

Something's Happening

Text: Esther 4:14, Mark 9:40

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Who knows whether it is not for such a time as this that you have come to royal estate? Esther 4:14

"Whoever is not against us is for us." Mark 9:40

The story of Esther is a wonderful story. It might most appropriately be called an historical novel. It probably has a certain historical core around which has grown this marvelous story, full of drama. It has a great plot. I am waiting for Arnold Schwarzenegger to get hold of this story. I think he could really do something with it. I was thinking about the casting as I was preparing this sermon: for Mordecai I would choose Clint Eastwood - kind of grumpy and clever, not showing any emotion, just sort of sitting in the background. You know, kind of organizing all of this stuff. For Esther, how about Whitney Houston? She could tell the king, "I will always love you." Well, anyway it is a wonderful story. I pull it out about every five years or so. Usually I pull it out when I am dealing with God and providence, and history and some of those themes.

I have to admit that when I really got serious yesterday, I thought to myself: "Why in the world did I choose that scripture? What was I thinking about?" I do that in advance, you know. It is kind of like the birthing process, I think. I go through great labor pains and then suddenly there's illumination, and I am all excited, and I write it down quickly. But at this age those things don't stay with me as long. So I get down to the real thing and I say: "What in the world was in my mind?" I thought and thought and thought about it, and finally it began to come back again. It's because "Something's Happening" in our world.

Now something is always happening in the world. But sometimes there's more happening than other times. What I like about the story of Esther is that it is such a wonderful, dramatic story of the faith of the people of God who believe that God is engaged in the things that happen in our world. It's that kind of involvement, that kind of engagement of God that you can't put your finger on. I say God is involved, or God is engaged, and that's rather ambiguous. I do that intentionally.

I don't know how to spell that out. But the biblical people of God have always believed that what is happening in the world has another dimension, and there is more to it than meets the eye. "Something's Happening," and God is involved.

It's true in our world today. So many things are happening. There is so much ferment. It's a very exciting time in which to be alive. Then for some it's a very frightening time. It's kind of scary. For some it's threatening, but for others it's challenging. But for all of us we live in a spectacular period of the human drama. What I want to say to us as the people of God, as the Church, is that "Something's Happening." Will we or will we not be a part of the purposes and programs of God as the agents of reconciliation that are trying to move the world toward community and Shalom?

You see, that's so clearly in the story of Esther - something was happening. The people of God to whom God had pledged God's faithfulness are threatened. An edict has proclaimed all Jews must die. When Mordecai learns of it, Mordecai says to Esther, "Do something about it." Something was happening and Mordecai believed that what was happening on the historical plane was not apart from the involvement of the eternal God who had pledged God's faithfulness to his people. Mordecai also believed that what was happening would eventuate in the effecting of God's purposes. Mordecai was one of those Jews that believed that God's purposes would prevail. He wasn't biting his fingernails. He wasn't overly anxious. He simply believed that God's purposes would prevail. He also was one of those people that believed that God's purposes might be effected through a particular person or a particular movement. He said to Esther, "Who knows but what you have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this?"

She had naturally said, "I am scared. I can't just go in to the king until he calls for me. I risk my life if I do. I am in peril."

Mordecai says, "Esther, just maybe you are where you are for just such a moment."

Thus there is this too in the story: it takes commitment at great risk to be an agent for the effecting of the purposes of God. All of those things are so beautifully narrated in this story. The reason, I think, back sometime in the misty past, when I was thinking about that story and this message is that it is a word to us at Christ Community. It is a word to us who believe that in this exciting, scary day in which we live God is engaged. We live in the aftermath of Pentecost. The Spirit of God moves across the face of the earth. And what is happening in our day is not apart from the engagement of the eternal God. And, more than that, as we think about that at Christ Community, do we really believe that God's purposes will prevail? So Mordecai's question comes to us here, in our context: might God have brought us together for such a time as this? Is there something about this strange community called Christ Community that we characterize as an "Alternative to Church as Usual" that might simply be at the right place, at the right time, to be an agent for the effecting of the purposes of God and the power

of the Spirit? And, if that might be the case, would we be willing to take the risk and to commit ourselves to such a common mission?

Well, no one would deny that "Something's Happening" in our world. My goodness, it boggles the mind. I picked up a book from a dear friend this week. (Just what I need is one more book.) Really she gave it for the church library, and it will get there eventually, but I opened it up and I began to skim through it. It was full of interesting data. It is called *Racing Toward 2001*. Do you know that we are less than 90 months away from the 21st century? Now as God counts years, I don't imagine that the move of a century or the shift of a millennium is any great shakes, but psychologically it's going to impact us. It's already beginning to impact us. That's a significant time shift. We are on the threshold of century 21. This book begins to lay out some of the characteristics of this fantastic world of which we are a part, the discoveries of which, and the technological breakthroughs of which are only beginning to be felt, but will be impacting us and will transform the face of the earth. It blows my mind!

Let me just give you an instance. One chapter speaks about century 21 as the "information society." I read there that the old copper wire that transmits our telephone conversations, an old copper wire can transmit 24 conversations simultaneously. That's not bad for copper. But we are in the world of fiber optics: filaments of glass that have a super ability to conduct: transforming the energy into image, moving light at lightning speed, so that a single fiber optic can transmit not 24 conversations simultaneously, but 16,000! Isn't that amazing? And I, who am addicted to books, I learned that on a 3½-inch disk can be recorded 1000 volumes. I looked at my 3,000 plus volume library and thought, "Well, I guess nobody's going to be able to sell this for anything when I'm gone!" Such a disk - about \$10 - a thousand volumes. You could have a hundred thousand-volume library in your desk drawer. On one disk they can record the entire Bible, *plus* the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Now that's a lot of stuff to be transmitted around the earth in two seconds! Can you even imagine that? Well, that's just one aspect of this age of which we are a part, the implications of which will continue to increase exponentially and impact our human society.

For example, the stuff that we live with every day: the reality of the world religions, the whole situation of pluralism. I mention it every once in a while. Sometimes I think maybe you say, "Well, we've heard that." You've heard it, but we have not begun to reckon with it. The globe, as I said last week, has become a grapefruit, and the world's peoples have become a family. We simply cannot any longer live in indifference to what is going on half a world away. We are fully cognizant of much more than we ever wanted to know. But it's not a choice. It is a reality. It is a fact. And in a world where the great religions of the world are in an adversarial posture, where the respective fundamentalisms of the world religions are at each other, we have a volatile situation in which it will be incumbent upon people of good will and the faith communities to engage in dialogue and conversation in order that we might share a common goal and dream for building

community rather than living in the awful threat of terrorism and some of the horrible things that have happened in the all too recent past.

Multiculturalism. For some on the left, kind of a new “in” word. For some on the right, a term that brings out animosity. But for all of us, simply a reality. The United States of America has always been driven by immigration, as a United Methodist report mentions. But formerly it was from Europe and Africa. Now it's from Latin America and Asia. There is a rising tide of multiculturalism, which is the reality of the human drama in the society of these United States of America of ours, as well as around the world. There is not a major ethnic group anywhere in the world that is not now being represented here in more and more significant numbers. Multiculturalism is a reality. The old “melting pot” is being challenged by some who are saying we are a “salad bowl.” The uniqueness of all needs to have its own integrity. However that is solved, the point is multiculturalism is simply the state of affairs of the nations, and the world has become a grapefruit, become family.

Gays in the military, the present point of discussion for the whole question of sexuality. It's on the news, on the TV day after day after day. What will we do in the Church about this issue, which has the potential for being so explosive and divisive in our society? We talk about it every other place perhaps, but not in church because it is explosive and divisive. But, I wonder, I wonder if that whole issue would make us say not, “Gee, if they would just go back in the closet,” but might rather call us to acknowledge the diversity of the human situation so that we come to deal with that diversity. It doesn't happen through argumentation. We only really change through concrete experience. While there are all kinds of shades to that discussion, I know that the impact in my life has come through concrete encounter with people who never had a choice given their orientation. So what does that say to me as a Christian person that would build community and tear down barriers, and remove the acids that eat away at the human family?

Pressing ethical questions. Abortion. There are decent civil Christian people on both sides of that question. So, what are we going to do in order that we might not have bombings and threats, and all of the animosity that is so characteristic of the groups that are militant on one side or the other? How can we bring the posture of Jesus Christ and the sense of what true community is to that burning issue of our day?

Euthanasia. Dr. Kevorkian. Very difficult issues. Tremendous implications needing to be handled with care. But I have talked with enough of you one-to-one to know that while those broader social issues have to be handled with great care and with great thoughtfulness, I have yet to find someone that does not wish to die with dignity. To recognize that it is really an issue that we must face up to and come to terms with. Maybe the Spirit of God is pushing us, saying to us, “There is a certain measure of responsibility that you must take for your human existence.”

I use these things as illustrations, not to claim that I or anyone else has a simple answer. But these are the kinds of issues that can divide, that can be a catalyst for violence, and that break down human communication, and undercut human community. "Something's Happening" in our world. It's not whether or not we want to choose to deal with it. It is there at our doorstep. We will deal with it one way or the other. We will be agents of reconciliation to deal with it or we will be those who will build the wall high in order to stem the floodtide that is as inevitable to break the levy as the old Mississippi.

I was reading an excellent thoughtful scholar who says what is needed today is for a people to create a *colloquy*. Well, I thought I knew what the word meant. I think I've been in one or two, but I looked it up. It simply comes from two Latin words *meaning to speak with, to have conversation, to have dialogue*. This person suggested, I think, a wonderful image. He said, rather than us being in face-to-face confrontation, what we need is to be side-by-side confronting the question and the issues. I really like that. So often we are face-to-face in confrontation. How much better to stand *with* each other confronting the issues. That's the gift of real deep community. Scott Peck in his book *A Different Drummer* says that most congregations are "pseudo communities." I want to deal with that in a couple of weeks. "Pseudo communities." It means that we act just like my mother taught me to act. 'Don't say anything to anyone that's not nice. And if anybody says anything to you that's not nice, don't let them know it. Be polite at all costs, even at the cost of your integrity.' (She didn't say the last thing.) But Scott Peck said that's "pseudo community," and it really is. What happens to us all too often is that we seek out our own kind so that we can be confirmed in the position with which we started before we even thought about it. Then we get communities of like-minded people over here and communities of like-minded people over there. And the community over here and the community over there face each other in confrontation and mutual excommunication rather than staying side-by-side, honestly facing the issues, raising the tough questions, honoring diversity, granting respect and dignity to each other, and with grace seeking to move the whole thing toward community, toward Shalom.

This is a wild time to be alive. "Something's Happening." And I think that the thing we have to offer is that marvelous model of Jesus. The gospels were written to specific communities in concrete situations, and the things that are dealt with in the respective gospels are the things that needed to be dealt with in those particular communities, and in this case John comes to Jesus and he says, "Hey, Jesus, there's this guy down the street casting out demons in your name. And he's not following us." Jesus says, "Don't stop him, John, just because he doesn't belong to our group. The one who isn't against us is for us. And in fact, even a cup of water in my name doesn't go unnoticed."

"Something's Happening." The Spirit of God will effect the purposes of God. I wonder if we might be who we are, where we are, when we are for just such a time as this? It is not without risk. But it just may be that God has something

significant for us together, and incidentally, just maybe, just maybe for one of you.