



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

For Such a Time as This

Romans 12:1-8

Esther 4:5-14

October 14, 2018 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost

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What a time we are living in, my friends. My intention when I chose today's scriptures was to talk about how we are each called to use our God-given gifts in the service of and in communion with others for the uplifting of the whole world and the spreading of God's love in the world. We are called to put ourselves out there – to make ourselves a living sacrifice, as Paul puts it. The offering we are called to give goes way beyond the checks we put in the offering plate. We are called to recognize that all that we have, and all that we are, comes from the gracious hand of God. In gratitude, we are called to give our whole selves to the service of God.

Somewhere along the way, though, I lost sight of that. Reaching for inspiration for this sermon, I googled "For such a time as this"- the most well-known words from the book of Esther, and a whole slew of quotes came up about the time we are living in. According to the wisdom of the internet: We live in times of high stress. We live in a society that likes to kick people while they are down. We live in a time of transition, an uneasy era which is likely to endure for the rest of the century. We live in a time of terror. We live in oppressive times. We live in very, very dangerous times.

And here I am, standing before you, trying to figure out how to preach a message of hope. Because the message of our scriptures – Old and New Testament – and the message that we, as Christians, have come to know best

through the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – is ultimately a message of hope within the deepest and darkest despair imaginable. A message of life in the face of death, of redemption in the face of sin, of reconciliation in the face of chasms of division.

Those who know me – even a little – know that I am not a person given to despair. I am very optimistic – bordering on being a Pollyanna. I have heard the words “She bounces like Tigger” being used to describe me. Yeah, that happened two days ago. But if I am going to be really honest here, my friends, I am tired. I am tired of the constant barrage of negativity, violence, hatred, outright lies, and anger that seem to be the status quo in this moment.

One more quote from my Google adventure: “Strange times are these in which we live when old and young are taught falsehoods and the person that dares to tell them the truth is called at once a lunatic and a fool.” Plato – in the 5th Century BCE – reminds me that this is not the first time humanity has existed in painful, frightening, or uncertain times.

And that brings me back to Esther – a story that is set in the same time that Plato lamented. The story is set in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire under the rule of King Ahasuerus. Not too long before this takes place the temple had been destroyed and the Jews had been taken from their land to live as captives in Babylon. After 70 years of captivity, good King Cyrus had been moved to return some of the people back to their homeland, but, after two generations of assimilation with Persian culture, some chose to stay. The story opens in a relative time of peace for the Jewish people, but – as is generally the case – there are always some who cannot tolerate difference, and the peace was short-lived.

It is apparent, from the beginning, that King Ahasuerus is easily swayed by the opinions of others. In the first chapter, he demands that his wife, Queen

Vashti come display her beauty in front of the men at his celebration. Like a spoiled child with his playthings, he must prove that he has the best. When she refuses to come, he is angry, but banishing her was not initially his idea. It is his ministers who tell him that she must be gotten rid of, lest the women throughout the kingdom stop following the orders of their husbands! In fact, it is even the king's servants who suggest how he might find a new wife when he decides he's lonely and regrets being swayed to send her away.

Their plan? Have a big beauty contest. Bring the fairest young women from the 127 provinces to the palace for the king to select his new queen. Among the maidens brought to the palace is our heroine - Esther. She is an orphan who was raised by her relative, Mordecai, one of the leaders of the Jewish people in exile. When they come to take her to the palace, Mordecai insightfully instructs her not to reveal that she is Jewish. After a year-long process of beauty treatments, Esther is deemed the fairest of them all, the king finds her pleasing, and she is chosen to become his queen.

While Mordecai does not reveal his relationship to the new queen, he frequents the palace gates to hear news of Esther's well-being. One day he overhears two men plotting to murder the king and he quickly sends word to Esther, who reveals the plot to the king in the name of Mordecai. The plotters are caught and executed, and Mordecai's name and deed are written in the king's Book of Chronicles.

In the midst of all of this, we are introduced to the villain of the story, Haman. Haman likes to be important. He gets himself elevated to the right-hand of the king, but it's not enough for him to know that he is powerful and important. He has to be sure that everyone around him knows that he is powerful and important. So, he convinces Ahasuerus to order everyone to bow down

before Haman whenever they see him. Mordecai, as a devout Jew, refuses to do this, and Haman throws the mother of all hissy fits. He tells the king of a certain group of people whose very existence threatens all they hold dear. “There is a certain people,” he says, “scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction.” Haman’s hatred for Mordecai – as both a man honored by the king in the book of Chronicles, and as a man who refuses to bow down to him – turns into a call for genocide against a whole people.

This is where we come into the story with today’s scripture.

Esther 4:5-14

Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king’s gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king’s treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ‘All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the

king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.’ When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, ‘Do not think 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. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.’

For such a time as this, he says. Esther is queen, but she has never been more powerless. She was told to lie about who she was, brought into the king’s harem and subjected to a year’s worth of poking and prodding and lessons in how to arrange her whole existence to bring pleasure to the king. And, even after all of that, after being chosen from among hundreds of women to wed the king, she finds herself more alone than she has ever been. The king has not invited her into his presence for a month. She is in an incredibly vulnerable situation, and she is asked to put her safety on the line in order to rectify an injustice.

And she does it. But she doesn’t do it alone. Esther’s response to Mordecai’s plea is to request that he, “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:15)

She knows what the risks are. This king had banished the last queen because she didn’t come to his party. This king had issued an edict that all Jews be executed. And now, she was going to go before him, uninvited – potentially a

capital offense if he was not in a receptive mood – and reveal herself to be a Jew – also currently a capital offense. But she didn't do it alone. There is no explicit mention of God in the book of Esther. And yet, this verse is one of the places where I see God most clearly. Esther reaches out to her family in faith. She reaches out to the people of God in what seems a hopeless situation and she asks them to be with her in spirit. She asks them to pray with her and fast with her and hope with her. And then, bolstered by the knowledge that she was not alone, she approached Ahasuerus and ultimately saved the Jews and brought Haman to justice.

Just this morning, I read an article by Anne Lamott¹ outlining her plan to save the world. The plan: Show up with hope.

“You would almost have to be nuts,” she says, “to be filled with hope in a world so rife with hunger, hatred, climate change, pollution, and pestilence, let alone the self-destructive or severely annoying behavior of certain people, both famous and just down the hall, none of whom we will name by name.

Yet I have boundless hope, most of the time. Hope is a sometimes cranky optimism, trust, and confidence that those I love will be OK—that they will come through, whatever life holds in store. Hope is the belief that no matter how dire things look or how long rescue or healing takes, modern science in tandem with people's goodness and caring will boggle our minds, in the best way...through the workings of love, science, community, time, and what I dare to call grace—some elemental shift will occur and we will find we are semi-OK again. And even semi-OK can be a miracle.”

She goes on to say that the best way to be sure that hope is present in any situation is to bring it with you. “By showing up with hope to help others, I'm

¹ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/10/embark-essay-anne-lamott-hope-adversity-conflict-climate-change/>

guaranteed that hope is present. Then my own hope increases. By creating hope for others, I end up awash in the stuff.”

Personally, I would take it one step further and say that, not only are we called to create hope *for* others, but to create hope *with* others. That is what we are about as Christians. That is what we are about in this church.

Yesterday, I went down to the Habitat worksite in the Vine neighborhood, and several of us ended up having to leave because there was more help than could reasonably be employed. That’s hope. On Thursday, I gathered with other local clergy to continue our work on figuring out how we can be involved in supporting efforts to end homelessness in our community. That’s hope. This week, members of this congregation have tutored children at Edison school, taught adults to read, served a hot meal to people who are hungry, joined in around various tables and in various places to explore the story of faith, worked in the office supporting the ministries of this church, turned in pledge cards to promise to continue partnering with this church, and prayed, prayed, prayed for one another, for our community and for our world. This church has welcomed 3- and 4-year-olds who need a safe and secure place to learn, people trying to recover from addictions to alcohol or to food as a means of emotional support, musicians who need a place to create, boy scouts, and even bagpipers! Our Lovell Street entrance greeters guide people to the places where they can get the help and services they need every day – services that this church helps support through work at and donations to organizations such as Ministry with Community and Loaves and Fishes.

One of the things that I find exceptional about this church is that nearly every organization our outreach programs support is supported by time and effort rather than simply a check. The money that we spend on outreach is vital to keep

these programs going, but it is not the end, or even the biggest part of our involvement. We don't just send money. We also show up. We show up with hope. We show up knowing that we may not solve the problems of the world today, but we can feed someone who is hungry today. We can support someone's quest to learn today. We can love someone today, and we can offer a glimmer of hope today.

In two weeks, we dedicate our pledges for the 2019 budget year. The stewardship committee set a lofty goal this year – some would say an unreasonably lofty goal. I just call it hopeful. We want 100% participation. That's 263 pledge cards returned, representing 263 member households promising to partner in some way with this church to bring hope. The new pledge cards give you many ways of doing that. We recognize that not everyone has a stable enough financial situation to estimate what they will be able to put in the offering plate next year. If you can't pledge funds, then pledge time, pledge prayer, pledge your presence. After all, as we heard from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." (Romans 12:6-8)

We are not meant to do this life thing, this ministry thing, this hope thing alone. Esther could not face her seemingly hopeless situation alone. She needed the support of her community of faith. And with that support, with that prayer,

she did what she was called to do for such a time as that. I invite all of you to consider how we can partner with one another to do what we are called to do for such a time as this.

Amen.