FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS
THE STORY OF ESTHER

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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Esther 4:5-17
Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.' When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.' Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.' Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

THIS MORNING, WE BEGAN OUR READING OF SCRIPTURE IN CHAPTER FOUR OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER, which puts us pretty much right in the middle of the story. This is one of only two books named after a woman in the Bible, the other being Ruth, and as such, it has become one that is dear to my heart.

The Book of Esther holds so much within it. For those of you who might not be familiar with the story, or even if you are but haven’t heard it in a long time, it’s one that bears repeating. So a quick summary:

The Israelites are under the rule of the Persian Empire. King Ahasuerus, the Persian King, chooses young Esther to be his queen after dismissing his first queen, Vashti, for her disobedience. This is a time when women were essentially property in the eyes of the law and of the people. They had little to no say in who they married or how their lives may turn out, and yet, we read stories of women, like Esther, who prevail even under such an oppressive culture.

Esther is a Jewish orphan who was raised by her cousin Mordecai, but the King and the court do not know her Jewish identity.

Now around the same time, Haman is promoted within the kingdom and essentially becomes the king's second in command. With that honor, he begins expecting people to bow down before him. But Mordecai refuses to
do so. So when Haman learns that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman begins to plot the destruction of all the Jews living within the Persian Empire.

Mordecai learns of Haman’s plans, and in an exchange with Esther, beautifully read by our own Ellen Curry this morning, convinces Esther to advocate for her people by approaching the king. Esther is risking her own life by choosing to do this, but she succeeds, and a young girl who happens to have access to the king, who happens to be in the right place at the right time, is able to save an entire people.

This is the story of Esther. This is what our Jewish sisters and brothers celebrate on Purim.

Now, the book of Esther isn’t always well-received by scholars. There’s been a lot of debate about whether it’s “theological” enough. And it is true, that it doesn’t even mention the word “God” anywhere in its ten chapters. Yet here it is, a part of this book that we call holy.

In Esther, we don’t find the God who shows up in a burning bush and calls Moses to be a leader; or the God who dictates a blueprint for an ark to Noah then provides a rainbow as a sign of promise. That God, the one who shows up and makes her presence clear to all those around, doesn’t show up in the book of Esther.

That’s not the way God works in this story.

And, quite honestly, most of us would agree, that that’s not the way God works in the story of our lives either.

I don’t know about you, but I can relate a lot more to the uncertainty and ambiguity found in Esther than I can with the certitude and conviction found in the story Noah. Noah builds an ark, he knows God has told him to do this, and he knows exactly how many cubits each part of the ark should be, no need for questions, no need for doubt. It’s just harder for me to resonate with that kind of faith.

But in chapter 4 of Esther where she decides to act on behalf of her people, the conversation is ridden with doubt and uncertainties. Mordecai says, “Who knows?” and “perhaps this is the right thing to do”.

And at first, Esther refuses. This is, after all, seemingly beyond her; it’s politics and kings and policies. Things she doesn’t really know about; things she’s not supposed to meddle in.

One commentator states that, “the actions of Esther in chapter 4 present us with an all-too-human portrait of a person’s response when faced with a demand for action in a situation that she neither created nor asked for …” Esther is being asked to act in a situation that she neither created nor asked for. And she is, at first, reluctant.

Much like Esther, our lives today are filled with unjust circumstances and oppressive situations that we have neither asked for nor directly created.

Not any one of us is to blame for the lack of clean, potable water in so many of our world’s countries or the drought in our very own state. Not any one of us is to blame for the fact that millions of refugees are fleeing Syria for fear of their lives. Not any one of us is to blame that so many of San Francisco’s long-time residents are being evicted or have nowhere to call home. The injustices of our world are not any one person’s fault. So sometimes, we are reluctant to act. It’s easy to feel like there’s nothing we can or should do.

But perhaps, every once in a while, we still wonder: Where is God in this story? What’s God doing about these injustices? And when is God finally going to show up and change everything?

Sidnie White Crawford, in a reflection about the story of Esther says this: “God, though unseen and unacknowledged, works through human instruments… Human action is the key to achieving God’s purpose in the world.”

And perhaps that is what we can learn from Esther.

As the old Hopi Indian saying goes: “Perhaps we are the very ones we have been waiting for.” Perhaps we are not to sit idly by, waiting for God to show up and make a difference or give us some huge and obvious sign that tells us exactly what to do. Perhaps we are the very ones whom God will use even with our doubts and our uncertainties and our questions.

We might not have all the answers, but surely we know that the world isn’t as it should be, and there are steps – even small baby steps – that can be taken to set it just a little more right.

Perhaps we have been given the privilege to act, to be a doer and to participate in the ushering in of God’s kingdom. I assure you, God doesn’t need us to do this work, but God chooses us, calls us, claims us, to do this work. Mordecai says, “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but … who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”
God doesn’t need us. But perhaps we have been placed in this very time, in this very place, in your very workplace, in your very neighborhood, for just such a time as this.

And maybe, just maybe, we have the privilege of being used as an instrument of God to help those who might need it most.

Now, in the 21st century, we can’t read the story of Esther with Haman’s plot of genocide without being reminded of the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. No heroine, like Esther, was able to stop that mass murder of Jews and those deemed unworthy of life by the Nazis.

Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the Nazi regime and their concentration camps and author of the book Night says this: “I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”

He reminds us with these words that we must speak up. We must do something, for silence takes the side of the oppressor.

Too many kept silent in the early 1940s, too many failed to speak up and stand up for those who were being systematically killed. But more and more we hear stories of the few brave, faithful people who did.

Andre Trocme was a pastor in a small French town called Le Chambon. These were ordinary people living ordinary lives, but when Jews started being rounded up and sent to concentration camps, people in this community took notice and took action for such a time as this.

They took strangers into their homes, hid them from the Nazi soldiers, and helped them escape to Switzerland. The citizens of this town put their own lives in danger for the sake of those who were most vulnerable at this time.

They probably knew they couldn’t do everything. They couldn’t stop Hitler and his army for example, and they couldn’t even help every person in danger throughout France, but they could live quiet lives of resistance. And that’s what they did.

With the leadership of their pastor, these French Huguenots recognized the little they could do, and put it to use. It’s estimated that the people of Le Chambon helped save over 3,000 lives.

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None of us has the power to change all the structures of injustice in our world. To try to do so would be overwhelming and futile.

But we’re reminded that even a young woman like Esther, with her life in danger and with the very little power she had, still took whatever leverage she could to help save her people.

She didn’t know if her plan would work. She wasn’t sure that this is even what God wanted because she didn’t get a burning bush or some voice from the heavens. And yet, she chose to advocate for those without a voice.

Perhaps put quite simply, that is our call.

No matter what we do for a living; no matter how old or how young we are; no matter how much or how little experience we have, we are called for such a time as this.

For such a time as this when xenophobia, islamophobia, and racism are reaching a new peak in our country’s fear-meter.

For such a time as this when living costs are simply unaffordable for so many hard-working San Franciscans.

For such a time as this when our divisions seem unsurmountable and unity in the midst of our differences seems like an improbable goal.

For such a time as this, we are called.

Though we certainly aren’t omnipotent, we must recognize that we are also not powerless.

Like the brave people of Le Chambon, like brave queen Esther, we must take action on behalf of the marginalized and the oppressed. On behalf of those who are forgotten and silenced; we must take action.

Sometimes we won’t have all the answers, and sometimes we won’t be sure if what we’re doing is what God’s planned. But even with our doubts and our uncertainties, we must be agents of peace and justice in this world.

The good news is, we don’t do this alone. Remember, Esther did not do this alone. Rather, she had a community who helped discern with her, pray and fast with her and advise her through Mordecai.
And the people of Le Chambon did not act alone either. The whole community had to work together and covenant to keep their secret in order to save those lives. People lived in solidarity with each other.

And in the same way, I believe this community, too, can live shared lives of solidarity.

That, we, too, can help one another discern and act where and when we see the need.

I believe we can encourage one another to be filled with hope and courage when the road seems hopeless and frightening.

And as we encourage and strengthen one another within the walls of this church, we also build relationships and partnerships with those beyond these walls, so that we can make a greater impact in our community. As we work with our “Breaking Cycle of Poverty” partners, with SF Achievers, with New Door Venture, with the Boys & Girls Club, and with Raphael House, and as we build relationships with Grace Tabernacle down in Hunters Point, we are strengthened to do God’s work in this world. Knowing that while we can’t change everything, we can change some things.

Thanks be to God. Amen.