



“For Such a Time as This”

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Ben Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On September 8, 2024, from Ester 4:1-17*

“Is there no Esther among you?” she pleaded, imploring people to act like the Jewish queen. Her name was Angelina Grimké, a Quaker abolitionist, who employed the story of Esther to encourage white women to join her in the fight against slavery. With an influential pamphlet in 1836, she argued that the sin of slavery would lead to the moral destruction of American society and urged white women of the South to risk their own lives, as Esther had done, to speak out against the evil institution and ensure the survival of their people. “Read the history of this Persian queen, it is full of instruction,” she wrote, “Is there no Esther among you?”

The story of Esther, which is celebrated during the Jewish festival of Purim, has a special place in American history. While some have argued the unifying biblical story for America is the Exodus from Egypt, the courage of a hero named Esther has also been a source of moral inspiration for Americans since the days of the colonies. After being taken to the palace of the Persian King Xerxes to become his queen, Esther heroically risked her life to save her people. At the urging of her cousin Mordecai, she acted to save her fellow Jews from the plot of the king’s wicked adviser, Haman. And to this day, whenever the name of “Haman” is read during the festival of Purim, Jews blot out his name by making loud noises with rattles and by writing Haman’s name on the sole of their shoes so they can stamp it out.

Americans have been drawn to the story of Esther because it is one of those few tales where the line between right and wrong, good and evil is clear. Haman planned to carry out a genocide against the Jewish people, but Mordecai discovered his plot and charged his cousin Esther to intervene with the King saying, “Perhaps you have come to royal power for just such a time as this.” We tend to turn to the story of Esther when we feel strongly that we know who our enemy is, which is why during the decade preceding the American Revolution, as colonists rebelled against British rule, journalists and preachers turned to Esther’s story to articulate their struggle for freedom. When the Stamp Act was repealed in 1765, the Boston Gazette declared that whoever had suggested George III enact such a law was “as great an enemy as was wicked Haman to the Jews.”

A century after the Revolution, Americans continued to draw on the story of Esther, no longer to oppose the enemy across the Atlantic, but the enemy within—the evil of slavery. Women like Harriet Beecher Stowe, saw Esther as a prototype for those women to use “rhetoric and logic to persuade” men of slavery’s immorality.



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The story of Esther inspired Stowe to write the bestselling book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a strong rebuke of Christians who viewed slavery as a providential institution and appealed to their religious sympathies to make them feel the scourge of slavery. A year later in 1853, Sojourner Truth quoted Esther in a pivotal women's rights rally in New York. Speaking above the hecklers who'd come to disrupt her speech she reminded her audience of Esther's bravery in risking her life as an oppressed woman, by coming before the king to proclaim there was a great wrong. Since our nation's inception, Americans have found great comfort, inspiration, and courage in Esther's pages.

Her character and conviction have been heralded by advocates of freedom and equal rights and employed to inspire their fellow citizens to rise and redeem their nation and sacrifice themselves for a better America. We too live at a time when the lines between right and wrong, good and evil seem clearer than ever--moment which feels fraught with a sense of urgency. Scholars, like our friend Bill Leonard, have described the time in which we live as a "Bonhoeffer moment" after the German pastor and theologian who bravely resisted the rise of the Nazis. However, long before Bonhoeffer was born, Jews and Christians called urgent times like these "Esther moments," and turned to her story to find the wisdom, faith, and the strength needed to face the coming hour.

Stories of heroes like Esther are always inspiring, but many of us wonder if we could ever act with such bravery and conviction. But while the name "Esther" means "star," she was not destined for royalty. In fact, Esther was an unlikely hero. As a mirror image of the people of Israel in exile, Esther was an orphan who grew up without the security or rootedness that comes from a stable family. She was rescued as a child by her cousin Mordecai, who became her foster parent and guardian. Yet even her time with Mordecai was short-lived as she was captured for the king's harem and taken from the safety of her home and thrust into the sexual and political intrigue of the Persian royal court. On top of all that she was a Jew living as a foreigner and outsider in the Persian culture, which was especially noticeable in the capital city of Susa. Esther was a resident alien living in exile as a member of a peculiar tribe that was unevenly tolerated by the Persian dynasty. Throughout it all, as an orphan, foster child, and consort, Esther often had to decide if and how much to reveal her Jewishness within the dominant Persian culture.

Early in the story Esther and Mordecai operate dialectically, as exiles in a foreign culture, at times hiding and other times revealing their Jewishness, projecting a hybrid identity. This required sophisticated judgments in each new circumstance. As the plot twists and turns, we realize the expression of their religious identity is not static, but always dynamic and responsive. As a queen, we might expect Esther to be aware of her own power and exercise it. Yet up to this point in chapter four, Esther had not identified herself as a player in the king's political circles.



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She has not weighed in on policy, or leveraged her position to maneuver others into power, or even strategized to use her body to produce a male heir, which was always the quickest path to power for women at court. She had made none of these power plays. However, when Mordecai realizes Haman's genocidal plot against the Jewish people and reads the King's decree that on an appointed day and time all the Jews would be killed, Mordecai senses the urgency of the moment and springs into action. He approaches Esther and demands that she must step into this particular historical moment, in this particular place, at this particular time. In fact, Mordecai contends that her personal history has led precisely to this moment. He believes she was born, raised, and rose to royal authority "for such a time as this," because, as a Jewish woman who is also a queen, Esther was in the unique position to influence the royal court and save her people.

There would be great peril for Esther. Regardless of her royal status, a woman could be executed simply for speaking in the presence of the king, and challenging a royal decree was considered suicidal. Make no mistake, Mordecai was asking Esther to risk certain death to speak out for the sake of her people. The stakes were extremely high, and Esther knew it, which is why after developing a plan she told Mordecai resolutely, "if I perish, I perish." In the end, she decided to sacrifice her life to save her community.

One of the reasons I love the story of Esther is that the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, hated it—more accurately, he despised it. He called Esther less worthy of being in the Bible than any other book in the Old Testament and put it on a list of books that "Judaize too much and contains much pagan naughtiness." To which we can say, "Be careful Martin, your antisemitism is showing." Luther may have been uniquely vitriolic, but he is far from alone among Esther's critics. Throughout history, Christian pastors and theologians have railed against the book of Esther for its lack of classic doctrines such as covenant and circumcision. They go on to detail the book's obliviousness to the practices of the Torah or Temple and its indifference to the themes of anticipating the Messiah, the gospel, or the church. But according to her critics, the primary evidence of Esther's defects is surely the book's failure to mention the name of God or the activity of divine providence in its pages. In fact, Esther is one of the only two books in the Bible that never mention God.

For generations, Christian scholars (nervous to protect God's power) have argued the reason God is never mentioned in Esther is not that God is not present in the story, but simply that God is invisible, hidden, and working behind the scenes. But the Rabbis offer us a different answer. They argue God's absence in the book of Esther is meant to remind us that there are times in our lives when (for whatever mysterious reason) God does not act decisively to part the Red Sea, send plagues to bring down an empire, rain down fire from heaven, shake the foundations of the earth, provide bread in the morning dew, heal the sick, or raise someone from the dead. In fact, this is the reality for most of our lives.



And what the Rabbis say is that God is not always going to intervene to save us, or our people and that Esther teaches us we cannot just sit around waiting on God to do something when it's up to us! The survival of our people is on our hands! We should not wait and pray for God to do something, when we have power as people made in the image of God to take responsibility, speak up, act out, and be the change we want to see in the world.

The story of Esther will not allow us to “pass the buck,” “punt the ball,” “shirk our duties,” “shift the burden,” “cop out,” “wash our hands,” or abdicate or abrogate our responsibility to God, the market, the government, or any other force we think will swoop in and do the work for us or save our people. We are agents who have already been called and equipped by the living God, which means that the task is ours, and ours alone. As the old quote that is loosely attributed to St. Augustine and St. Ignatius goes, we must “Pray as if everything depends on God, and act as if everything depends on us.” This is the message that must become our mantra as we face another “Esther moment” in the history of America and the church. The question remains, what does it look like for people of faith like us to be like Esther, to take responsibility, and to rise to the occasion for such a time as this?

“On December 7, 1941, a date which will live in infamy, the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan.” These famous words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared war on Japan after the attack on Pearl Harbor, catapulting our nation into WWII. One year later, on December 7, 1942, The Charlotte Observer ran a front-page story reporting that 125 people attended a meeting at Queens College to organize a new church in Myers Park. Our church was born in a time of war in the wake of a deadly attack on US soil that killed 2,403 people. Myers Park Baptist was founded by people who faced their own “Esther moment,” knew they’d been called “for such a time as this,” and responded. One of our founders, Judge Fred Helms recalled, “WWII was upsetting to all of us. Things were downright serious, and we concluded that religion ought to be downright serious too, that it was time to wake up and get going.” In response to the horror of war and holocaust they founded a community of faith. Other Baptist churches in town criticized the decision saying a war was no time to start a church, but Judge Helms replied, “We thought it was a good time because religion is the only ultimate antidote to the stupidity of war.”

There were already plenty of churches in Charlotte, but Myers Park Baptist was not organized (in their words) “with the intent of providing a more convenient place of worship; nor to the end that we might build a church at the expense of other congregations; nether was it that we might point with pride to what we had done. We were organized because certain people became possessed of a dream to meet the needs of the community as they had never been met before, a church that was free from the rigid dogma, fundamentalism, bigotry, and barbarism that characterized so much of religion in the South.”



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Our forebearers were acutely aware of the ways traditional churches had harmed and excluded people, so they decided to build a place where people could come and be their authentic selves, where questions were encouraged, where following Jesus was more important than doctrine or denominational beliefs—a true place for people to find beloved community.

The world is still at war. Americans are more divided than ever before. Economic disparity is at an all-time high. Democracy is on the brink. It feels as if we could be one election away from a fascist dictatorship. And the church in America is in rapid decline. Do we still believe that religion is the only ultimate antidote to the stupidity of war? Less than 47% of Americans belong to a house of worship. Both participation and giving are down nationwide. 65% of churches have seen a decline in attendance and contributions since the Covid-19 pandemic, that have not returned. In Gary, Indiana, for example, there are 67,000 residents and 250 empty churches. Experts predict that 30% of churches in the US, upwards of 100,000 congregations, will close in the next three years. What if the answer to the “Esther moment” we are facing is the same as our founders—to build and rebuild, to found and re-found, to form and reform this church as an antidote to the madness of our world. What if each of us have been called “for such a time as this” to roll up our sleeves and get to work making this church into the beacon of life and love in a world of death and destruction?

Martin Luther King Jr. had his own version of the phrase “for such a time as this.” He called it “the fierce urgency of now.” We could easily be overwhelmed by the weight of the present moment, but we could also think of it as an opportunity instead of a burden. “For such a time as this,” and “the fierce urgency of now,” could also be translated and claimed in another way as “This is our time!” I know it may take hope and faith to believe it, but if we cannot believe it, we will never be able to seize it. This is our time Myers Park. This is our time for love and liberation. This is our time for inclusivity, community, spirituality, and justice. This is our time to build and rebuild. This is our time to shake off the dust of the pandemic and rise from the ashes. This is the time to put away all the old grievances and division and clasp our hands together in peace for the work we have ahead of us.

This is the time to forgive and move forward. This is the time to lay down our burdens and surrender the shackles of tradition and journey together into a new horizon. I know the task is daunting and as Esther teaches, God will not do it for us. But even though the future is in our hands, that does not mean we have to do it alone. God is still with us, and just as Esther had Mordecai, we have each other. If we were asked to sacrifice our lives for the greater good as individuals in isolation, none of us would be up to the task. But we are not asked to do it alone, we are called and invited into community to do the work together, and there is great joy and love and fulfillment in the journey of partnering for the sake of those who are hurting and building a beloved community where everyone can find a home.



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For over 81 years, this church has been a refuge for the outcast and the marginalized. For over 81 years we have never shrank from the present moment, but always tried to rise to the occasion—and rise we have against the evils of segregation, patriarchy, antisemitism, homophobia, supremacy, and racism in solidarity with our fellow human beings by proclaiming we are “open to all and closed to none.” We need every single person in our fellowship to take responsibility to find their own unique way to serve our congregation. On this Welcome Sunday, each of us has been called again “for such a time as this” to respond to Angelina Grimké’s question, “Is there no Esther among you?” “Is there no Mordecai?” To that I say, “Yes there are. I believe we are here in the choir loft, in each and every pew, in the balcony, in our homes watching online. I believe we are here, we are prepared to do what is necessary, we are ready to face our “Esther moment,” we are geared up “for such a time as this” to seize the “fierce urgency of now,” to rise to the occasion once more, and to be the church that God has called us to be in this city, in this country, because here at Myers Park we are not just Easter people, we are Esther people, and we believe that this is our time.