For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:7-17

February 15, 2015
I like words, always have. I’m partial to the word oxymoron. An oxymoron is a figure of speech in which two seemingly contradictory words appear together.

The book of Esther is something of an oxymoron, given that it’s a book in the Bible without so much as a single reference to God. It seems incongruous for there to be a book in the Bible that doesn’t even mention God.

There are no references to prayer or worship at the temple in the book of Esther. There are no explicit religious motivations for anything that people do.

This glaring omission of God is problematic for some. Our Protestant reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, had serious doubts as to whether Esther belonged in the Bible. Luther said, “I am so great an enemy of Esther that I wish it had not come to us at all, for it has too many heathen unnaturalities.” Even though Calvin compiled a 22-volume commentary on the Bible, there is no such analysis on the book of Esther. Of Calvin’s 1400 surviving sermons, there is not a single homily on Esther.

I beg to differ with my Protestant forebears. I’m convinced that Esther absolutely belongs in the Bible. It’s a much needed corrective for those among us who cannot see God working in our present circumstances. If you are struggling to see God’s activity in your present life, this book is for you.

The book of Esther opens with a banquet. King Ahasuerus, who is better known by his Greek name, Xerxes, has had too much to drink. He orders Queen Vashti to parade before his equally intoxicated guests in her royal finery. Who could blame her for refusing to play along with this little charade? When she declines, the king banishes her from the palace and goes looking for a new, more suitable queen.

The king holds what amounts to a beauty pageant to select a new queen. Esther is chosen as the new Miss Persia. She is, quite literally, a beauty queen.
There are some things you need to know about Esther if this story is going to make sense. She is an orphan raised by her uncle Mordecai. She also happens to be Jewish; a detail she is expressly told by Mordecai to keep hidden from the king.

The villain in our story is a man named Haman. He is essentially appointed by the king to serve as second-in-command. Haman is something of an egomaniac. He expects everyone to bow down to him. When Mordecai refuses, Haman becomes so enraged that he resolves to kill Mordecai and his fellow Jews to assuage this slight.

Haman manipulates the king to turn over his royal signet ring to him. This is a grave mistake by the king since the ring is an equivalent of writing Haman a blank check. Haman seals an edict with the royal ring to eliminate the Jews and confiscate their property. The day selected for this bloodbath is chosen by casting a lot (or pur). This is significant since the Festival of Purim originates from this story and is still observed in Jewish circles today. At this festival, the book of Esther is read in its entirety.

Mordecai doesn’t have direct access to the queen, so he sends word of this catastrophic edict. Esther reminds Mordecai that she has no entré with the king unless he first summons her. The penalty for breaking this law is death unless the king extends his golden scepter. Since she hasn’t been summoned for 30 days, she concludes there is nothing else for her to do. This may strike you as an odd way for a married couple to relate to each other, but that’s how it worked between a king and queen back in the day. The king does have his harem to keep him company at night.

Mordecai doesn’t let up. He instructs the queen to act now or face certain death. Then Mordecai utters the immortal words, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to this position for such a time as this” (Esther 4:14).

Esther rises to the challenge. She asks her fellow Jews to join her in a three day fast and then she will approach the king with her request. Her concluding words display newfound courage, “I will go to the king even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (4:16).
After the fast, Esther appears before the king, who extends his golden scepter. One obstacle successfully navigated! She requests an audience with the king at a future banquet with Haman as the only invited guest.

On the eve before the banquet, the king cannot sleep, so he requests his royal chronicles be brought to him. The king is reminded of Mordecai’s successful intervention to rescue him from an assassination plot. Why he doesn’t remember, I don’t know. King Xerxes must not be the sharpest tool in the shed.

In the meantime, Haman is building a gallows on which he will hang his nemesis, Mordecai. The plot thickens.

Esther waits for the most opportune time to reveal her nationality and expose Haman’s sinister plot. “Who would dare do such a thing?” the king wants to know (7:5). “You’re dining with him, your majesty. That vile Haman seated next to you sealed the edict with your signet ring.”

The king steps away to gather his thoughts. When he returns, he finds Haman on the queen’s couch, begging for mercy. He interprets it as sexual assault and in a touch of striking irony, executes him on the very gallows Haman has constructed for Mordecai. Like they say, “What goes around comes around.”

We have talked often in this sermon series about the lower story and upper story. The lower story refers to the horizontal dimension of everyday human life. The upper story describes life on the vertical plane—that of life lived in relationship with God. Our goal, as we have said before, is to connect our lower story life with God’s upper story purposes.

I identify with Esther’s lower story life. She is asked to do something well outside her comfort zone. She is summoned by Mordecai to do something very courageous. Initially, she balks. It is risky to stand up and be counted.

We are not born with courage. We grow into it. We develop courage over time. We learn courage by deciding to live for something beyond our
own safety. The late African-American poet Maya Angelou says much the same thing: “One isn’t born with courage. One is born with potential.”

We are not told in so many words what God is doing in Esther’s lower story life. But here’s the key to the story: just because we can’t see God working in our present circumstances doesn’t mean God is not active in our lives.

We’re not told in so many words what God is doing in Esther’s life, but it can be inferred from the story. Mordecai hints that God has positioned Esther to save her people from certain destruction. He implies that Esther is queen because God has led her to this role. She is a queen, not for her beauty but for her strategic influence.

There are plenty of places in the Bible where God is working away from the center of the story. God does some of his best work offstage and away from the limelight. God prefers at times to work behind the scenes.

I’m struck by the remarkable number of coincidences in our story. A young, Jewish orphan becomes queen of Persia. Xerxes has a sleepless night and thereby reads of Mordecai’s efforts to save him from an assassin. Esther ends up, through an amazing string of coincidences, to be in position to save her people. There are simply too many coincidences in this story for it to be merely coincidental. As former New York Yankee Yogi Berra said, “Some things are too coincidental to be a coincidence.”

Just because we fail to perceive God’s presence with our five senses doesn’t mean God is absent. God is still present even when it seems as though God is absent. God is still active whether or not I am able to see Him at work.

A solar eclipse occurs whenever the moon passes between the earth and the sun. The sun is still shining when it’s obscured by the moon. God is still present even when it seems like God is absent.

There will come a time in your life, if you haven’t experienced it already, when you will ask “Where is God?” You will wonder what on earth God is doing in your life. You have asked God for help but no assistance seems forthcoming. Sometimes the only thing we can do is to
be like Esther. Do the right thing and trust God to be at work in the circumstances of our lives.

Esther has some great things going for her. She is, after all, queen of the exalted Persian Empire. But she is also vulnerable. Even after five years on the throne, she is still faced with severe limitations. If the king doesn’t extend the golden scepter to her, she is history.

Like Esther, we have some things going for us, just as we lack some things. Perhaps we are positioned for such a time as this. I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to say that God has us where he wants us. There are people and situations we can influence that no one else can replicate.

It is unlikely that we will be asked to do anything as heroic as Esther. But we can certainly do our part. Do the right thing. Act in fidelity with God’s good purposes for your life. “Who knows? Perhaps God has placed you in your unique position for such a time as this.”