

(2ND Sunday of Advent)

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Second Sunday of Advent

What time is it? If you are a child of the 1950s, you might answer "It's Howdy Doody Time!"

What time is it? The late comedian and constant Presidential candidate, Pat Paulson, once announced on Laugh-In or was it the Smother's Brothers Show, that while people had been urging him to once again run for President, the time was not right. As he continued his comedic speech, his watch alarm started beeping. He then announced the time finally come and with balloons falling around him and patriotic music playing, he announced the time was now right and he would be running!

What time is it? In 1973, Dr. John sang that he was in the right place but it must have been the wrong time.

I think Esther might have grooved on this Dr. John song. She found herself in the right place as queen to save her people, but she was worried it was the wrong time to speak up because it could cost her life to do so.

Her cousin, Mordecai, had to convince her that she was in the right place and it was the right time, reminding her that even if she kept silent, fearful of her own fate, that just because she was the queen living in the palace, she would not escape death anymore than all her other people. Mordecai then says, perhaps you have come to this moment in this position "for just such a time as this"?

Perhaps Mordecai's words about her own potential fate got through to her? Whatever the reason, Esther realized that she was in the right place at the right time to make a difference, so risking her own life she spoke "truth to power" on behalf of her people who had no voice and were vulnerable to the whims and wishes of those who held all the political power over them.

"Though it is against the law," Esther says, "I will go to the king" and speak out on behalf of my people, and "if I perish, I perish."

Wow! Would you have the courage to speak that way to a powerful political figure on behalf of others if you knew that to do so would cost you your life? Would you have the courage and determination of Esther and risk your own life and reputation for someone else?

What time is it? Well, some might say it is "the most wonderful time of the year" - Christmas. But it really isn't Christmas time, yet. Right now, it is Advent, of course.

Advent is a time when we are called to watch for the in-breaking of God's love anew into our world. We keep looking for a future time, in some dramatic fashion for another God moment to arrive as it did long ago in Bethlehem.

But what if the time is now and we, like Esther, are in the right place as the right people to speak and act as God's messengers in a broken, hurting, violent, war torn world?

What if we are the ones who were put in this exact position for a "time such as this" to challenge the powers-that-be to act justly, compassionately, and mercifully for towards the immigrant, the refugee, the hungry, those seeking health care, the poor and outcast?

What if we are the ones, like Esther, who were put in the position we are in here in this small village of Cambridge in our small congregation to help save God's people in our own community, school and area?

What if we, like Esther, realized that Mordecai was right, if we remain silent in the face of injustices and violence to others, it will eventually affect us too.

We often quote the one whose birth we celebrate when as an adult, he spoke out saying: "If you save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life, you will save it." Or "When you did it to the least of these, you did it to me too."

For his speaking out, challenging the powers-that-be, Jesus lost his life, being tortured and killed on the cross, but in doing so, saved us. In his life, through his death and by his resurrection, we find the faith and courage to risk our own lives for others.

If God's light and love does not shine in and through us in this time and in this place, in and through whom will it shine? Or as the rabbinic sage Hillel the Elder famously said, "...If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?"

Now is the time for the Advent of God, right here in this place.

As followers of the babe born in Bethlehem, we have a calling to speak out, speak up, and act as if that birth actually made a difference in our lives and in our world.

Rabbi A.Y. Kook said: "I don't speak because I have the power to speak; I speak (and act) because I don't have the power to remain silent (and sit on the sidelines of life.)"

In this time, in this world, in this state, in our nation, in our community, in our church, in our lives and by our words and actions - perhaps we were indeed, like Esther, created for a "time such as this"?

And if we perish, we perish, so be it, but how can we not at least try to make a difference now?

Building the Bridge From the Prophets to Esther

Over the past Sundays, we have been hearing from the Prophets Micah, Isaiah and Habakkuk. All spoke on behalf of God. The message they delivered warned the corrupt, greedy, and abusive political leaders and government officials about their failure to serve all God's people with love, compassion, empathy, mercy and justice. Because of their failure in these positions of power and leadership, Jerusalem would be destroyed, their kingdoms would fall, and they along with their people would be carted off into slavery to live in exile serving the Babylonians and Assyrians.

All that came true. This is known as the Second Exile Period, the first Exile Period being when the Hebrew people lived in Egypt.

As happened before, an exodus occurred. The Israelites were allowed to return home, but not all did. Some discovered they enjoyed living in Babylon and stayed. This is where we pick up the story of Esther.

I would guess more than a few of you have not read the book of Esther. It is a unique book in the Old Testament. It was one of the latest additions to the Hebrew Scriptures for various reasons, the big one being that it is the only book in the Bible not to mention God or prayer.

Esther was written about a 100 years after the Babylonian Exile. It tells the story of the remaining Jews who are living in a community in the Persian capital city of Susa.

The main characters in the story are:

- Esther: who is a beautiful, young virgin orphaned,
- Mordecai: her cousin who helps care for her,
- King Ahasuerus who is described as a greedy, corrupt, ego maniac, control freak who loves only his money and women.
- Haman: the king's chief of staff of sorts, Haman is a conniving, corrupt, evil person who is always seeking his own sense of self-serving power by doing the king's bidding.

As the story of Esther unfolds, we learn that the king throws an elaborate extravagant banquet at his palace to show off his "greatness" as king. It lasts 180 days. In a state of drunkenness on wine and his own ego, he orders his wife, Queen Vashti, to accompany so he can show off her beauty to everyone. She refuses. He is outraged and publicly embarrassed by her refusal. He fears, as do other men in the kingdom, that all the women will begin to speak up for themselves and refuse to do what their husbands want. So he draws up a new law, decreeing that all men will be masters of their homes and women must obey them.

King Ahasuerus decides he needs a new queen. He orders the most beautiful, young virgins from throughout his kingdom to be brought to him, and in a beauty pageant sort of selection process, he will select his new queen. Esther represents her community, but she hides her Jewish identity. She is selected by the king to be his new queen.

In the meantime, Mordecai overhears two guards plotting to murder the king, tells his cousin, Queen Esther about the plot. She in turn tells the king, who rewards Mordecai with favorable status.

In the next twist, Haman, who is not a Persian himself, but an Agagite who are descendants of the Canaanites, is elevated to the "chief of staff" to the king or the second highest position of power. Haman, drunk on his own ego and maniacal ways, orders everyone to bow to him. Mordecai, sees Haman for the evil, twisted political leader he really is, and refuses.

Haman is enraged. Discovering that Mordecai is Jewish, he persuades the king to order a royal decree for the extermination of all the Jewish people. The king does.

Mordecai convinces Esther that she must convince the king to reverse his decree by revealing her true identity - and that she was elevated to her position "for such a time such as this." Esther is hesitant, for in doing so, even as queen, speaking truth to power, could cost her her very life. Still, she says - "If I perish, I perish".

In a new twist, Esther with Mordecai's help, throws a banquet for the king and Haman when she will reveal her true identity. Haman, leaves the banquet and in a drunken rage, orders that Mordecai is to be impaled on a giant stake the next morning. That night the king can't sleep and has his chronicles read to him. He remembers that Mordecai had saved his life. In the morning, instead of executing Mordecai, the king orders Haman to parade Mordecai on horseback through the city telling everyone of the wonderful deed he done and to honor and praise him.

Learning that Haman had ordered Mordecai's execution, the king orders Haman to be executed in the same manner.

While the king cannot reverse his original decree, he does order that Mordecai, Esther and their Jewish community can destroy all who plotted to kill them.

Esther, in finding the courage to step forward and risk her life for her people, saves them.

Mordecai is now elevated by the king to the second in command.

The Jewish community celebrates with a feast which is known as Purim. Pur being the dice used to determine the date of the Jewish peoples execution by the king's decree. Purim is celebrated in someways like Mardi Gras. Purim is in March of 2019. The story is told with much liveliness and feasting, laughter and celebration.

But again, no where in the story of Esther is God mentioned. It is suggested by some that we as listeners are to pay close attention to the story to see where God's activity is present and visible, guiding the decisions and lives of Esther and Mordecai.

While not your typical Advent story - perhaps it is meant to be shared with us for "a time such as this"?

This morning, we tell a portion of the story in chapter 4:1-17, as Mordecai comes to Esther encouraging her to reveal her true identity and save her people.