

“For Such A Time”

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 8, 2017 ~~ Indigenous People’s Weekend
Text: Esther 4:4-16

The story of Queen Esther is one of my absolute favorites in the Bible. Scholars debate as to whether or not it is historically accurate with most agreeing it is not a factual account of a real person. But that doesn’t change the beauty and the power of the story for me one bit. For me, Esther is sort of like the Cinderella of the ancient Hebrews. A little orphan girl raised by her much older cousin grows into a beautiful young woman, so beautiful that she ends up marrying a king. What’s not to love?? Was Esther a real person? No independent historical record of her exists, which is noteworthy since the history of the Persian empire is well documented. Nor is there any record outside of the Bible of either King Ahasuerus or his first queen, Vashti. Some have tried to argue that Ahasuerus is really another name for Xerxes I, a real Persian king whose existence is well documented. But even if Xerxes and Ahasuerus are the same person, which is doubtful, there is still no record of either Esther or Vashti as his queens and that is hard to imagine, given how important a king Xerxes was.

While it is fun to imagine that Esther was a real person, a simple Jewish woman so beautiful that she captured the heart of a powerful Persian king, the significance of her story has nothing to

do with its historical accuracy. The significance of Esther's story lies within Esther herself. Esther is a heroine of the Jewish faith not because she was a beautiful queen, real or imaginary. Esther is a heroine of her people because she struggled to become the person God needed her to be in a dangerous situation. Esther, the beautiful, young girl who beguiled a king, had to find it within herself to rise above her reality and all its limitations in order to save the lives of her people. Esther had to find out for herself just how important it is to "be who you are" for only by knowing who you are can you discover who you are capable of becoming.

One Night with the King is a fantastic movie which tells Esther's story in beautiful detail and I urge you to find it and watch it. The movie is based on a novel, *Hadassah: One Night with the King* by Tommy Tenney and Mark Andrew Olsen so it is definitely an even more fictionalized account of the story than what appears in the Bible. But, it is an excellent movie which does justice to Esther and the dilemma she faced. It makes clear that Esther understood exactly who she was and what her place was in the royal palace as the Queen. At least, she thought she did until her cousin Mordecai asked something of her that seemed impossible for her to do within the strict protocols of the palace that framed her existence. Queen or not, there were clear rules she had to follow along with everyone else and what Mordecai was

asking her to do meant breaking the most important one – going to see the king without an invitation.

The reason Mordecai asked her to do this is simple enough – he had found out about a plan by the evil Haman to trick the king into signing a decree that all the Jewish people were to be killed because they were a disobedient and rebellious people. Haman didn't name the Jews specifically but rather convinced the king to trust him to deal with these disobedient rebels. When Mordecai learned of the plot he put on sackcloth and ashes and began mourning in the city square. Esther soon learned of this behavior and sent word to him asking what was wrong. He told her about the plot and that she was the only hope for her people to survive. The text we read this morning reveals Esther's response to Mordecai's appeal to her. Initially she says no, she can't possibly do this because the rule for everyone, including her, is that she cannot go to the king unbidden. To do so is to risk instant death and she wasn't willing to do that. At least she wasn't until she heard Mordecai's answer. "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."

For just such a time as this. Those were the words that brought Esther up short. Those were the words that gave her pause and made her think. Those were the words that made her ponder, consider and wonder just who it was she needed to be in the situation confronting her. She didn't ask to be queen in the first place, but she accepted it when it happened. She didn't exactly hide the fact that she was Jewish, but she didn't make a big deal about it either. She had worked hard to become well versed within the complex world of the palace. She had decided if she was to be queen, she would be a good one. Until that moment when she received that fateful message from Mordecai, she knew who she was and what she was supposed to do each day. She had figured it all out and life was going well, better than she ever imagined it could. And now here comes Mordecai asking her to throw all that work, all that effort, all those plans and dreams out the window to try to do something that might well be impossible.

So, what does she do? Does she just say no? That would have been the easy thing. Some might even say it would be the smart thing. But she doesn't do that. She decides she must do something, but just what is still unclear. She realizes she needs to prepare for this next step, whatever it is, so she makes arrangements for a fast of three days and nights. Then, she tells Mordecai, after those three days of fasting, she will go in to the king and if she perishes, she perishes.

The exact meaning and significance of Esther's three day fast is debated by scholars. It is proof that she was praying, spending all the time she could with God so that God could make plain what she should do? Or was she trying to win God's favor with the fast? Or was she mourning for herself in advance just in case things didn't go well with the king? We don't know. The text doesn't tell us. And, truthfully, the text doesn't even mention God at all. Esther is, in fact, the only book in the entire Bible that doesn't mention God at all. This little reference to fasting is the closest it comes to any sort of reference to faith or prayer or God. While I recognize that this lack of even a mention of God is true, it's pretty clear to me that Esther intended to use these three days of fasting to try to figure out just what God needed her to do and how, given the rigidly outlined protocols facing her, she would do it. She was trying to become the person God needed her to be and she needed to figure out for herself just what that meant to her. "Be who you are" took on a whole new meaning for Esther over the course of those three days. And at the end of them, she rose to the task.

So, what did she do? Did she go into the king? Yes. Was he glad to see her? Yes. Did she blurt out the whole story throwing herself and all the Jewish people on the mercy of the king? No. She came up with a much more ingenious way of accomplishing her task than that. And if you want to know what she did, you'll just have to read it for yourself in the Bible. Or, watch the movie.

Or both. Spoiler alert! Haman gets his in the end. But his end is not the end of the story....

Be who you are. These words are the gist of the wonderful children's book we heard read this morning and better advice for children and youth and all of us no matter what our age cannot be given. We all must work at being who we are, as individuals, as members of a family, as members and friends of this church, as students or employees, as retirees – as people beloved of God and created by God to do amazing things. It's that whole amazing things bit where we start to get confused. Me? Amazing? No, can't be. I'm just me. Nothing special about me. I just do what I do each day, taking life as it comes. I do my best to be a good person and most of the time I am. But amazing? Me? Never!!! Not possible.

Now that is just what I think Esther was struggling with during those three days of fasting. She had already experienced the impossibility of amazing. She had become queen! How many shots at amazing could she reasonably expect to have? She had to have wondered that. I would have wondered that. Wouldn't you? And now here Mordecai was asking her to risk everything she had just gotten used to. It was crazy! The whole thing didn't make sense at all! And yet, she knew, deep down inside her she knew that Mordecai was right. Perhaps all this other stuff had happened so she would be right where she was for such a time as

this. Perhaps God had been behind this amazing set of circumstances all along. Perhaps God knew she would be needed for such a time as this, and made sure she was there, right where God needed her to be, just when she needed to be there.

This is Esther's wisdom to share with us, I think. Esther's story reminds us to dare to be who we are, the good stuff, the great stuff, the not so great stuff too. God needs us to be who we are, right here, right now, because we can. God needs each of us to be who God created us to be, fully aware of who that is and why it matters. Okay, fine, we think. But, really, what does that mean?? What does that mean to me right now? What will it mean to me tomorrow morning? Well, it means you need to be paying attention to the world around you, to the people in your life, to the situations surrounding you and how God might need you to be present as the YOU God made you to be in the midst of it all. Hard as it is to imagine sometimes, God made you YOU for a reason and that reason becomes a little clearer every day with every person you encounter, every decision you make, every prayer you offer, every time you make the effort to see God in your life all around you. BE WHO YOU ARE because that is God's gift to you, and it has been from the day you were born. And don't be afraid to be amazing, if and when the opportunity presents itself.

I'm pretty sure Esther would tell you if she can do it, anyone can.
So, go ahead. Give it a try. Who knows what amazing thing might
happen? Well, God does... Amen.