

Called to Such a Time as This

Because the Old Testament scripture reading today requires some context for it to be understood, I will be reading it as part of my sermon.

Let us pray. By your Holy Spirit, O God, open our ears, our eyes, our hearts, and our minds to the Holy Word so that it comes to rule within us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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There are times when we're called as people of God to stand up and be counted.

There are times when it does not serve God's purposes for us to blend in or be anonymous.

There are times when we must be the voice of God's perspective in the public square in a clear and unequivocal way.

The Bible is filled with stories of many such times when the voice of God was desperately needed in times of trial and challenge. And the Bible is filled with stories of those who were called by God to deliver such words and perspective.

In a few of those cases, those called by God embraced the call without reservation and boldly proclaimed God's word. In many other cases, those called by God were reluctant and feeling unprepared and ill-equipped for the task they were being asked to embrace. In every such case though, God not only called, God also equipped them for the task at hand that they ultimately embraced as they boldly proclaimed God's word.

Feeling unprepared and ill-equipped do not cut it with God as a reason to resist God's call.

Today is one of those times that we, as God's people, are being called to not just stand up and be counted, but to stand up and declare God's truth in a clear and unequivocal way.

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, as Christians, we call out the sin and evil of racism that has been part of the underbelly of our nation and world for far too long, and that has recently been brought into the light of day in none other than the Oval Office of the President of the United States by the President himself. For us as people of Christian faith to do anything other than express abhorrence at this blatant display of racism is to compromise the faith we declare in our savior Jesus who knows no distinction of any kind whatsoever in the human family.

My friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, it pains me deeply to be at this point today as citizens of our great nation. Let me be as clear as possible. This matter of which I am speaking—racism—is not a partisan issue. And it is not an issue that has anything to do with political correctness. Partisanship and political correctness are lenses through which matters of governmental policies and priorities are seen differently. This is not such an issue. The matter of racism seen through the lens of human dignity is also the lens through which our Christian faith sees it. There is only one way to see it and that is that it is evil, it is wrong and it is an affront to God our creator. For us to do anything other than to call it out as such is a betrayal of our faith.

In the immediate aftermath of this crude eruption of racism on Thursday, I am appalled that there are Christian leaders in our nation who have sought to excuse or explain away the derogatory and vulgar language of racism used by the President. And yet there are several of them who have done just

that. It begs the question as to whether they are reading the same Bible as the rest of the Christian world.

So let's take a look at the Bible this morning to better understand what it has to say to us about standing up and speaking out. For I want us to stand on a solid foundation as we answer this call to stand up and speak out.

Today, we take up one of the stories of a woman of faith in the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament. It's the story of Esther that we're looking at. Sometimes it's called the story of Queen Esther. The book of Esther is one of those little books tucked in the Bible between much larger and more well known books. It follows the great historical books of Kings and Chronicles, and it precedes the larger works of Psalms and Proverbs. It is a stand-alone book that could be considered a novella. It is a complete story in and of itself with a beginning, a middle and an end.

Another interesting feature of this book is that while God is behind the scenes throughout, God is never named or mentioned in the text. This fact is notable because as the canon of the Old Testament was being determined—that is the process by which the decision was made as to what books are considered inspired holy scripture—this book was deemed to be of holy import and worthy of inclusion in the Bible.

Now even though this is a short book—10 short chapters that take up just 7 pages in my Bible—it is nevertheless too long to read the whole of it in worship. And it's really worthy of more than a single sermon. So I would strongly encourage you to take the time to read the whole story when you have a bit of time this week. It's a good read. In fact when you do read it, you'll find that it reads somewhat like a Shakespeare play. It has partying and merriment (lots of it in fact). It has deception and intrigue. It has drunkenness and debauchery. It has resolution and celebration. It would make a great addition to the repertoire of our own Montana Shakespeare in the Parks some summer.

The focus that I've extracted from the book today has to do with a decision that Esther made that changed the course of history. My Bible dictionary summarizes it this way. "Set in the Persian Empire, the book describes the Jews' endangerment and subsequent deliverance, through Esther's initiative and ingenuity, from the genocide plotted against them." (Linda Day, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible D-H*, Vol. 2 © 2007, Abingdon Press, pp. 317-318)

In a nutshell, it is the story of how the Persian King Ahasuerus after being slighted by his wife, Queen Vashti, banishes her from the royal court and sets out to select a replacement queen. Two local Jews are introduced into the story, Mordecai and his foster daughter Esther. At Mordecai's insistence, Esther is entered into the running to be the replacement queen. In the hubbub of this process, Mordecai gets crosswise with the King's second-in-command Haman, who ends up ordering Mordecai's execution. In the meantime, King Ahasuerus chooses Esther to be his new queen without realizing that she is a Jew. By this time, Haman has convinced the king to kill not just Mordecai, but all of the Jews in Persia. But before his order can be carried out, Queen Esther musters the courage to stand up and speak out in order to reveal to the king that she herself is a Jew. This enrages the King against Haman who is then ordered to be executed instead of the Jews. The story ends with Esther and Mordecai working with King Ahasuerus to allow the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies and ultimately prevail.

See what I mean about this playing out like a Shakespearean drama. For Jews to this day, the story of Esther is the basis for the annual holiday of Purim, when the story is read and celebrated as a story of God's deliverance through the work and influence of Esther.

This brings us to the focus verses for today's sermon. Let me read it to you now that you have the context.

4:10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, ¹¹"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."¹² When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, ¹³Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. ¹⁴For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."¹⁵ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."¹⁷ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him. (Esther 4:10-17, NRSV)

Queen Esther is one who by God's power and call, rose up, risking her very life, to speak truth to power. She was the newly selected queen, cherished by the king who had chosen her from among countless others. She was crowned and placed within the citadel of power as she took her place alongside King Ahasuerus. She also knew the history of the king's anger that had brought down her predecessor, Queen Vashti.

She could have hidden the truth and saved herself by not disclosing that she herself was a Jew. She could have taken this easy way that assured her escaping the death that all of her fellow Jews faced. As the new queen she could have blended in and remained anonymous. But she knew that if she did, all of her family would perish along with the rest of the Jews in the kingdom. Her foster father Mordecai's words moved her to accept the call of God when he said, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (Esth. 4:14)

Who knows? Who knows why Esther became King Ahasuerus' choice to be queen? From the perspective of the Jews and from the perspective of faith, there is no question as to the answer. Who knows? God knows.

It will be 50 years in April this year that another who was called by God to stand up and speak out, died at the hands of an assassin's bullet in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a man called by God for just such a time as this when he led the movement that challenged the scourge of racism that was at the heart of unjust laws across our nation. It was Dr. King who 50 years ago led the civil rights movement that resulted in the powers that be to recognize the sin of racism and work to rid our nation of this hideous evil.

During the historic civil rights movement, Christians and Christian churches across the country joined in the marches, the protests and civil disobedience to raise the awareness to the level where change could occur. Denominations like ours, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the Presbyterian Church in the United States, stood up publically and boldly and were counted among those who stood for justice and righteousness and reconciliation.

That time was not without its controversies within churches like ours. There were those who would say that the push for change was happening too quickly. There was a call to slow down and let the needed changes emerge more naturally.

Dr. King challenged this very sentiment in the last sermon that he delivered on Sunday, March 31, 1968 in the pulpit of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. He said, "Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. And without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. So we must help time and realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

Four days later, Dr. King died, leaving his legacy to those who follow in his footsteps.

My dear friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, in the words of Dr. King, the primitive forces of social stagnation have been festering beneath the surface this last 50 years and they have now broken through the surface in an ugly and vulgar way as racism has re-entered the public square. For such a time as this we must help time and realize that the time is ripe to do what is right. It is not for us to stand aside and assume that others will step up and address this scourge. We live in a democracy and if our republic is to not just survive, but thrive, you and I and every other Christian must stand up and be counted among those who will be co-workers with God in the work of truth and justice. We cannot and must not be silent in the face of this evil.

In this new year, we are picking up once again our "year of call" emphasis in the life of our church. Throughout these months we have been celebrating the many ways that God calls. The good news for us today—it is good news that we seek when we come here to worship each week—is that as we find ourselves called to action in this critical time in our nation, we have the assurance that we stand in a long line of those who have answered the call of God and discovered God's equipping them for living out their call.

Let us therefore lock arms and support one another as we stand up to be counted among those who declare God's word for such a time as this.

Let us pray. God of all, we pray that in this time of crisis we will be equipped by you to stand up and be counted as we speak out to challenge racism in all its forms. Give us courage and conviction as we labor with you as your co-workers in this holy and sacred calling. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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Later in the day on March 31, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. after his final sermon in Washington, traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, where he delivered what would be his final speech in which he stated, "We shall overcome. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome. And I believe it because somehow the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

"We Shall Overcome." It's number 379 in our hymnal. Please stand, as you're able, and sing.