

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 19, 2008
Lessons: Esther 4:1-17 and Luke 19:1-10

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

The villain Haman has contrived a plot to destroy the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. Mordecai knows he must act to save his people, and the one person positioned to intervene with the king is the Jewish woman, Esther, who has risen to become queen, replacing the independent-minded Queen Vashti the king learned he not control. Under the law, standing up to her husband the king could cost Esther her life. Mordecai, however, makes it equally clear from faith's viewpoint that trying to keep herself secure by failing to stand up for her people will not save Esther. "Do not think," he warns, "that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish." Mordecai believes Israel's future depends upon God, not one human being, but he believes also that God has put Esther in place for Israel's sake. If she tries to save her own life, she will lose it. Bravely, the queen replies, ". . . I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

It's a powerful story, retold each year at the feast of Purim, and as we know only too well, the threat of genocide has followed the Jews through history, manifesting itself most horribly in the Holocaust, but also working its cruelty and slaughter through pogroms and the Inquisition with its "acts of faith." With a terrible irony, the church's *auto de fe* means an *act of faith*, which in practice was preceded by torture and followed by burning.

This morning, I call your attention to the view of life expressed in Mordecai's persuasion of Esther to overcome her fears and go forward with an attempt she alone can make to intervene with the king and save her people. It is a way for faith to look at life that transforms life's situations, great or small, good or bad. "Who knows?" he asks the queen. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Purpose – Mordecai sees what may be God's hidden purpose in Esther's rise to such an exceptional position in the empire. How did a Jewish girl grow up to be queen of Persia? Mordecai asks not *How?* but *Why?* What opportunity lies within Esther's perilous choice? Whose hand offers her this singular possibility of preventing the slaughter?

My sermon turns upon one suggestion. Mordecai's view of life is not reserved for such dire choices as that Esther must make or for such extreme dangers as Haman's plot for

genocide. This view of life can transform any situation you or I encounter on even the most ordinary of days. By nature, we ask ourselves of a new situation in life, “What’s in it for me?” That question need not be one of aggressive greed looking to snatch something away from others but may be merely a matter of wondering whether to expect an easy time or a hard one, support or opposition, pleasure or pain. Mordecai suggests asking instead, “What’s in it for God?”

Mordecai knows Esther could be tempted to see her special position as queen to be her personal saving grace, her exceptional haven of safety. Surely the king would protect his own queen from Haman’s genocide. So, when life provides me with an opportunity or a shelter, is it all about me, or might there be something within that grace that challenges me to use what I am given in a different way suggested by the question, “What’s in it for God?”? Put better, that question would be, “What is God giving me the opportunity to do in this situation that might serve God’s own purpose?”

I expect Bridgeton and Cumberland County to have a long, hard winter regardless of the mildness or severity of the weather. God did not bring about our economic crisis; human greed has done that. Many people across the nation and around the world are going to suffer for the cunning greed of some and the naive greed of others. Fear is pervasive, and everyone may be asking, “How can I best survive this crisis as it worsens?” although survival has very different meanings, depending upon the wealth or poverty of the person asking the question. Should we not ask also, “What has God positioned us to do in this crisis?”? People are going to need help, and the poor will be hit hardest, as usual. Others besides will be in distress, especially (for example) many students hoping to go college and people in their 60's hoping to retire. But there could be other problems as well. Hard economic times breed anger and resentment, and human nature looks for scapegoats. So, our own situation might not be so different from Esther’s. Think about it. What groups in our society might be chosen as the objects of rage as people’s frustration and resentment build? Who in our own communities is most vulnerable? As people lose their jobs, who will be easiest and safest to blame?

Jesus insists that my neighbor is not a type I can dismiss as one of “them,” an outsider I am free to hate or regard with disgust, but always a real person loved by God who must be regarded with respect and treated with compassion. Neither our rituals nor our doctrines matter to God if we do not love our neighbors.

The larger issue here, that concerns good times as well as bad, is *redemption*. I have come to believe God works in many ways to move people toward moments of redemption when the bad effects of the past can be turned in new and better directions. These *redemptive moments* may come from new self-insight, from receiving respect where scorn was anticipated, from welcome where rejection was all but assured. Look at what Jesus does

for the hated collaborator Zacchaeus. By inviting himself to the man's house for a meal, Jesus accords Zacchaeus an honor that sets the crowd to grumbling. Encouraged by this unexpected grace, the man exhibits a change of heart he makes specific by promising to compensate anyone he has cheated. Jesus offers him an opportunity for redemption, and Zacchaeus takes it gladly. Until that moment, the collaborator has been trapped by his past and condemned to live out his life in the way he has chosen, because no one is willing to give him the opportunity to change. Then, Jesus comes along and confronts Zacchaeus with a redemptive moment, and what God wants becomes the new reality of the man's life. "Thy will be done on earth."

To understand that prayer and start to live it, we need to learn from Jesus that God's will is *redemptive* rather than *punitive*. The people in the crowd would like to see Zacchaeus get what he deserves. Jesus wants to see the man get what God wants for him. That distinction is crucial but hard for us to accept because it goes against our desire to see people who anger or disgust us destroyed or at least punished severely, but God has hopes that remain hidden from our eyes until we are moved to adopt the viewpoint of redemptive grace and catch a glimpse of the way God works in people's lives.

How do we handle painful experiences? How do we deal with disappointments, irritations or setbacks? Is there opportunity in what looked like a wrong turn or a delay? More than a few times, I have been interrupted in the course of an a day already too busy, only to find that the interruption had more to do with ministry and with the gospel of Jesus Christ than I would have found in the work I had planned. Sure, sometimes the unexpected can prove good for me personally (what we call good luck), but don't I also need to look beyond my own unforeseen blessing to the need of my neighbor for grace? Who knows if I have not been brought to such a moment for some purpose greater than my own security or advantage? I'm not saying God set everything up, any more than I would say God brought about our economic crisis or inspired Haman to seek the slaughter of the Jewish people. But God provides opportunities for our lives to matter to more than us and our own families. We can become more consciously aware of hidden possibilities by asking ourselves what God might want from such and such a situation and by keeping an eye peeled for redemptive moments. Even when we can't imagine what good could come from a situation, we can pray, asking to be led to serve a better outcome than we see as possible. Then we will at least be open to the daily possibility that life might prove to have significance beyond our plans, comforts, and stresses. *Thy will be done on earth.* Amen.