

“For Such a Time as This”

Esther 4:1-17

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Rev. Kara Seaton

The book of Esther is one rich with drama – perhaps that’s why I like it so much! It’s not a long book, and I encourage you to read it – for the first time, or again. It is a book in the Old Testament, and did you know that it was the very last book accepted into the Hebrew Bible?

Understanding where we are on a Biblical timeline, is important. So let me recap for you. God’s chosen people, the Jews, had been exiled after the Land of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Persia had become the largest empire in the world, with a territory spanning from modern day India, beyond Egypt and into Sudan and Ethiopia. When the Persians came to power, they released restrictions on the Jews, allowing them to return to Israel. However after fifty years of being displaced, a new generation had grown up, and many of them had married, had families and were integrated into other communities – and so chose to stay in the territories away from Israel in which they had settled. This is the time and context of Esther’s story.

It’s also important to know Esther’s story as a whole, so I’ll give you the shortened version. Esther was born and raised a Jew, and after the death of her parents when she was a child, her cousin Mordecai took her in and cared of her as a father. When Esther was a young teen, King Ahasuerus (the king of Persia) sent out an all call for a new wife. Scripture tells us that Esther was beautiful and is chosen as one of King’s wives, and ultimately wins his favor and is crowned his queen. Through this transition, Mordecai instructed Esther to not reveal her identity as a Jew to anyone in the court, so she didn’t.

Then there was an incident between Mordecai and the king’s right-hand man, Haman. In revenge, Haman asked the king to order the destruction of all of Mordecai’s people – saying they refused to follow the king’s laws. The king endorses Haman’s order, and in an instant Mordecai and Esther’s people are in grave danger.

The passage we read today, comes after Mordecai learns about the King’s order to kill all the Jews. Mordecai is distraught while Esther knows nothing about it, so through the text, we experience the correspondence between Mordecai and Esther in the aftermath of the new law. Mordecai pleads with Esther to step out and save her people, and Esther responds with much hesitation about what he is asking her to do.

Esther’s identity as a Jew, had not been revealed. And her cousin’s request not only would out her, but it put her life in grave danger. She couldn’t just sit down at an evening meal and share her concerns with the king. While Esther had some experience winning the king’s favor, there was a law stating that if anyone came before the king without being summoned, the penalty was death. And then there was a new law ordering the destruction of all Jews.

We can imagine why Esther is reluctant to do what Mordecai asks and we bare witness to how she wrestles with what to do. Esther was forced to have an intense look at herself and her identity. Is she first a Jew, a cousin, or a Persian queen? What, if any, power does she have? What risks is she willing to take? Esther responds to Mordecai, asking “Why me? Can’t someone else do it? Someone else more qualified? Perhaps a passionate prophet or a priest?”

But Mordecai persists. He encourages her to step into this moment. Not only to save herself, but to save her people. He says to her, “Perhaps you have come to your royal position **for such a time as this.**”

Ultimately, Esther gathers her courage. She says, **I will go.** She asks Mordecai to tell all the Jews to not eat or drink for three days, as she and her servants will also do, to help her to be brave. She leans on her faith community for support, and she promises to go before the King, even with the very real threat that it may cost her life.

The rest of the story does go in favor of Esther. She devised a plan and goes in front of the king. Haman is exposed for his evil, and that leads to his demise. Mordecai is honored, and the law to destroy the Jewish people was reversed.

Like Esther, I think most of us have found ourselves in a position of being a reluctant prophet. In fact, the Bible is full of people like Esther, ordinary people who doubt themselves and their ability to rise to the occasion. You know Jonah, of course, who doesn’t want to go do what God asks of him, so he gets swallowed by a whale...and ends up doing the work anyway. Moses, upon God’s request to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, responded, “Pardon me, please send someone else.” Jeremiah, who said he couldn’t be a prophet using the rationale that “I am too young!” And even Simon Peter, the disciple who takes several denials, before he could claim himself as a follower of Jesus. Perhaps it’s even ‘normal’ to be reluctant?

How many of you has either been asked directly or indirectly or even simply felt called to stand up and speak out, and your response was, “Who, me? I have no power. I have no authority!” Be honest – who has experienced that?

How many of you have thought or said, “Someone else is better to do this...someone who is better equipped! It’s not me!” I think many of us even get good at it... even defending our reluctance with reasons why we shouldn’t go or shouldn’t say, and why someone else is better suited.

I wonder how many times each of us has left a conversation or situation and thought to ourselves, “I wish I would’ve said something. I didn’t agree with what was said, but I didn’t know what to say.” Or “so and so is so much better at speaking out, so I just waited for them to address the issue.” Maybe it was a conversation about human rights, or gender inclusion, or racial injustice or climate change or politics or even a person who is being unfairly judged. When is the last time you experienced that?

What Esther did was brave – she risked her life to save her people. But the takeaway today is not simply a long ago story about a girl who becomes queen and risks everything to speak up. Rather, I want you to see that Esther was a person, just like you and me. Esther was young and was scared. Whether we are young now, or were once upon a time, we all know the feeling that there are others with more knowledge, wisdom and experience than us. Each of us has known genuine fear. Esther found herself in a situation where she had to grapple with different parts of who she was, feeling uncertain about how she fit in, whether she could make any difference, when she should say something and when she should be silent, and ultimately, what risks she was willing to take. I think each of us have also found ourselves at times juggling different parts of who we are, trying to prioritize and look out for the wellbeing of others and ourselves, and even considering what risks we are willing to take.

We don't know much about the other parts of Esther's life. I'd like to think, in her humanity, that she didn't always get it right. But what I do know is that this story shows her internal struggle and ultimately, how she chooses to stand up to evil, violence and hate and calls out the oppressors. In **naming the injustice**, Esther risks her own life, offering her voice for vulnerable people who had no voice in the conversation.

So perhaps we can use this story to ask ourselves some hard questions. Like, how do we claim our faith in a world and country that is so divided? What places do we have privilege and power...and how can we use that to fight for others without? What risks are we willing to take in the name of love and justice? Whose rights and freedoms are being sacrificed when we are silent on issues of injustice? Where are we positioned to offer support and encouragement to others, helping them to stand up and speak out for the least of these? And are we willing to have the very hard, sometimes uncomfortable, conversations with others, about how we see the radical message of Jesus we find in the Bible – radical love, radical inclusion, radical care of each other and our planet, radical grace...and talking about the ways that message does and does not play out in the world?

Back at the beginning, I mentioned that the book of Esther was the last to be accepted into the Hebrew Bible. The reason is because it was considered by some to be a secular book **because it had no mention of God**. And that is accurate, God is not named anywhere in the book – yet do you see how God is everywhere in this book? And isn't God so often like that? Working just under the surface, just out of sight, in a small still voice. So I wonder, where is God working in your life? Where is someone or something nudging you to speak out? Are you willing to risk your comfort...what about your privilege? What conversations are you willing to have? And reluctant or not, I hope that each of us will reach deep inside to find our brave, to take risks, and to speak up...and to realize the spirit has been preparing each of us “for such a time as this.”

May it be so.

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