

“For Such a Time as This”

Esther

September 19, 2021

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie Osterhoudt

I have story for you this morning which I believe is a reflection of the times in which we are living. It is a Jewish folktale about two merchants, living in the same small town, who owned shops across the street from one another. At first their competition was good – they enjoyed learning from each other and sharing their talents. Their competition challenged them to be the best they could be and to sell the best products. They benefited from this competition as did the small town where they lived. But soon that sense of connection, of being neighbors, turned ugly – into a destructive competition. They began to judge the success of their business, not by how much they sold, but by whether they sold more than the merchant across the street. In fact, the merchant across the street became, not their neighbor in a small community where they all supported the good of the community, but a person to fear and hate. God wanted to put an end to this destructive rivalry for the good of the town. So, God sent

an angel to visit one of the merchants. The angel challenged the merchant: “You can have anything you ask for: riches, wisdom, long life, many children – the only stipulation is that whatever you ask for, your competitor will also benefit and receive twice as much. If you ask for \$1000, your neighbor across the street will receive twice.” The merchant thought for a moment and then requested, “Make me blind in one eye.” Friends, I believe that we – you and I – as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to change this destructive narrative in which we seem to be living today, where we are suspicious of our neighbors, consumed with a selfishness that neglects, even destroys, the common good. We can live across the street from one another and bring a diversity of ideas and beliefs to the table for conversation, without totally blinding one another. Perhaps we have been called to such a time as this to speak up and “be” the church of Jesus Christ which demonstrates something different to the world around us. This morning we will continue to explore what it means to practice our faith. I say practice because our faith is not simply about a collection of beliefs, but a way of life. And I say “practice” because we will never do it right but we are called by Jesus Christ to keep on trying to get it right. This morning we will consider one person in the Old Testament who might be able to shed

some light on what it takes to shift the political and social climate. Esther. I saw a quote this week from John F. Kennedy: “Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future.

Prayer for Understanding:

My mother was meticulous in researching our family’s genealogy. Some years ago I was going through some of her research and I discovered a story which had been apparently re-told to each generation in our family until it was finally recorded – a story I had never heard. I knew that my paternal grandmother’s maiden name was Willson. What I did not know that she was a descendent of Presbyterians from Scotland; a county on the southern coast of Scotland. The story is about an eighteen year old Margaret Willson. She lived during a conflicted tumultuous period of history in Scotland when the Catholic Church was demanding that Presbyterians recant their Presbyterian beliefs and re-dedicate themselves to supporting the Catholic Church. The Catholics and Protestants were always fighting in Scotland. If any adult refused to pay homage to the

Catholic Church then they would face the penalty of death. Margaret refused to deny her Presbyterian heritage and beliefs. As punishment she was tied to a stake and placed in the ocean at low tide. When high tide approached, she would die by drowning. She faced her fate courageously. When high tide came in, it miraculously did not submerge her in the raging waters. Afraid that God was somehow on her side, the Catholic officials released her. Obviously, she lived to have children or I would not be standing here this morning. She had the courage of her convictions and her faith sustained her during a conflicted, contentious, dangerous time. In many ways my great great grandmother's story reminds me of Esther's story. And it reminds me of the incredibly contentious and conflicted times we are living through in this country. The swiftness of the raging waters of change seems to overwhelm us. The hatred, animosity and disrespect in our public life is not only threatening to destroy our sense of community and the common good but destroying the lives of individuals.

The book of Esther is the story of one of the greatest threats to the survival of the Jewish people. The story takes place in Susa, the capital city of Persia. The story begins in the royal court of the King of Persia, King Ahasuerus. Here is the back story: the Jewish people have been exiled to

foreign lands after their nation was defeated by the Persians. The Jews, at the opening of our story, are displaced persons – refugees - in a foreign land.

In the third year of King Ahasuerus' reign, he decides to throw an enormous party for all his officials and ministers to display his power and his wealth. In the first chapter of Esther's story we read: " in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet. He displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all." Friends, this is a 6 month party!! "There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of marble and mother of pearl. Drinks were served in golden goblets without restraint, and the king gave orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired. On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded his attendants to bring Queen Vashti before the king in order to show the officials her beauty. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command. At this the king was enraged." What do you do when you are in a position of power and your orders are not obeyed? King Ahasuerus is in a conundrum. He consults with his officials. It is decided that if the king does not address this disobedience, all the wives will think they can

disregard their husbands. So, it is decided that Queen Vashti shall be exiled and a search for a new queen begins.

All the young women are invited to the court to be paraded before the King as he searches for a replacement queen. Esther is one of those young women. We are told that she was incredibly beautiful. She was Jewish although the royal court was not aware of her ethnicity. Esther was an orphan, raised and adopted by her uncle Mordecai. Eventually it is Esther's turn to meet the King. We read: "The king loved Esther more than all the other women; she won his favor and devotion and he made her queen."

And then events take a sudden and unexpected turn. The King promotes Haman, a descendent of a people who are hostile to the Jews, to be his Prime Minister. As Prime Minister, Haman requires the citizens of Persia to bow down to him, acknowledging his position of power. Mordecai, the Jew, refuses. We are not told his motivation but perhaps he is remembering that God, Yahweh, has commanded the Jewish people to have no other gods before God, their Creator. Mordecai will not worship any god but Yahweh, his God. Haman, in a rage, over reacts a bit, resolving to have all the Jews killed. It was not enough to simply have Mordecai

executed. A decree goes out to set in motion the genocide of all the Jews.

Total blindness.

When Mordecai learns of the decree he sends a message to Esther, pleading with her to stop the murder of the Jews. As queen, she alone has the power of shift the paradigm. This is the message Mordecai sends her and this is our scripture reading this morning

Read Esther 4

“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.”

You must be courageous and speak the truth to power, even if it means you put your own position and life at risk. Abuse of power, selfishness, destructive competition will affect us all. A lack of respect for human dignity and life will kill us all.

Esther then sets in motion a very cunning plot in which she might approach the king and get him to reverse the death decree. It reads as a soap opera. The ultimate result is that through Esther’s bravery and cunning the decree to execute the Jews is reversed, the Jews are saved,

Mordecai is elevated to the position of Prime Minister and Haman – well, the evil he would propagate comes back to haunt him. All this happens because of the courage and self-sacrifice of one woman living in a culture where the value of a woman was defined in terms of her beauty. And the Jews celebrate their salvation with a festival, which to this day they celebrate every spring – the Festival of Purim. Purim means “lots”, implying that divine fate has been with them.

What is interesting about this story is that God is never directly mentioned in the story. Why? God is implied through the actions of the characters of Queen Vashti and Esther and Mordecai. Why would this story end up in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible? Could it be that the writer is reminding us that whenever and wherever we are living, even if it is in a tumultuous, dangerous, life diminishing situation/culture, our God is present in and with the people who put their trust in God and are willing to courageously speak the truth to power? Do you believe that your life has purpose and that you are called for such a time as this to give voice through your actions to the presence of the living God? Perhaps all of us together and individually are here for a reason – for such a time as this.