



For Such a Time as This



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

September 30, 2018
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2018-09-30-AAA.mp3>.

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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22
Psalm 124

James 5:13-20
Mark 9:38-50

Our first lesson is from the Book of Esther. This reading appears to sort of fall in our lap today. This is the first and only time a reading from the Book of Esther appears in our lectionary cycle. Most readings, we tend to hear little by little, week by week. Like our Gospel text from Mark, or our second lesson from the book of James, which we have heard excerpts from for weeks now. That is not the case with our reading from Esther. This reading only comes up in our lectionary cycle once every three years, or 1 Sunday out of 156 Sundays. The passage we hear today is a shortened selection from Esther that gives us an outline of the story's ending and the origin story of the Jewish festival of Purim. Many of us are probably not overly familiar with Esther or her story, because we rarely hear it, and when we do, we only hear this summary of it. So today I want to explore this fascinating female-centric story of deliverance because it is a story we need to be reminded of.

The book of Esther is part of the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. It was probably written between 400 and 300 BCE. The story is set in Persia, where the Jewish people were living in exile. It centers on Esther, an unlikely heroine. Esther is a resident alien, a Jew, who is thrust into the intrigue of the Persian royal court when she was chosen by the king, Ahasuerus to be his queen. One of the king's advisors, Haman, was driven by shallow self-concern and by hatred for everyone who threatened his sense of privilege. He wanted to kill the Jews and he talked the king into allowing their destruction. Esther, whose Jewish heritage was a secret from the king, risked her own life by revealing her identity and boldly pleading with the king to save her people. Ahasuerus granted her petition; and in a reversal of fate, Haman and his men are killed instead of the Jews. The text tells us that the experience of Esther's people was turned "from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday" (9:22).

It is clear to the reader that God is present and active in this story. Innocent lives are saved. The humble are lifted up and the proud are brought down. But oddly enough, God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. God does not anthropomorphically speak or act in the story – not once. There are no burning bushes here; no still small voice of God directing or guiding. And yet, by the end of the book, God's people are saved and their enemies are defeated. God's people triumph.

In this story, God saves God's people not through direct intervention, but through the wisdom and courage of everyday people like Esther and her kinsmen Mordecai. Deliverance comes through everyday people who choose to act, who choose to speak. Liberation comes through regular people who take risks, who choose vulnerability, honesty, and courage. God's saving presence is made known through the actions of people.

Esther may have wished for God's direct intervention, for a burning bush or an obvious miracle, but she didn't get that kind of sign in her story. And most days we, like Esther, don't get such signs either. Indeed, most of the time, God is subtle to a fault. It doesn't feel like God's presence is made known to us in mighty signs or visions that often today. But that doesn't mean God isn't present or active. It's just that God is active in another way. God is active in the world through people like Esther and through people like us.

"Who knows? Perhaps you have come... for just such a time as this," Mordecai, Esther's kinsmen says to her about halfway through the book (4:14). Mordecai makes a case to Esther that she must step into this particular historical moment. Her personal history intersects with the Jews' corporate history at this particular time, in this particular place. In fact, says Mordecai, maybe her personal history has led

her precisely to this moment, “for such a time as this,” that she might make a difference by sharing her story and using her voice.

Esther’s story reminds me of another woman who was thrust into a national spotlight. Though their stories are vastly different, both women’s courageous strength speak to me of God’s activity. This week Dr. Christine Blasey Ford bravely told her story to the US Senate Judiciary Committee and spoke her truth to our nation. Before politicians and reporters, cameramen and the eyes of millions of viewers, Dr. Ford recounted one of the most traumatic experiences of her life in which she remembers being sexually assaulted.

Dr. Ford’s testimony was difficult for her to share and it was difficult to hear. It triggered memories for countless sexual assault and harassment victims. The event 30+ years ago was traumatic and its retelling Thursday was painful. And yet, Dr. Ford’s raw testimony also was empowering. She told her truth and for many people, her courage, vulnerability, and honesty were liberating to behold. While no survivor should ever be forced to share the most painful moments of their life, Dr. Ford’s perseverance and ability to do so were moving and inspiring.

The book of Esther makes it clear that Esther never thought of herself as having the agency to effect change or make a difference. And yet, that is exactly what she did. I don’t know what kind of change or difference Dr. Ford’s testimony will make on a national level. I do know that for me, on a personal level, witnessing Dr. Ford’s testimony was moving and heartbreaking and stirring and transformative.

God intends wholeness and health for God’s people and not harm. God did not desire Dr. Ford’s assault 30 years ago. Let me repeat, God did not want this for Dr. Ford or for any assault survivor. And I also know that God works in and through our lives, through brokenness and the pain to bring about wholeness. Dr. Ford’s testimony, while heart wrenching, has also inspired people and catalyzed difficult conversations.

Since Thursday, I have had conversations with some of my close friends about assault, abuse, power and gender dynamics and brokenness and health. These conversations have been raw and personal, and have often included tears of sadness and anger. These conversations have been brutally real and in them, I have felt God’s presence. I’ve felt that presence, not in a burning bush kind of way, but in an incarnate way, in & through the people I have spoken with.

God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther, but God is at work in the narrative. God is at work in our narratives too. In this week, which has been difficult nationally and personally, I have seen God’s presence in the strength of people who are vulnerable. I’ve seen God in action in shared conversations and shared tears.

Where have you seen God this week? God’s name may not have been invoked a lot throughout the week, but God’s presence and action, in such a time as this, is unquestionable. Esther’s story reminds us, that even when it remains to be seen, the grace-filled power of God will ultimately overcome the destructive powers of this world. Dr. Ford’s story reminds us that there is great power in vulnerability. God is always working to bring about wholeness out of brokenness and life out of death. We may not be overtly aware of God’s movement or action in our lives, but God is at work in everyday regular people to bring about our deliverance. May our eyes be open to see and our hearts be open to recognize this movement in us and in others, in such a time as this. Amen.