

**August 22, 2021 | Summer Worship Service**

**TEXT: [Esther 3:5–7](#); [4:8–14](#); [5:12–14](#); [7:1–6](#)**

**TITLE: A Tale of Three Banquets – Esther | Part 3**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

The hinge of the book of Esther is found in chapter 4 and on that hinge swings a door of fate—one that will either open to a story of salvation and hope or one that will slam shut with the death of Esther, Mordecai and all the Jewish people. The gullible king Ahasuerus has been bamboozled by Haman to issue a decree calling for the destruction of all Jewish people living in his Persian kingdom. Mordecai tells Esther about the death decree and warns her that she won't be safe behind the palace walls if Haman's edict is allowed to stand. Then he says the famous words that have launched a thousand sermons: *Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.*

Mordecai needs Esther to act. Now, he could have shaped his request out of family loyalty saying, "Esther, I've raised you all these years like a father; do this out of respect for me." He could have tried to guilt her into action, saying, "Esther, after all I've done for you, will you do nothing now and let Haman destroy me?" Mordecai could have criticized her and coerced her into action, saying, "Has all your fancy clothes and harem jewels made you forget where you've come from? Don't think you can hide behind the palace walls." It is an interesting back and forth between this man and his one-time ward. Esther has to process the news of a proposed genocide right there on the spot. She knows the rules of the royal court and that no one is allowed to disturb the king unbidden. And she clearly sees that if she does anything like what Mordecai is proposing, it will be risky if not life-threatening for her.

But into this tense conversation, Mordecai subtly introduces the idea of God's hand being at work in the unfolding of this drama. The decree has been sent out; the door leading to a possible genocide has been opened. Where is God in all this? Perhaps, just perhaps, maybe Esther—the Jewish girl now queen of the realm—has been brought to high honor for just such a time as this?

It's at this moment in the story when preachers typically want you, as listeners, to stand beside Esther and ask "Have I been in a situation where an action from me could have changed things for the better?" They will remind you of others whose actions at the right time changed history: Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on that Montgomery bus, or Martin Luther King, the young pastor agreeing to lead the Montgomery bus boycott, or Nelson Mandela, stepping out of the doors of the Robben Island prison and into the presidential suite in Pretoria, South Africa. Or young people like Greta Thunberg, staging her school strike to protest climate change or Malala Yousafzai, breaking the silence around honor killings and the abuse of women.

God used each of those people in their particular moment of history to affect, if not change history. Yes, they acted bravely in such a time as they endured; but I'd wager that most of us are saying to ourselves "But I'm no Rosa, Martin, Nelson, Greta or

Malala. I'm a teacher, a social worker; I'm part of the staff of a non-profit, part of a faceless large corporation; I'm retired and just trying to pay my monthly bills; I've got a bad back; I hate public speaking; I don't have time to join another committee. Don't compare me to Esther—I'm happy to celebrate her courage, but I'm no Queen Esther."

That is how most of us react if invited to stand beside Esther and told to act boldly for such a time as this. That's why the next step in many sermons is to redefine what it means to act boldly—to shift the focus from one dramatic gesture to a thousand small deeds of faithfulness. For example, one preacher said that it's not like God is calling you to plop down a \$10,000 bill, but rather that you take that \$10,000 bill to the bank and cash it out for rolls of quarters. Then you go through life putting down 25 cents here and 50 cents there—listening to a neighbor instead of walking away, visiting a shaky old man in a nursing home, attending yet another committee meeting and accepting a task, or saying a prayer for someone who's struggling. Giving our life to God is actually lots of little deeds done for times like this. (Fred Craddock)

And yes, it's true that small acts of justice and kindness can change lives. Another preaching story tells of a World War II American pilot who was doing a bombing run over Kassel, Germany when his plane was hit with anti-aircraft shrapnel. It punctured his fuel tanks, but amazingly they didn't explode. The next day the repair crew found 11 unexploded shells in his fuel tank where if even one had gone off, he'd have been blown from the sky. When the shells were examined, none of them had an explosive charge. Instead in one they found a small rolled up piece of paper with a message written in Czech. Translated the note simply said, "This is all we can do for you now."

Speaking personally, I think it is important to lift up both types of faithful actions – the Czech resistance fighters creating blank bullets and the Good Samaritan doing small acts of kindness every day AND the dramatic examples of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and Greta Thunberg. A lot depends on where God has placed you in the first place. Maybe "for such a time as this" means listening to a co-worker who's having a rough day—or maybe it means taking the risk of turning in a whistle-blower report when the company that employs both you and your co-worker is doing unethical practices. Maybe "for such a time as this" is as simple as getting a vaccination shot or making sure to vote; or maybe it is helping set up a clinic in an underserved neighborhood or running for office yourself. Like Edmund Burke said a long time ago, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing." God calls us and places us where we are so that we might do something—small or large—to thwart the advance of evil.

But how do we know if now is the time to act and if our actions are truly righteous? That's where the story of Esther is so valuable – not because of the pivotal conversation between Mordecai and Esther, but because of the stark contrast between Esther and Haman. The actions of Haman are antithetical to the actions of faith. Haman is vain—so vain that he demands all people bow down to him; and when one person, Mordecai, refuses to do so, he plots the death of the entire Jewish race. He is cruel—casting lots in the first month of the year and decreeing that the genocide will occur in the last month of the year, so everyone has as much time as possible to bemoan their fate. He is

boastful—telling how only he and the king were invited to Queen Esther’s special banquet; and he is mean-spirited, somehow believing he will feel better about being at this banquet if he hangs Mordecai beforehand on a fifty cubit high gallows.

Those same options were all available to Esther. When Mordecai’s message came to her, she could have been vain, saying “I’m now the queen and can’t be bothered with my kinsman’s problems.” She could have been cruel, insisting that taking any action put herself at risk and thus wasn’t worth even considering. And she could have been mean-spirited, hiding away behind the palace walls while others suffered and died. But she didn’t act like Haman. She listened to another’s plea. She was persuaded to act, even if it was risky. And most importantly, she owned her true identity at last—accepting that she was a Jewish woman, a child of God. We see this most clearly when the climactic banquet scene happens and Esther finally puts her request before King Ahasuerus, saying: *Let my life be given me and the lives of my people—that is my request.*

Even since the fateful door swung open and Haman’s plot was revealed, Esther took charge. The girl raised by Mordecai became fully a queen who acted. She gave orders for her people to join her in a fast—to humble themselves that they might yet have hope. She planned two banquets to show her devotion to her husband before unveiling her mortal enemy. And when she made her request, it wasn’t for her alone but for all her people. It wasn’t an act of self-interest, but of justice for the meek and the oppressed.

The power behind the phrase “for such a time as this” is that it calls us to take a larger perspective on our life—to look beyond the immediate moment and imagine how this moment fits into a lifetime. When we raise our eyes to look at the broader horizon, we also raise our gaze off ourselves and see those who are beside us. That’s the power of Queen Esther as opposed to wicked Haman. That’s the perspective of small random acts of kindness, of acts of resistance during wartime, and acts of prophetic leadership against racism, sexism, and environmental degradation. Whatever is done is done for us and for those around us—people known and unknown, family and stranger, neighbor and distant refugee. In Christ we find our true identity—as descendants of Esther; redeemed disciples of Jesus like Peter, Thomas, and Mary Magdalene; and members of the global family of God placed right here for such a time as this.

So go ahead—stand beside Queen Esther. Let your requests be known to God and announced here in this world: *Let life be given to me and my people, all people—a life of justice and righteousness, of food, shelter, family, and peace.* It is for that message God has placed each of us where we are for such a time as this.

AMEN