

May 22, 2011

Rev. John C. Minihan
Esther 4:1-17

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

“And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

From time to time folks leave interesting articles and clippings on my desk – for which I’m grateful.

This week someone left a story from *USA TODAY*, in which a church, down in Virginia, was left with a very difficult decision to make.

Let me quote from the opening paragraphs of the article...

When officials at Vienna Presbyterian Church decided to acknowledge the church’s failures in handling reports of sexual abuse by a youth ministries director, they thought it might upset some in the congregation.

What surprised them was the admonishment from the church’s insurance company. And it wasn’t the church’s lapses in responding to the abuse a half-decade ago that bothered the insurer – it was the church’s plan to *admit* those lapses and *apologize* to the victims.

You see, the insurance company had advised the church essentially to say nothing – admit nothing – and make no statements of any kind that could be construed as an admission of guilt or liability.

The church, on the other hand, felt differently!

Just a day after receiving the insurer’s counsel, the Session sent out a letter acknowledging the pain of those who suffered and confessing that the church’s response in the aftermath wasn’t adequate.

In his sermon the following Sunday, the pastor even added that the church wouldn’t hide behind lawyers – but that Jesus had said, “...*the truth will set us free.*”

It’s an interesting dilemma.

On the one hand, the church wants to own up to what happened under its watch and seek forgiveness and reconciliation and peace.

Themes that are at the heart of the Christian Faith.

On the other hand, by candidly admitting the abuse, the church opened itself up to potential lawsuits which could threaten to shut its doors, as well as put the insurance company at financial risk.

In between, of course, is all the pressure – trying to decide what to do!

Well, by going forward against their insurance company's wishes and admitting the abuse, the Vienna Presbyterian Church made their choice.

And, it was the right choice.

It wasn't easy.

But, it was right!

Which again reminds us that the "right" thing very often isn't the easy thing...

And that while we don't always get to choose the situations and circumstances that are thrust upon us – we always get to choose how we will respond to God's unique call in our lives.

Now, this is something Esther would have understood.

You see, Esther found herself in a situation she clearly didn't want to be in.

But, when push came to shove, she recognized God's unique call in her life and that God had placed her in a particular time and in a particular place to accomplish a particular purpose.

Now, the Book of Esther is one of the most fascinating accounts in all of Scripture.

For one thing, it's the only book of the Bible that doesn't mention God.

I don't know if you knew that – or if that was even possible...

To have a book in the Bible that doesn't mention God or refer to God in any way.

And yet, while God's not openly mentioned, His Presence is clearly felt throughout Esther's life – which begins as a concubine in the harem of King Xerxes – and ends up in the royal palace itself where God uses Esther's influence as queen to save His people.

You see, the story itself starts out with King Xerxes of Persia – who's kind of a megalomaniac -- deposing his wife because she wouldn't degrade herself and prance around for him and his drunken guests at a party.

Later on Xerxes begins the search for a “new” queen. And, out of all the beautiful young women in his kingdom...

A kingdom that stretched from India all the way to Africa and included everything in between...

A young Jewish girl named Esther was chosen.

Actually Esther wasn't her real name. Her Jewish name was actually Hadassah. And, after she'd been orphaned, she'd been raised by her cousin Mordecai – who served as sort of a surrogate father.

So, Esther's chosen as Xerxes' new queen – queen of the whole Medo-Persian empire – which really isn't as noble as it sounds.

You see, Xerxes was a man of big appetites and passions and kept a stable of women at his disposal in addition to Esther.

So, Esther was really more of a “trophy” wife than anything else.

But, she plays the part well.

Now, in the meantime, her cousin/surrogate father Mordecai, has a dust-up with Xerxes' prime minister – a man known as Haman.

And, Haman is so incensed at Mordecai's insolence, that he manipulates Xerxes into issuing a decree that on a certain day in a certain month, all the Jews in his kingdom would be destroyed.

In fact, Haman's hatred is so great, he even offers to bankroll the entire operation himself – so long as he can get rid of Mordecai and the rest of these troublesome Jews.

Now, Esther – whose identity as a Jew has been concealed up to this point – is completely unaware of all this.

But, when the orders are posted throughout the kingdom, Mordecai begins mourning quite loudly and quite publically. And, when word reaches Esther, she sends messengers to Mordecai to find out what's wrong...

Which is where we pick up the story today.

You see, the focal point of chapter 4, is the exchange that takes place between Esther and Mordecai.

It's not a direct exchange...

Messages are sent back and forth.

But, what it boils down to is that Mordecai informs Esther of Haman's plans to destroy their people and he begs Esther to go to the king and beg for mercy.

Now, surprisingly Esther's initial response isn't quite what Mordecai had hoped for.

She doesn't exactly "jump" at the opportunity – at least not at first!

You see, in the message she sends back to Mordecai, she reminds him that the penalty for seeking an uninvited audience with the king – was death – even for her!

But, Mordecai reminds her that as a Jew she's gonna die anyway!

So inaction was not an option!

Silence was unthinkable!

Mordecai even indicates that if she won't do it, deliverance will still come!

They themselves would perish – but deliverance for the Jews would come!

Now, Mordecai doesn't say "how"

But, the implication is clear!

God will find a way!

If not through Esther – then through somebody else!

You see, this is part of the "mystery" of God's workings in the world.

And, to some extent, we have to become a little more comfortable with "mystery" – a little more comfortable sometimes just saying, "I don't know."

We have to learn to live by faith that God – in His Providence – always comes through!

Maybe not in the ways we expect.

Maybe not in the ways we prefer.

But, God is dependable! And, God can always be counted on to act in our best interests!

And yet, at the same time, if we've got to become more comfortable with "*mystery*" – we've also got to become more open to the "*possibility*" of God using "us" somehow – someway – to accomplish His purposes.

And, this is what Mordecai suggests to Esther!

That God may have put her there in this exact place and in this exact time for this exact purpose!

“And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this.”

Of course, the very idea would have blown Esther away!

Sometimes it does us as well!

Earlier this week I was driving back from a lunch meeting in New Albany kinda feeling sorry for myself.

Another minister and I had been discussing everything that’s gone on recently in the Presbyterian Church...

The complete abandonment of Biblical authority...

The disregard of Scripture...

The reshaping of the moral landscape where basically now “anything goes!”

All the stuff we talked about last week in worship. And, basically I was having a pity party there by myself as I drove home.

“Why do I have to deal with all this stuff?” I wondered.

“Why couldn’t I have been a minister – say – in the 50’s – where all the men wore fedoras and the women donned pearls and everyone went to church on Sunday and the biggest problem anybody faced was whether to put marshmallows in the jello salad or not?”

Of course, I’m simplifying things greatly – but you know what I mean.

“How come I’ve gotta live in such troubled times?” I wondered.

Well, I didn't get my answer.

But, that's when I began thinking about Esther.

In fact, Esther *may have been* my answer.

You see, Esther would've rather not found herself in the position she was in either.

She knew the risks and, quite frankly, they terrified her!

It would have been much easier to go on just being the queen and showing up at royal functions and dazzling the King's dignitaries with her beauty and her charm.

Instead, she's got to come to grips with the idea that "*she*" was put in a specific place for a specific purpose – even if she didn't understand it all.

It's like what Phil Yancey says in his book, "*Disappointment With God.*"

Yancey says:

In the natural world, human beings only receive about 30 percent of the light spectrum. (Honeybees and homing pigeons can, for example, detect ultraviolet light waves invisible to us.) In the supernatural realm, our vision is even more limited, and we get only occasional glimpses of that unseen world.

In other words – we don't always see the Big Picture!

And, Mordecai's request that Esther consider the possibility that she was put where she was for such a time as this – is, in essence, a challenge to step out in faith!

A challenge that admittedly carried no guarantees.

And, Esther knows this!

But, so do we!

We don't choose the times...

We don't choose the circumstances...

We don't even choose the results and how everything will turn out.

Like Esther, we simply choose "how" we will respond when God calls us to act!

In Michael Lewis' book, *The Blind Side*, there's a scene in which the main character, Michael Oher is being tutored by his adopted father, Sean Tuohy.

If you've read the book or perhaps, seen the movie, you know that Michael Oher, was pretty much an abandoned street child whom the Tuohy family took in.

After taking him in, they discover Michael was an incredibly gifted athlete and they go to work helping him make up for his academic deficiencies so he can graduate high school and play football in college.

Well, in this particular scene, Sean Tuohy is trying to explain Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*, which he translates in football terms...

Something that Michael Oher would be familiar with.

But, the part that doesn't make sense to Oher is why the 600 who made up the Light Brigade would willingly charge into battle knowing they were doomed and would ultimately die.

Tuohy tries explaining it in terms of duty and honor and courage – especially that part about, "*Theirs not to make reply – Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die...*" as they charge into the valley of Death.

But, even he admits there's a fine line between bravery and stupidity...

Between mindless obedience to authority and stepping out in faith for something that really matters.

You see, the charge into the Valley of Death – risking everything -- only makes sense if we know and are known by the Author of Life!

As one man says:

**...there will always be some uncertainty in God’s claim upon our lives!
There will always be unknowns in God’s work in this world. It is the very nature of faith and trust in God that He calls us to take steps when we don’t have all the details nailed down.**

But, what we’ve got to remember in all the uncertainty is also the possibility that God has raised “you” and “me” up for such a time as this!

That God has put us here for a purpose...

And that all the events of our lives have been leading up to the moment when we finally say “Yes!” to God – and begin discovering what that purpose is!

It isn’t easy!

Genuine faith never is!

I mean, think about it from Esther’s perspective.

Taken from her home...

Deposited into the Royal harem...

Pampered and dolled up for an entire year for a one-night stand in which her performance in the sack is little more than an “audition” for the king...

Just so she could be in the right place at the right time and given the opportunity to do the right thing!

It’s certainly not how Esther would’ve written the script if she’d gotten a chance.

And, the script of our own lives may not be what we've envisioned either.

But, we don't choose the times or the circumstances.

We only choose how we will respond when God calls!

Irena Sendler is probably the most courageous woman you've never heard of.

She died three years ago, at the age of 98. And, if it weren't for four high school girls who decided to research her life and do a project on her, she'd still be pretty much unknown today.

But, Irena Sendler was responsible for saving 2,500 Jewish children from Nazi death camps back in World War II.

You see, Irena recognized quicker than most the intentions of the Nazi's as they began herding Jews into the Warsaw ghetto in Poland.

As a senior administrator in the Warsaw Social Welfare Department, she began by forging documents -- registering Jews under Christian names, so they could receive food and financial assistance.

Irena took the further step of identifying all the recipients as typhus and tuberculosis victims, knowing the Germans would keep their distance and wouldn't investigate.

But, that wasn't enough.

Irena joined the underground resistance and began smuggling food and medicine and clothing into the Warsaw ghetto -- where 5,000 people were dying each month of disease and starvation.

And, it was then that she realized that all she was doing was merely prolonging the suffering of the people trapped there.

So, Irena took a different tact.

She began concentrating her efforts on the children.

“When the war started,” she said, “all of Poland was drowning in a sea of blood. But most of all, it affected the Jewish nation. And within that nation, it was the children who suffered most. That’s why we needed to give our hearts to them.”

In 1942, Irena began smuggling Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto and placing them in Polish Christian homes where their identities, as Jews, would be concealed from the Nazis.

Infants were sedated and carried out in the bottom of tool-boxes.

Others were smuggled out in burlap sacks, laundry bags or suitcases...

Sometimes in boxes or body bags or in coffins.

Older children pretended to be ill and were taken out in ambulances...

While others were ushered to safety through sewers or underground tunnels.

One boy told of nervously waiting by a gate in the darkness while a German sentry patrolled nearby.

After the soldier had passed, the boy had been instructed to count to 30. Then he made a mad dash to the middle of the street, where a manhole cover suddenly opened up and he was whisked away!

Once out, the children were given false names and documents and placed with foster families or in Catholic convents or orphanages for their protection.

The hardest part, Irena said, was not actually smuggling the children out, but convincing their parents that this was their children’s only hope for survival.

Sometimes she’d leave empty-handed only to return the next day hoping to try again and discover the whole family – children and all – had been shipped to the death camps at Treblinka.

Through it all, Irena meticulously recorded the names of each child and buried them in glass jars under an apple tree in a friend’s yard.

In 1943 Irena was arrested and tortured, but she refused to divulge any information about the operation.

During one interrogation they broke Irena's feet and legs – leaving her permanently crippled.

She was eventually sentenced to the firing squad, only to be rescued by a Gestapo officer had been bribed to include her name among those executed and help her escape.

She went into hiding, but continued working for the rescue of the children.

After the war, Irena unearthed her jars and began trying to reunite the children with their families.

For most of the children there was no family left.

Some were adopted into Polish families.

Others were sent to Israel.

And, Irena quietly resumed her work as a social worker – leading mostly an anonymous life – until her story was rediscovered by those four Kansas schoolgirls.

Irena Sendler has been, of course, hailed as a hero!

In 1965 she received the Israeli Yad Veshem Medal for the Righteous Among the Nations.

And, in 2007 she was reportedly nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

But, Irena didn't do what she did for the recognition.

And, she certainly never considered herself a hero.

In fact, Irena said, *“I only did what was normal. I could have done more.”*

But, she did what she could --- “For such a time as this!”

Like I said...

We don’t get to choose the times or the circumstances in which we live.

We only get to choose how we will respond to God unique calling in our own lives.

God has placed each of us in a specific time – in a specific place – for a specific purpose.

And, whether or not we respond to that calling will certainly not deter God’s plans or purposes in any way.

God will always find a way!

Just as He found a way to bring Life out of death on the cross...

And, redemption to lost sinners through Jesus Christ, His Son.

The question that remains today is whether you’re willing to consider how God is calling you to share this with others in your own life...

And, to be His agents of Truth and Reconciliation in a broken world...

For such a time as this!

Amen.