

For Such a Time as This
Esther 4:4-17
11/2/08

Monday night we all were waiting for the ninth inning, paying attention to every pitch, wondering if the rain was going to slack off or turn to snow, wondering if they were going to get enough innings in to make an official game. Then the game was suspended and we all tried to be patient until the rain ended and the field dried. But it was Wednesday night before it finally all came together. The weather was cold but clear, the fans were gathered, the players were ready and the game was won. There are times when circumstances are not favorable and other times when things just seem to come together. The Phillies took full advantage of their opportunity when they had it and they came out champions. The story of Esther is like this and it has much to teach us as the Church, about our circumstances and position in the kingdom of God.

Esther was a Jewish girl who had been chosen by King Xerxes of Persia to be his new queen. Her cousin Mordecai had raised her since she was a child because her parents had died. Mordecai had gotten on the bad side of a man named Haman who was the highest ranked nobleman of King Xerxes' court. Haman convinced King Xerxes to issue an order to destroy all the Jews living throughout the kingdom of Persia because of his hatred of Mordecai. But Xerxes didn't know that his queen Esther, was Jewish, or that Mordecai, who earlier had saved the king's life, was Esther's cousin.

When Mordecai learned that Haman had convinced the king to decree the destruction of the Jews, he and all the Jews living in Susa went into mourning and put on sackcloth and so forth. This is where the story picks up that Tina read for us earlier. When Esther heard that Mordecai was in mourning, she sent one of the king's eunuchs to find out why, and Mordecai told her of the plot and asked her to go to the king to beg for mercy. But the king had a law that no one could approach him without being summoned and Esther had not been summoned to the king in a month. When she told Mordecai this, he said, "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 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 royal position for such a time as this?"

So Esther asked all the Jews in Susa to fast for her for 3 days. Then she went before the king and he held out the scepter to her, showing that she was welcomed in his presence and asked her what she wanted. The story goes on that she invited the king and Haman to a banquet, they came, she asked them to come again the next night and they came again, and then she told the king her request. In **chapter 7, verses 3 and 4** she said to the king, "If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life – this is my petition. And spare my people – this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated." The king asked who has dared to do such a thing and Esther named Haman. The king ordered Haman killed and gave his estate to Esther who handed it over to Mordecai. When the king found out that Mordecai was Esther's cousin, he gave Mordecai his signet ring which then gave Mordecai authority to communicate in the king's name. He could write orders, seal them with the king's signet ring, and it was as if the order was coming directly from the king.

So Esther asks the king to do something to keep the Jews from being destroyed. The king told Esther and Mordecai to write something up in his name and send it out to all the empire. He couldn't stop the first order because it was a law that, once an order was given in the king's name, it couldn't be changed. So instead he gave the Jews the right to assemble and protect themselves and to destroy anyone who attacked them on the day that had been set aside for their slaughter. The Jews rejoiced at this and celebrated, and in chapter 8, verse 17 it says that "many people of other nationalities became Jews because fear of the Jews had seized them."

The first thing I want to point out from this story is that Haman would have hated Mordecai and the Jews regardless of whether Esther was queen or not. Haman wanted to be worshiped. He wanted honor and fame and esteem. He hated anyone who denied him that. Mordecai got on his bad side because he

refused to bow down to Haman. There is an enemy of the kingdom of God. According to **1 Peter 5:8**, this enemy, the devil, “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” One of the temptations he presented to Jesus was to give him all the splendor and authority of all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would worship him. We have an enemy and he is active in this world. He tempts people to sin, opposes the righteous, stirs up trouble and division and confusion, and is called the father of lies. He is fully committed to opposing the kingdom of God. He hates us because we worship God and not him.

But, in the story of Esther, we see that Esther the Jew was in a privileged position. This is the second thing I want to bring out. She had found favor with the king. She had been named as queen and, when the threat from Haman came, she was found to be in a position to intervene for her people. We, the Church, are in a privileged position. We are the Bride of Christ. We are the people that are in a favored position and can approach the King of Kings. We will not be turned away or rejected by Him. In **Hebrews 4:16** we are told “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” In **Isaiah 41:9** God says to His people, “I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you. So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” Our God works on our behalf.

The third thing I see here is that Esther wasn't in that privileged position just for her own sake. She was there so that she could help those who had been sold for destruction and annihilation. She had come to the throne for such a time as this, a time of desperate need, a time when people's lives were at stake, a time when evil rose up to destroy the people of God. Do we live in such a time? In this country at this time, we enjoy so much religious freedom that it's easy to forget or just not think about the fact, that the religious freedom we do have is the exception and not the norm. In many countries it is illegal to practice Christianity. There are several countries where it is a capital offense to convert to Christianity.

Right now in several states in India, Christians are being forced out of their homes, their houses and churches are being burned, and they are being killed. Recently Eastern Mennonite Missions sent out a request for people to be praying for the situation in India because of workers whose lives and property are in danger. These are our brothers and sisters and they have been sold for destruction and annihilation.

What about right here in our own communities? How is our enemy seeking destruction and annihilation right here? Someone in our congregation has a coworker whose 12 year old son was recently shot. There is fear, anger, and a desire for vengeance in this family. They are struggling with the shock that violence could come so close, and how to deal with all the emotions without there being further violence and destruction. In the Village there has been an increase in gun violence recently. There is fear about going outside the house after dark. There are several in our congregation who daily walk in recovery, practicing the disciplines needed to keep from going back to that which enslaves and destroys. We all have anxieties about our finances. What will the future hold? Will our jobs stay secure? Will we be able to afford to pay our bills? Some have already suffered significant financial loss because of the current economic crisis. We can see the enemy at work even among us can't we?

The fourth thing I see is that when Esther found out that there was a threat against the Jews, she had to be reminded by Mordecai that she was in a position to do something about it. We need to remind ourselves that we are in a position of favor and privilege as the people of God. We can go before the King. We are promised access. But more than that, we are promised that our God is and will continue to be with us in all situations. But Esther had to take the risk and go before the king and do the asking. For her it was a real risk to go before the king when he had not sent for her. But God was already working in Xerxes heart, already directing his thoughts to be favorable to the Jews. God works through all the circumstances that we have no control over. He goes before us. For us, we can go in full confidence knowing that God hears us and works on behalf of His people.

But there may be other risks. People working in India now have their lives and property at risk. I sent out an email asking for prayer for the Vellaramala's recently and someone emailed me back, asking me to remove them from the list because they are in a sensitive country and it is too dangerous for them to be receiving emails of an obviously Christian nature. It may be risky for us as a congregation to confront the violence in this community. As we seek to walk faithfully in the vision God has given us to seek reconciliation in this community, we most likely will face opposition from our enemy. We are told in **Ephesians 6:12-13, 18** "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground...with this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints." Yes, we have an enemy and he's active and working so therefore we are to keep on going before the king, praying for all the saints including ourselves. There are risks and very real dangers and we may very well face suffering and loss. But our God is with us in all this. The apostle Paul was a man who knew about risk, danger and suffering. He writes in **2 Corinthians 4:8-10** "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." The Church of Jesus Christ might suffer loss but she is never destroyed.

There is another story in the Old Testament, in **Numbers 32**, where the tribes of Israel were preparing to invade the promised land. They had wandered through the desert for 40 years because of unbelief and now they were finally ready to go in and claim the land God had promised them. Two tribes, Reuben and Dan, came to Moses and asked that they be given land on the east side of the Jordan River, because they had lots of livestock and that land would be good for raising livestock. Moses got upset because, 40 years previously, it had been the refusal of the people to cross the Jordan and enter the land that had resulted in the 40 years in the desert. Now Reuben and Dan were saying they didn't want

to cross the Jordan. But Reuben and Dan want to secure a place for their families and animals first and then they will help the other tribes. So the tribes of Reuben and Dan tell Moses in **Numbers 32:17, 18** “We are ready to arm ourselves and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place...We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance.” These two tribes had found a good land east of the Jordan and were willing to accept that land as their inheritance. Reuben and Dan were in a privileged position and could have simply settled where they were and said, “Good luck to the rest of you. Come visit when you can.” But they did not forget that the other tribes still had a land to invade and conquer. They were willing to go out in front and take the biggest risk in order to see their fellow tribes safely settled in the land. They fought for years on behalf of Israel before finally returning to their homes east of the Jordan. They looked out for those who had not yet settled in a safe place. They helped their fellow tribes overcome their enemies rather than simply dwelling safely in their own land.

Over 60 years ago, there were Mennonites living here in the city who were concerned for this neighborhood. Harry and Viva Reedel were Mennonites living in Oxford Village who began teaching Bible stories to children and families in the Village because there wasn't a strong church presence in this neighborhood. They began transporting children to Norris Square Mennonite Church which was 8 miles away. Eventually too many children were involved and it was discerned that there needed to be a church building right here in this area. In 1949 this building was built. For many years Mennonites from Lancaster County would come in and minister in this neighborhood on Sundays, teaching Sunday School, preaching, and doing outreach, and then return back to Lancaster for the week. I was talking to Pastor Peter's mother last night and she remembers coming to Oxford Circle with her youth group when she was a teenager and being involved in outreach in this neighborhood. We are all here today as a congregation because there were people from Lancaster County who were not content to stay in Lancaster, attending established congregations there, but who had a heart for the people of this community who had not yet come into their inheritance in the

Kingdom of God. They were willing to take a risk and come and get involved in a community that was not really their own because there was no strong church presence here. They made this community their own and made the people here their own people. That is our legacy as a congregation and we are now carrying that legacy forth as we also seek to reach out in this community, throughout this city, and prayerfully, around the world.

We are in a privileged position. We are free to approach God's throne with boldness, knowing that He welcomes us to come and present our requests before Him. We know that God hears our prayers. But our responsibility is to pray, not only for our own needs, but also for those who have been sold for annihilation and destruction. We are to take risks on behalf of those who have not yet come into their spiritual inheritance. We are not to shrink back because there is a price to pay. Esther was afraid but she still went before the king. Reuben and Dan knew there was a price to be paid, but they still left their families behind and were the first wave of the invasion into the promised land. We are paying a price to move forward in reaching out to this community. But we do so on behalf of those who are not yet safe. Others came before us and sacrificed so that we might be here today. Now we need to be faithful in continuing to build on the foundation that has been laid for us.

We all have fears. We all are aware of the ways the enemy has come against us personally. We all have suffered at his hands at one time or another. Many of us have battles we are engaged in right now. Maybe you feel like you are the one who has been sold for annihilation and destruction and are in need of help. Maybe you're afraid to go before the King. Maybe like Esther, you are afraid He won't extend the scepter to you and spare your life. I know there have been times I've been afraid God would say no to my prayers and He would reject me if I came before Him. But that's a lie. No one who comes before God with a sincere and open heart will be turned away.

As the worship team comes now and as we move into a time of prayer, let us remember that Jesus Christ came, suffered, died and rose again, for such a time as this, that we might openly and boldly come before the throne of grace

and present our requests to God and that we might go out into our communities and our world boldly proclaiming the gospel and working for the Kingdom of God because our God goes before us and is with us. **Hebrews 4:14-16** says “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” In this time of prayer, let’s pray for one another.