

For Such A Time As This

Sermon

Esther 4:12-17

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Preached at the chapel of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, CA on September 18, 2001, one week after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center.

Esther was the queen of Persia. The position of queen was largely an ornamental one. The king chose Esther not because of her well developed intellect. The king chose her not because she would seek to affect positive change in the lives of the people. The king chose her not because she came from a noble family. The king chose Esther to be queen from among all the virgins throughout the province of Persia simply because she looked good.

We may critique the process by which Esther became queen. However, more important than how she became queen, is what she accomplished once she occupied the throne. In our lives we may not always understand how we or other people have come to hold various positions or offices in society. More important however, is what we do with the positions once we have attained them.

Though Esther was the queen of Persia, she was a Jew. Esther was raised by her cousin Mordecai. Mordecai taught her right from wrong. Mordecai taught her how to treat other people. And Mordecai instilled in Esther values which shaped her worldview. Mordecai advised her to not tell anyone that she was a Jew.

During Esther's reign as queen, the king honored one of his noblemen, a man named Haman. The king demanded that royal officials kneel down and pay homage to Haman whenever he graced their presence. Mordecai, however, refused to bow down. Haman became enraged at Mordecai because he would not bow down. Haman also subsequently learned that Haman was a Jew. As a result, Haman requested of the king that all Jews be annihilated. That's right. Haman wanted all Jews to be killed because of the actions of one.

Unfortunately this type of racial stereotyping is still alive and well. Last week's tragedy has affected all of us tremendously. By the actions of a few, thousands have been killed. It is widely speculated that the perpetrators of this heinous act are of Arab descent. Because of a widespread tendency for racial stereotyping of minority groups by the majority, Arab American have been the target of hate crimes. Mosques have been vandalized around the country. One Sikh gas station owner in Arizona was killed. Arab Americans fear for their safety. Why do we impart upon the shoulders of an entire race of people, responsibility for the actions of a few? We need to check ourselves.

As an African American female growing up in the South, I hated it when people prejudged me based on stereotypes. When well-meaning whites complemented me on how different I was from other blacks or stated that I did not talk like I was black, I realized I would never be seen as simply, Debra. But I would always be seen through a tainted lens. A lens colored by every negative image of African American my complementors had ever encountered. It was and still is frustrating. Why can I not just be accepted for who I am? Why can we not simply accept all people for the unique individuals they are.

When Mordecai heard that all Jews were to be annihilated, he sent a messenger to Esther bearing a copy of the edict of the king indicating the date when the annihilations were to take place. Mordecai also asked the messenger to beseech Esther to use her influence with the king to stop the killings.

Esther responded to Mordecai by essentially saying there was nothing she could do. If she went before the king without being summoned, she could be put to death. Therefore, by not going before the king unsummoned, Esther was simply complying with existing law. Or perhaps she was being compliant because she was complacent. The risk of losing her own life, according to her initial response, was more troubling for her than the certain loss of thousands of other lives. She was queen. She was waited upon hand and foot by maids and servants. Her every desire and need were fulfilled. Perhaps the thought of losing her charmed life was traumatic.

Upon honest reflection, I know there have been times in my life when I complied with traditions, existing rules and regulations because I was complacent. I was happy to be where I was. I did not want to rock the boat or be seen as a trouble maker. I went along just to get along. I allowed injustice to exist because it was inconvenient for me to challenge it.

Mordecai did not let Esther off the hook with her initial response. He sent her a message which served as a reality check. "Do not think that just because you are in the king's house, you who are Jewish, will escape persecution." Mordecai was warning Esther that one day her heritage would be discovered. On that day Esther would die like every other Jew. Prejudice knows no bounds. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" Mordecai told her. Perhaps Esther's being queen at that time was not a coincidence. Perhaps she was allowed to be queen so that she could save her people.

We live in a time of tremendous human suffering. The graphic images of the World Trade Center destruction are indelibly etched in our minds. The stories of people who kissed their loved ones goodbye on the morning of 9/11, only to discover a short time later that they would never see them again, are numerous. We saw planes flown intentionally into the north and south towers. We watched in shock as the towers crumbled before our eyes. We saw a city thrown into chaos.

In our time, human suffering exists everywhere. In addition to the suffering created by terrorists on September 11: In the United States, 2 million men, women and children are homeless; 12.7% of the U.S. population lives in poverty; every 9 seconds a woman is battered and beaten, usually by someone she knows; every 38 seconds a child is physically or sexually abused; in 1999, 280,000 people died of AIDS in Ethiopia, 180,000 in Kenya, ravaging the African continent; and 64 million people are undernourished in Latin America and the Caribbean due to poverty.

I share these statistics not to further depress us but to alert us. Perhaps we have each been called by God for such a time as this. Perhaps some of us are called to encourage the hopeless. Perhaps some are called to speak for those who have no voice. Perhaps some are called to challenge injustice, seeking justice for all. Perhaps some are called to challenge existing traditions, rules and regulations that prevent God's will from being done. Perhaps we are not where we are by accident. Perhaps if we diligently seek God, God will reveal to us exactly what we are called to do.

Esther rose to the occasion and sought the king on behalf of her people. Her people were saved from destruction when she risked her life to save theirs.

Closing Prayer:

God we pray for families, friends, co-workers, and loved ones of those who were victims of last week's tragedy. We pray for people of New York and all Americans that we may continue to come to the aid of our sisters and brothers at this time. We pray that our willingness to help others continue beyond this tragedy and becomes a way of life. We pray that the growing sense of nationalism become instead a heightened sense of each person's humanity; that we value all people everywhere for the unique individuals they are. We pray for our national government.

Though we want justice to be done, we do not want innocent blood to be shed. And we pray that God will work within each of us to bring about a time of healing so we can become the people God would have us to be. Amen.