Queen Esther and the Urgency of Now.

Esther 4: 10-14; Matthew 5: 13-16.

The story of Esther is one of the most famous in the world, and the book of Esther is read aloud and celebrated every year at the Jewish feast of Purim. One highly unusual thing about the book is that God's name is not mentioned once. The king's name 190 times, God zero. But an important meaning of the book is that the Unseen Hand of God works behind the scenes with ordinary humans like us.

It has a bit of everything: beauty pageants, a befuddled and dim-witted king, a malevolent Prime Minister pulling the strings behind the scenes, a devoted uncle and a beautiful young Jewish maiden who becomes Queen and risks her life to save her Jewish people.

On one level it's like a melodrama, like the old silent movies. The heroes and villains are clearly identified, the handsome young, blond-haired hero, the villain with slicked back black hair and a carefully trimmed and waxed mustache which he twirls at just the right moments. Every year at Purim an Esther play is put on and the audience cheers and jeers. If our younger folk put it on, I can already begin to imagine what our cast would look like. You may as well as we go along. I've got one juicy roll picked out for David Grose.

I

I want to begin the story later in the story at its most climactic moment, the one you heard in our reading for today. Scene Three. Esther is now Queen. The King, egged on by his evil Prime Minister, has ordered a decree to "kill, destroy and annihilate" all the Jews, young and old, in the Persian kingdom. Esther's uncle, Mordecai has heard of the decree and pleads with his niece to go to the king and plead with him to withdraw the decree. The king does not know she is Jewish. She draws back, knowing that she is subject to death if she enters the king's chamber uninvited.

Now here is what Mordecai said to her:

> "Do not think you shall escape the king's palace any better than the rest of the Jews. If you keep silence, help will come for another quarter, but you and your father's house shall perish."

And then he added these immortal words,

> "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this". Or, in another translation, "come to your royal position for such a time as this."

I've heard these stirring words used before. Have you? We have thought perhaps about certain leaders with those words. But his call to Esther is not a call to exert power, as the words are sometimes used, but to risk her life for others.

I love the reverence of the uncle when he said, “Perhaps”. He would not claim to know the mind of God perfectly. But he did know his God worked like that. Mark Twain is quoted as saying that history does not repeat itself, but sometimes it rhymes. It rhymes a lot in the Bible.

We might call that moment, “the urgency of now.” We all have such moments. The Greeks had two words for time. The first was “*chronos”*, tick-tock time, clock time. The other was “*kairos*”, times of special opportunity, significant time. We know both kinds of times, the hum drum minutes on clocks, days on calendars, but we also know those unusual, uncommon times of making decisions that will change the rest of your life— “with this ring I thee wed”—times when you have a special time of opportunity to help another or help a whole community. Kairos time. Queen Esther faced a *kairos* moment. What would she do?

II

So let’s return to the beginning of the story.

Scene One. The Great Queen Hunt.

The king of Persia has thrown a great feast, a party lasting 180 days, half a year of non-stop partying. On the seventh day the king who is described as “merry with wine”, or “sloshed”, commands his wife, Queen Vashti, to come

parade her beauty and dance naked for the guests. She, one of the Bible's first feminists, refused to be exploited and said No to the king.

The king is upset and calls in his advisors to ask what he should do. They agree that the queen's refusal is not just an insult to the king but also threatens to undermine the institution of marriage and unravel the fabric of society itself. How can society stand if wives disobey their husbands?!

So the king has Queen Vashti banished, and most probably, behind the scenes, put to death. This is what happens too often in history when women defy authority.

To secure the new queen, he sets up The Great Queen Hunt. His assistants go through the land to find the most beautiful young women. The finalists would spend a year at the king's private spa beautifying themselves even more. Then the king would choose among them the next queen. The mother of all reality shows.

The one he chooses is Esther, a young Jewish maiden, though he at the time does not know she is a Jew.

Esther is an orphan who has been raised by her uncle Mordecai, who has brought her up, in good Jewish tradition, as his own daughter.

Mordecai has a government position at the king's gate. One day he overheard a plot to overthrow the king. He had this plot reported to the king and

thus saved the king's life — though the king did not know it was Mordecai who uncovered the plot.

Scene Two

Enter Haman, the Prime Minister. If this were a silent movie, the piano music would turn ominous, and Haman would appear dressed in black, twirling his mustache. When the Esther story is read during Purim to the adults and children, every time Haman's name is read the children lead the boos and jeers and noise makers to drown out his name.

But Haman is playing for real. One day as he passes through the King's Gate, Mordecai does not bow down to him. The reason is more than personal, it is theological. A Jew bows only to God. This infuriates Haman who resolves to get rid not only of Mordecai but also to exterminate all the Jews in the land.

The scene turns dark with human evil, a kind of evil too much present in our world and nation today. He goes to the king and says,

> "There are certain people scattered throughout the kingdom. Their laws and customs are different than everybody else's, and they do not keep the king's law. They are dangerous to the kingdom. It does not profit the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, they should be destroyed"

The words bring chills.

It has been an accusation made against the Jews all their history, culminating in the Holocaust. That is how genocides happen. We can hear echoes today in public words about immigrants: they are “vermin”, they are “poisoning our blood”, they are murderers and rapists, they eat dogs and cats. We must get rid of them.

The king who was putty in anybody’s hand who flattered him, or created a figment of threat in his mind, said to Haman, “Do as you wish to these people.” The king signed the decree put into his hand. It was the authorization,

> “…to destroy, kill and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children in one day….”

Now back to *Scene Three,* where we began.

When Mordecai heard of the decree, he tore his clothes, put on sack cloth and ashes and went through the city crying out loudly and bitterly. Esther heard of her uncle’s behavior, but did not know of the decree. Though she was queen, she did not rule!

She sent new clothes to him and begged him to stop. He sent back a copy of the king’s decree and asked her to go to the king and intercede for her people.

She replied that anyone who entered the king’s chambers uninvited could be put to death. She had not been invited to the king’s chambers in 30 days.

And Mordecai responded with the words you have heard: “Do not think you will escape the king’s palace any better than the rest of the Jews….Who knows, perhaps you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this.”

To this point in in the story, Esther had been undistinguished except for her beauty. Beauty is a wonderful thing, but it can have its disadvantages. There’s a character in a Frederick Buechner novel, Mrs. Schroeder. He writes,

“The main trouble with Mrs. Schroeder was that she was so beautiful.”

She was so pretty she didn’t have to do anything in life to have friends or be successful except to be pretty. In Buechner’s words, “She never learned to be kind and generous and unselfish because she never had to.”

Until now Esther had never needed to be anything but beautiful. But Uncle Mordecai had raised her in stories and moral virtues of the Jewish faith; what would she do in this time of crisis. It is in times of crisis that our deepest values are displayed.

So, she said to her uncle: Go gather the Jews in the city, ask them to fast and pray for me. Then I will go uninvited to the king. “If I perish, I perish.”

The story races to its dramatic ending. The king received her and said he would grant any request she made. She asked to dine with him and Haman. That day Haman had just passed by Mordecai at the King’s Gate, and Mordecai had once again refused to bow to him! Filled with fury, he went to his wife and told

her how badly he had been treated by this impudent Jew. She told him exactly what he wanted to hear: Build a gallows 50 cubits high and ask the king's permission to execute Mordecai upon it. 50 cubits?! Noah's ark was only 30 cubits high! A gallows the size of an Ark! As preposterous as the size of Haman's ego. He licked his lips at the thought of it.

Meanwhile the king was having trouble sleeping. Sometimes that's good. The wine no longer worked, and Ambien had not yet been invented. He asked his servants to bring him the King's Chronicles, compiled by his secretary, reading material sure to put him to sleep. But as he read he discovered that it was Mordecai who had reported the assassination plot which had saved his life!

The next day the king asked Haman, "How would you honor someone if you wanted to do so in the most glorious way? Haman, of course, was thinking the king had HIM in mind. Haman said, "Put the king's ring on him and have a great parade through the city so everyone can honor him!

The king said, "Great! Prepare such a parade for Mordecai the Jew who sits at the King's Gate!"

Mordecai?! Haman was Mortified! Now he had to prepare a ticker tape parade for Mordecai!

Scene Four: The Reckoning

Now to the lunch Queen Esther had asked for with the king and Haman. Esther now made her request the king had promised to grant. For the first time revealing the truth that she was a Jew, she said:

"My people and I are sold to be destroyed, to be killed and annihilated."

The king replied dimwittedly—after all, he had signed the decree—"Who would presume to do this? And where is he?!" The Queen replied, "Sitting right across from you at the table."

The story reaches its dramatic end. Haman is executed on the very gallows he built for Mordecai! Mordecai is raised to a high position in the king's court. And Esther, the Jewish maiden who became queen saved her people!

History is not as neat as this story, nor are our lives. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize novelist who spent years imprisoned in a Soviet Gulag, said that the line between good and evil passes not only through states and classes and political parties, but also through every human heart. And he added that these lines shift.

So everyday day we choose. Daily we choose between truth and falsehood, right and wrong, between love and un-love. And every day God's Unseen Hand is guiding us to make a difference in someone's life, in the life of our community and even nation—even our lives. How might God be prompting you these days? You may say, I can't make such a difference, but you can. The smallest thing can

make a difference, begin a turn in your own life. People today speak of “the exhausted majority” in our nation. But we can rise from our exhaustion.

Last week the choir opened worship with Harry Emerson Fosdick’s great hymn:

God of grace and God of glory, on your people pour your power;

Crown your ancient Church’s story, bring its bud to glorious flower.

Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,

for the facing of this hour

Thank you Esther. Here we come!

Benediction

In the Purim celebration, as the book of Esther is read, this prayer is said at the end. May it be our Benediction.

Praised are You, O God of life,

whose will it is to end all strife,

whose word still hallows Israel’s soul,

who bade us read Queen Esther’s scroll,

because her courage and her will

give us the strength of spirit still,

strengthen us to keep your ways,

and help us live to sing your praise.