

**Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Livestream Adult Bible Class
May 16, 2021
Esther 4:1-17**

While the Xerxes and Haman share a drink to celebrate the issuing of the edict to kill all the Jewish people in the empire, Mordecai is consumed with fear and mourns his fate. However, God is at work, out of the mourning will come a plan and Queen Esther will be central to the fulfillment of that plan. In Esther 4 we come to one of the key questions of the book as Mordecai asks Esther to consider whether she may have come to her royal position “for such a time as this?”

Mordecai’s Mourning - Esther 4:1-3

Mordecai’s mourning is not the “stiff upper lip” style of grieving we are accustomed to in North America. Instead, it is loud, visible and public.

- The rending of garments, and the putting on of sack cloth and ashes are classic Hebrew mourning rituals. Throughout the Bible, such actions are the typical ways of expressing grief, lamentation, anguish, and distress; they symbolically identify with death itself through a process of dramatization. Typically these actions follow tragedy, but in this case the announcement of the impending slaughter is sufficient to cause Mordecai and the Jewish people to grieve openly. By setting aside his usual clothing Mordecai was also made ineligible to continue his work at the King’s Gate.
- Mordecai and the Jewish people also begin to fast. This is a common Old Testament practice in times of mourning or in times of fervent prayer. Here in the context of the book of Esther, the fasting is also to be seen as a sharp contrast to the levity and celebration in the palace itself. Chapter 4 includes 2 references to fasting likely in deliberate contrast to the two feasts of the king in Chapter 1.

Mordecai’s Plea - Esther 4:4-8

Word reaches Esther about Mordecai and she is in great distress. Clothes are sent and refused and finally one of the court officials Hathach is sent to talk to Mordecai on her behalf. Mordecai reveals the plot and sends Hathach back to Esther with a copy of the edict and a request for her to intervene with Xerxes to avoid the annihilation of the Jewish people. The Hebrew word translated as “annihilation” (NIV) is a very strong verb meaning nothing short of utter, complete and final destruction. A good English equivalent today would be genocide.

Esther’s Response - Esther 4:9-11

Esther is unsure if she will be able to intervene with any positive effect. No one comes into the king’s presence unless invited by the king and no one speaks to the king unless the gold scepter

is extended to ward him or her. To further complicate matters, it has been 30 days since Esther has even seen the king. Finally, entering into the king's presence to request clemency for the Jews would most likely require her to reveal her own heritage and risk her position in the kingdom.

All in all, the odds are heavily stacked against her. Nothing would indicate that an uninvited entrance into the throne room would go well. Persian law forbids it. The concealment of her identity complicates it. The impulsiveness of the king threatens it.

The Moment of Truth - Esther 4:12-14

Mordecai is undeterred by the politics of the palace! His request is urgent and whether she fully realizes it or not, Esther is in as much danger as all the Jews of the kingdom. She may die if she confronts the king; she will die if she does not. **“Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”** (Esther 4:14)

Mordecai suggests to Esther that she may very well not be in her current position by chance or accident. Perhaps there is something larger, something purposeful and providential, at work. Perhaps she wasn't gathered into the palace with all the other virgins by chance. Perhaps she didn't just happen to appeal to the king. Perhaps the fact that she, a Jew, is the queen at this particular point in time is not accidental at all. Perhaps God has placed her right where she is, in this very place, in this defining moment, so that she might be the means through which her people are delivered. Perhaps there is something larger at work than Agagite hatred and the fate of the lots; perhaps there is a deeper providential plan at work that has placed Esther in this fortuitous position, for just such a time as this.

Life for God's people today is full of similar moments, even though the stakes may not be anywhere near as high as they were for Esther. When we find ourselves in these moments the temptation is to focus primarily on how we can get out of the difficulty we are in. Instead, Mordecai's question lead us to ponder whether God has placed us exactly where we are at this defining moment—“for such a time as this”—and then ask how God might want to use us in that situation. That means that we need to ask ourselves, “Why might God have placed me in this neighborhood, with these neighbors, at this point in time?” “Why might God have placed me in this office, with these coworkers, during this season of this company's life and during these seasons of my colleagues' lives?” “Why might God have crossed my path with this person's path at this moment in time? How might he want to use me in her life?” “Why might God have placed us in this country, at this point in history, in the midst of these events? What would faithfulness to him look like here and now? What might he want to do with us and through us in our community, in our schools, in our businesses, in our churches, in our nation, and in our world?” “Why has God placed me exactly where he has me right now?”

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the

whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.” – Matthew 16:24-27

Esther’s Resolve - Esther 4:15-17

Even as it is to us, so also Mordecai’s word to Esther was the word of God. For the first time in the story Esther is the active person. Up to now, it has been Mordecai who took her to the court, Hegai who assisted her and the King who made her his wife. But now she acts:

¹⁵Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: ¹⁶“Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

One of the things people note as missing from Esther’s instruction is any reference to prayer. This is probably intentional. The author of the book omits religious language in order to heighten our awareness that it is indeed God who is working behind the scenes for the sake of his people. In the Old Testament world, fasting and prayer went together, so the first readers would have understood prayer to have been an essential response to the king’s decree.

From the perspective of the New Testament, this part of the story reminds us of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is one of the defining moments in his earthly ministry. As the fully human Son of God, he looked upon this in the same way anyone of us would look upon our arrest and unjust death. Yet, despite the temptation to avoid the cross he moves forward trusting the will of the Father. Despite his great sorrow, despite the excruciating pain before him, despite the fickle abandonment by his followers, despite the knowledge of certain death, Jesus did not retreat into self-protective avoidance. He did not cower in weakness. He did not opt for the path of least resistance. No, when Jesus faced his defining moment, having been called by God in the fullness of time for such a time as this, he responded with resolute conviction and courage, “Not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). With courage, he went to the cross, knowing that he would certainly perish, that there would be no golden scepter extended for his escape, and he did so knowing that, in his perishing, God would accomplish the deliverance of his people—a salvation much greater than the deliverance from the edict of Haman, a salvation from the judgments of sin, death, and evil.