

For Such a Time as This

*Sermon delivered by Rev. Alexandra Lusak, Moderator
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Romans 5: 1 – 5

Esther 3: 12 - 4: 17

Esther was an outsider. Orphaned by the death of her parents, adopted and raised by a devoted older cousin, she had grown into young womanhood in a strange land far from the country of her birth. She was a Jewish teenager growing toward adulthood in the Persian metropolis of Susa, one of the most important cities in the ancient near East, which was located at the site of the present-day city of Shush, in west-central Iran near the border between Iran and Iraq.

As an orphan, a young woman, and a Jew, Esther was a person at risk. To use a term which has gained currency in contemporary parlance despite its being insensitively pejorative and psychologically bruising, she was an alien. But she was also fortunate because she was conscientiously protected by Mordecai, a devoted member of her extended family, in whose care she resided. She was also careful to engage in the activities of her daily life without drawing attention to herself. As the storyteller informs us, “Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell.” In other words, like so many contemporary young migrant youth—think DACA recipients brought to the U.S. by their parents as children—her actual identity was not known to the people among whom she was living. Given that circumstance, I cannot help but imagine that Esther might have experienced some of the same fear and sense of vulnerability that so many of her present-day contemporaries are experiencing. Furthermore, also like the DACA dreamers, although she was young, she would have had to be quite strong and resilient to have endured and flourished despite all that she had lost and left behind.

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt,
But still, like dust, I'll rise.**

Of course, since the Book of Esther is a story that focuses on a young woman, even the Biblical author, whoever he may be, was unable to resist the temptation to describe the main character by highlighting physical beauty as her ticket to liberation. And, after the author has provided some intimate detail about the cosmetic preparations afforded to those designated to audition for roles as King Ahasuerus's sex partners, (no #MeToo in this story) we then learn something about how a supremely powerful man who could have anything or anyone he wanted was able with complete impunity to objectify and use women as if they were pieces of property, trying each one out until he found the one he favored. The story tells us that Esther was that favored one, ultimately being crowned queen and rising to a whole new level of power and influence.

But, of course, this is where the story gets really interesting, because, for some strange and unstated reason, King Ahasueras then decided to promote a self-focused, mean-spirited, conniving courtier whose name was Haman to the most senior post among his many influential advisors—something like making him chief of staff or awarding him a seat on the National Security Council—and then demanded fawning loyalty to Haman from all who would be serving with him. The plot thickens when Esther’s parental protector, Mordecai, unlike all of the other courtiers, chooses to engage in non-violent resistance, refusing to bow down to Haman in response to the king’s command. As a result, Haman, with whom a couple of other courtiers conspire, hatches a plan not only to eliminate Mordecai but to inflict a pogrom of collective punishment on all of the Jewish residents in the kingdom. Playing to the king’s outsize ego and need to be master of all as well as to his love of wealth, Haman then concocts an “us against them” scenario, insinuating that the Jewish residents of Ahasueras’s kingdom are a threat to national security. And when there’s threat to national security, extreme measures are frequently the response.

Esther 3:12 - 4:17:

3¹² *Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman’s orders to the king’s satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Xerxes himself and sealed with his own ring.*

¹³ *Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.*

¹⁴ *A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.*

¹⁵ *The couriers went out, spurred on by the king’s command, and the edict was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered.*

4¹ *When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.*

² *But he went only as far as the king’s gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

⁴ *When Esther’s eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of his sackcloth, but he would not accept them.*

⁵ *Then Esther summoned Hathak, one of the king’s eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.*

⁶ *So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate.*

⁷ *Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews.*

⁸ *He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.*

⁹ *Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said.*

¹⁰ *Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, ¹¹ “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”*

¹² *When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, ¹³ he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. ¹⁴ For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

¹⁵ *Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶ “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”*

¹⁷ *So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.*

There’s a great deal more to the Esther story beyond what we have just heard, but I want to focus our attention for just a moment on the dialogue that takes place between Esther and Mordecai and the remarkable process of radicalization that transforms Esther. At the outset of her story, she is a vulnerable young outsider who has experienced tragic loss, heartache, and the very real fear of being fully known for who she is. Then, because she was valued for her appearance and her sexuality, she attained a powerful position, which brought with its status and privilege. She seemingly has it all yet remained very aware of and complicit in the power imbalance within which she functioned. But then a crisis erupted. The king, who held supreme power over her and over all of the people in his realm, was about to commit genocide. So, Esther had to make a choice. At first, in her very real humanness, she wavered, fearfully aware of what the price of her decision could be. Nevertheless, Mordecai, who loved her enough not to let her off the hook, said to her, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

In response to that message and drawing on the spiritual wisdom that was her finest attribute, she gathered in community with a company of women for a time of fasting and prayerful discernment. Summoning her courage, Esther made the decision to become an advocate and activist, willing to step out of her comfort zone, even at the risk of her life. Taking the initiative, she went to speak to the king and then continued to work on behalf of her people to ensure their safety and freedom, equality, and justice. Through the process of her remarkable and redemptive radicalization, Esther rediscovered and reclaimed her identity as a strong, wise, and heroic Jewish woman, living a life filled with meaning and purpose as she participated in *tikkun olam*, the healing of the world.

*Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise*

*Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I rise, I rise, I rise**

It has always been puzzling to me that the story of Esther is rarely the subject of a Christian sermon because, in my view, it offers an example of what it can mean to a wounded world and to the vitality of faith communities of all kinds when we, as people of faith, rise to the challenge posed by evil and summon the courage, as Esther did, to step out of our comfort zones, taking the redemptive risk of becoming advocates for freedom, justice, and equality. I view the strength, wisdom, and hope personified in the story of Esther as a clarion call from the God of justice.

Sisters and brothers, we live in a world where tumult and turmoil erupt every day. The values we hold dear are under attack, and the lives of people around the corner and around the world are becoming more fragile every day. The planet that is our home is increasingly polluted and less and less hospitable. It is time for us to rediscover and reclaim the faith we share. It is time for us to make a choice to engage in faith-fueled activism.

Indeed, perhaps you and I have been called to faith in our living, loving God,

“for just such a time as this”.

* From “*Still I Rise*” by Maya Angelou