to fight for themselves, the right to self-defense. And on the day of the extermination, on the 13th day of Adar, they destroyed those who had come to destroy them.

Let’s get this straight. Haman is hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. The mercenaries seeking to kill the Jews are murdered. And the 13th day of Adar, instead of being a holocaust for the Jews becomes a day of deliverance and victory. And Mordecai takes off his sackcloth and ashes and is given royal robes to wear.

Yes, for such a time as this Esther was where she was.

Esther teaches us that God needs our hands, our hearts, our minds, and our bodies to do the work of His deliverance. But it also teaches us, as her foster father Mordecai had said, if we’re not willing to be used, God will find those who are ready to do His business. We’ll be the ones left out.

For such a time as this – that moment of crisis, that time of testing – we find out, like Esther found out, who we really are.

I know what Esther did. The question is, “What will we do?”