

“People of the Time”

Reading: Esther 3:1-11, 4:1-17

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Probably the most famous line from the book of Esther is that phrase uttered by Mordecai in chapter 4: “for such a time as this.” “Who knows but that you have come to your position for such a time as this?” It’s a loaded statement. Mordecai is a wonderful theologian; he packs a lot of meaning in a few words. The book of Esther is famously known for being the only book in the Bible in which God is not mentioned, and the implication is that God is working in unseen ways to bring about His plan through all of these providential coincidences and improbable events. And so Mordecai lets his adopted daughter know that she has the opportunity to participate in something great, something unexpected, that has been orchestrated by God’s unseen hand. For such a time as this. But the choice is hers, he points out, and that’s the interesting thing. She can ignore the time and her place in it, and God’s unseen hand will accomplish what He wants anyway. Relief and deliverance for God’s people will arise from another place, Esther, if that’s what you want, but you were put here for this time.

It’s a very interesting story. The book of Esther reads something like a fairy tale, with a powerful king and his nationwide search for a new queen, with Esther’s humble and secret beginnings and then rise to queenhood, with a moustache-twirling villain named Haman who is unquestionably evil, and with wise old Mordecai guiding Esther to her greater destiny. It serves as an explanation for why the Jews celebrate the festival of Purim, which they still celebrate today, and is a celebration of their salvation from genocide in Persia. It’s a bit of an interruption to our larger story of the Bible and how God has been working with His people to redeem His fallen creation: last week we heard the story of how God brought His people out of their exile and began to replant them back in their home soil, but in the middle of that story we jump back into faraway lands and the adventures of the people who remained in exile. They may not be the central focus of the larger story, but they’re still a part of God’s story. God is present with them, even when He remains unseen.

And so we have this story full of intrigue and conspiracy and conflict. Everyone is plotting against everyone else, it seems, but of course the story is resolved by God’s silent planning and preparation. And as Mordecai perceives, the real conflict here is not ultimately between Haman and the Jews, because it’s a foregone conclusion how that story will end: God will save His people, and deliverance will arise from somewhere, because Haman’s plotting is not a surprise to God. The real conflict is within Esther. How will she respond? What will be her role in this drama? Will she play the potentially dangerous part God has made available to her on behalf of her people, or will she make the personally easy, safe choice? It’s a question of community: she has now been elevated to the royal household and is safe and comfortable, so will she remain rooted in the community of God’s people from which she comes? And it’s a question of time: will she recognize the importance of the events around her and her appointed place in them?

Many people have noted the different ways of looking at time: there is everyday time, the time measured by clocks as the seconds tick by and we follow our daily schedules; and then there is special time, time imbued with meaning, eventful time like holidays and special seasons and times of crisis or joy and dates you remember because they changed everything that followed. The biblical authors even noticed this sometimes in their choice of words, since Greek has two different words for time: *chronos* and *kairos*. Sometimes those two words can tease out that difference in meaning

between the two types of time. *Chronos* time can refer to everyday, normal time measured by seconds and minutes and hours, while *kairos* time can refer to meaningful time measured in holidays and anniversaries and seasons. And the question Mordecai is placing before Esther is whether she can tell the difference at this moment in her life: is this just another day for her, a day to go on living and doing whatever it is queens do with their time, or is this an appointed time in her life for her to take action on behalf of her people?

I've been a little bit time-challenged recently since I discovered a few weeks ago that wristwatches don't react well to being hit with a hammer. I was working at Five Loaf House and my hammer slipped and smacked into my watch, knocking out the pins that hold the wristband onto the watch itself, so I still have the watch but just haven't replaced the band yet. Most of the time it's not really a problem since there's usually a clock somewhere nearby, but still, Pastor Carey is probably getting tired of me asking her what time it is when her wristwatch happens to be the nearest clock.

Some people have trouble telling time. It's not easy to tell time on your own. Some minutes drag on, others fly past, and you can't necessarily tell what time it is without some sort of help. And this is the issue Mordecai is confronting Esther with: don't think for one second that you can continue happily oblivious to the time, because you, Esther, are a part of God's people, and this time is loaded with meaning for you and for all of us. For such a time as this. This is a special time, a time of consequence, an extraordinary time that will decide the future of many people. You might ignore the time, but you are not immune to it. Purim is still celebrated by Jews 2500 years later; it was a time loaded with significance. Esther made the right choice; she chose to do what she could, regardless of the cost, to bring her position and her actions in line with the work of salvation God was bringing into being for her people.

There are many themes running throughout the Bible, and one of the themes that Esther brings to the surface is that one of the characteristics of the people of God is that they are aware of the significance of the times because they are aware of the movement of God behind the scenes. There is no day, no hour, no moment in which God cannot work an act of salvation. There is no day, no hour, no moment in which God cannot position His people to be unexpected agents of that salvation. Day-to-day time becomes infused with meaning in the presence of God's people, because we are aware of the significance of daily choices and the potential eternal impact of every human life. For God's people, there ought not to be any *chronos* time; it should all be *kairos* time, special time, time loaded with potential, because there is no second in which we are simply killing time or filling time or waiting for something to happen. Every second contains the potential for glorifying God, for building His kingdom, for prayer, for acts of love, for witness to our hope in Christ, for growth and filling by the Spirit, for using our gifts to make God's creation a little more redeemed and beautiful. Even our hours of rest are significant among God's people: rest is a gift from God through which we can celebrate and trust in God's provision.

And it's important to emphasize that the *people* of God, plural, collectively, discern the importance of time. That's part of what Esther illustrates, that her awareness of "such a time as this" was connected to her awareness of God's people. In community together, we discern and pray for the movement of God in history. Together, we are acutely aware of the grand story of what God is doing in creation, because He has done new acts of creation in those who have claimed Christ as their Lord. God's people tell the story of what He has done for them, so they know that time is moving in a

direction toward God's ends. We know that we have the opportunity to join in that movement, to go in the direction of God's anointed time. But, like Mordecai told Esther, we also know that we don't have to do anything: God will tell His story one way or another, with or without us.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus warned those who "know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but...cannot interpret the signs of the times." He was confronted by those who were looking for miraculous signs to prove His authority, but they missed the larger meaning of their own times. What were the signs of the times that Jesus gave them instead? He fed the hungry, loved the downtrodden, forgave sinners, healed the sick, and proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God. He told His opponents that He would give them the sign of Jonah, meaning that just like Jonah spent three days inside the belly of a fish, Jesus would spend three days in the belly of the tomb and then rise again. Their sign would be that this Messiah would give His life for them. Would they be able to accept it? Would they realize their position for such a time as this? They did not, and God worked in spite of them.

Later in the New Testament, in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul talks about "when the times reach their fulfillment," the time in which God's plan that had been revealed progressively all throughout history and reached its high point in Jesus Christ will finally be complete, "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." God's people have a sense of the times. We see the unseen hand of God sculpting history in accordance with His grand plan, His great love song to the world that spurned Him. And so we have an awareness of the holiness of our time, whenever and wherever it may be. "Relief and deliverance will arise," Mordecai told Esther. Will *your* time tick and tock in rhythm with *God's* time? Will your time have the meaning it's meant to have?

How do we, as the latest generation of the community of God's people, make the most of our appointed time? Paul says later in Ephesians, "be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." The days are indeed evil, as Paul said, as Esther and Mordecai knew too well in their efforts against Haman. God's people face opposition and evil. The world is invested in its history of struggle against the Lord's will, and the people of God have often faced persecution or have wandered in exile. And so we must live wisely, making the most of every opportunity to live according to the Lord's will.

We must be people of prayer, together, consistently, in order to discern how God is moving in these days. We must be willing to take bold steps of self-sacrifice to model God's love and salvation for the people we encounter. We must live as those who know the importance and meaning of time and live wisely, honoring God's intent for us.



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