

McCabe United Methodist Church

“Timing Is Everything”

Esther Series: *Once Upon a Time Like This...*

Sermon on sel. verses of Esther 3 & 4 and Romans 8:27-28 (1/17 & 1/18/15)

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Esther was a Queen living in a Capital City and she found herself called to a big job she hadn't been anticipating. Well, I'm certainly no Queen...but I did recently find myself called to move to a Capital City to take a job that's much bigger than I was anticipating I'd be taking any time soon.

The “big job” was, of course, *this* job: to be Senior Pastor at McCabe United Methodist Church, which, as many of you know, is the beloved church of my mom's childhood.

Last Spring when I learned our bishop wanted to appoint me here as the Senior Pastor, it felt bigger than anything I was remotely ready for. Plus, I would be the first *female* Senior Pastor McCabe would have had – and that made it all seem somehow more daunting.

But, when God calls, it's not usually to something easy or simple. When God calls, it often doesn't *seem* like the right time and it's *always* bigger than we can handle on our own. Fear is involved, so we need to rely on God's strength to help us through.

When I moved here last summer, I kept thinking about the story of Esther and about the young woman who found herself living in the Capital City with a calling on her life that was bigger than anything she'd imagined.

So, here we are...living with Esther's story at the beginning of a new calendar year: *Once upon a time like this...* God speaks to *me* through her story and I hope the same will be true for you all.

Esther is an important story for the Jewish people and it speaks to their frequent place as an “underdog” among larger religious and cultural groups. Throughout their history as a people, the Jewish people – the people of Israel – have struggled to keep a hold on the land they believe God promised to them through their ancestors Abraham and Sarah.

Well, back around the year 600 before Christ, the Babylonian Empire invaded Israel and began systematically deporting Jews from their leadership class, and exiling them to other parts of the Babylonian Empire. This sent the people of Israel into a period of great cultural depression – and it lasted about 60 years...an entire generation and more, back then. This period of exile is called the Babylonian Captivity.

Then, in about the year 540 B.C., the Persian Empire overtook the Babylonian Empire. The Persians – at least at first – were friendlier to the Jews; their king at the time, Cyrus the Great, allowed the exiled Jews to come back to Israel, their homeland.

The biblical book of Esther tells a story of exiled Jews who chose to remain away from Israel after the Persians invited them to return. As I said, the period of the Babylonian Captivity lasted more than a generation. Some of the exiled Jews likely became comfortable in their new setting, away from Israel. So, for who know what reasons, they decided not to “go home.”

For our purposes as we explore the book of Esther, it's important to keep in mind that, though these now formerly exiled Jews retained their Jewish identity, they would have been a clear cultural and religious minority among Persians, Babylonians, and others.

The stage that is set for the book of Esther is the Persian Capital city of Susa. The Persian king, King Xerxes, got mad at his queen – Queen Vashti – because she disobeyed him in a fairly public way. Under the advisement of his top officials, King Xerxes banished Vashti and then held a competition to see who should become his next Queen.

The king's servants travelled throughout the Persian Empire to find beautiful, young women to be brought to Susa for this competition. The young women received beauty treatments for an entire year...and then, one-by-one, they were called in for a night with King Xerxes. (Take that to mean just exactly what you think it might mean...*[Ahem.]*)

The young woman who pleased the king the most would become the new Queen of Persia. Among the young women “competing” for the crown was a beautiful Jewish girl named Esther.

Esther was an orphan: her exiled, Jewish parents had died when she was very young, leaving her in the care of a male relative named Mordecai. Mordecai

adopted Esther and, when Esther was gathered up to be part of this Queen competition, Mordecai warned her not to tell anyone she was Jewish. Esther was a good, obedient girl, so she did as she was told.

After her night with King Xerxes, Esther was the instant favorite and the king chose her to become Queen. The king threw a great feast in her honor and all seemed right with the world.

In fact, in the midst of everything, Mordecai had even become part of the palace guard: so, even though Esther now lived at the royal palace, the two could still be in regular contact. However, not long after Esther became Queen, things started taking a turn.

Two of King Xerxes' servants plotted to kill him...Mordecai happened to find out about this plot, so he told Queen Esther. Esther, then, of course, told King Xerxes. The plot was investigated, was found to be true, and the servants were hanged on the royal gallows.

That is where we left off last week: with Mordecai and Esther working together to thwart an assassination plot against the king. Today, the larger plot twists in another, even more deadly way when the character Haman is introduced.

Haman became King Xerxes' highest official and advisor. Haman happened to be a descendant of a powerful king and, so, King Xerxes made it mandatory for the palace guards to bow down to Haman whenever he approached.

As one of the palace guards, Mordecai was bound by this rule...but, as a Jew, he could not faithfully follow it. Jews are not to bow down to anyone or anything other than God Almighty. So Mordecai refused to follow this law – and Haman was furious about it.

When Haman discovered that the reason Mordecai wouldn't bow down to him was because he was a Jew, Haman decided not only should *Mordecai* be brought down for this disobedience, but that *all* of the Jews in the Persian Empire should be brought down.

Haman approached the king saying that this entire group of people was disobedient and refused to assimilate into Persian culture. He suggested the king make a law that all of the Jews in Persia be killed and that their money and property be placed into the royal treasury.

King Xerxes agreed with this idea and, as a sign of his support, the king gave Haman his royal ring. In doing so, King Xerxes handed over to Haman kingly authority in this particular matter.

Xerxes also said that Haman himself could keep the money and property collected from the Jews once they were killed. With this extra motivation, Haman decided to get rolling on his evil plot.

Now, since we are thinking about timing today, it's important for us to be aware of the fact that the folks in this story were operating under a different kind of calendar than the one we operate under. As you listened to the Scripture being read, you may have caught references to the months of Nisan (“NEE-sahn”) and Adar (“uh-DAHR”).

Especially for the purposes of their religious festivals and holidays, Jews look to their own calendar, the Hebrew calendar, as opposed to any calendar being used by the wider culture. The months mentioned in today's reading from Esther chapters three and four are months in the Hebrew calendar: Nisan is the 1st month of the Jewish year and Adar is the final month.

In today's reading from Esther three and four, Haman wanted to know when the best time would be to have all of the Jews killed. He asked the question during Nisan – the 1st month – and he learned that the best time to kill all of them would be Adar – the final month. So, the plan became to kill the Jews nearly a full year after Haman decided that's what needed to happen.

In case you're wondering, there is no explanation in the biblical text as to why the Hebrew month Adar would be the best time to kill all of the Jews in the Persian Empire.

My best guess is that, back then, with no mass media, they needed time to spread the word throughout the empire about this pending mass slaughter...*and* that perhaps Haman wanted the Jews to have some time to stew in their fear. (We are not meant to like Haman in this story.)

When Mordecai learned about Haman's evil plan to kill all of the Jews in the Persian Empire, he entered into a period of mourning in the traditional Jewish manner: he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, placed ashes on his head, and walked throughout the city of Susa weeping.

When word spread throughout the kingdom about Haman's plot, Jews everywhere in Persia followed suit with these traditional Jewish mourning practices. And, eventually, Esther learned that Mordecai was behaving quite strangely – wearing sackcloth and ashes, and weeping his way through the Capital City.

(The palace was a bit of a stronghold and she apparently did not get out and about very much...nor was she made aware of Haman's plan. Also, keep in mind that Mordecai had told Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity to anyone. At this point, no one knew the Queen was a Jew.)

Because no one in sackcloth was allowed into the palace, Esther and Mordecai had to communicate through a servant. And, since Esther had no clue why Mordecai was in mourning, she sent him some different clothes to put on. Mordecai, however, sent them right back.

Esther then sent another servant to find out what was wrong with Mordecai.

Mordecai told Esther's servant what was going on and even gave him a copy of the letter dictating the pending genocide against the Jews. He also requested that Esther ask King Xerxes to put a stop to Haman's evil plan.

When Esther got this word from Mordecai through her servant, she replied that there was nothing she could do. In order to stay in the king's favor, even she – the Queen – had to wait to be invited to see the king. If you violated this rule, you could face death...and King Xerxes hadn't requested to see her for an entire month.

The final section of today's reading finishes like this: “When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, he sent back this reply, 'Don't think that you will escape being killed with the rest of the Jews, just because you live in the king's palace. If you don't speak up now, we will somehow get help, but you and your family will be killed. It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!'”

“Esther sent a message to Mordecai, saying, 'Bring together all Jews in Susa and tell them to go without eating for my sake! Don't eat or drink for three days and nights. My servant girls and I will do the same. Then I will go to see the king, even if it means I must die.' Mordecai did everything Ester told him to do.”

“It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!” *Once upon a time like this...* Timing really is everything in this story.

So often in life, and in our world, timing *is* crucial, right? When we look back on how the plot of our own life has unfolded, we can see the twists, the foreshadowing, the critical decisions that led us down one path or the other. If we think about it, we can recall those moments where everything seemed to crystallize in one, key moment – one major decision point.

“It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!”

Esther had a holy calling on her life, though she likely didn't realize it until Mordecai approached her with a very specific, very significant opportunity – and it was an opportunity that could have proven very costly to Esther.

Time and time again, we, too, will discover the ways in which God calls *us* with very specific, very significant opportunities. The story of Esther invites us to consider how we will respond when those holy calls come our way.

As I thought about the idea of timing, and about the idea of God's call on our own lives and on McCabe as a church, I knew today was the day to formally announce the result of our Christmas Eve offering...because it's a story that can only be explained by *God's* brand of holy timing.

Many of you are aware that, late last fall, we made the decision to give away our Christmas Eve offering here at McCabe. Over the last couple of years, that offering has brought in between \$5500 and \$7500...and that money always stayed here to support our own General Fund. Well, we were in a good financial position ending out 2014, and our Advent and Christmas theme was “The Perfect Gift,” so it was the right time to decide to give our Christmas Eve offering away as a gift to others.

Between our staff, Missions, and Finance teams, we decided to give the money away to three different non-profit organizations that are close the hearts of McCabe members. The first \$1800 would go to buy a year's worth of ovens through the Haiti Solar Oven Partners' new Oven-a-Month campaign.

Then, whatever else came in would be split evenly between our local Abused Adult Resource Center and our United Methodist-sponsored Ministry Center on the Spirit Lake Reservation north of Devil's Lake.

I had high hopes that each of these three organizations would get at least \$1800...I had higher hopes that even more would come in – possibly to the tune of \$10,000, but I didn't want to be disappointed if we didn't make that much, so I tried not to focus on a specific amount.

Now, as I continue this story, it's important for you to know that the Abused Adult Resource Center and the Spirit Lake Ministry Center had no idea we had chosen to give to them through our Christmas Eve offering. We wanted whatever came in to be a surprise.

So, we sent out a special letter about a week before Christmas letting people know about this offering give-away and we hyped it up at each of our three Christmas Eve worship services...all the while, I was hoping against hope we'd have a decent chunk of money to give to each of the three organizations we'd chosen.

Well, I went on vacation for about a week and a half starting Christmas Day, so I wasn't able to find out what the total was for our Christmas Eve offering until Monday, January 5th. I emailed our treasurer, Jeanette, and, when her reply email came in, I was blown away.

Our Christmas Eve offering total was just over \$11,400!!! This is an increase of nearly \$4,000 over last year and, actually, money has continued to come in since I got this number on January 5th.

What this means, of course, is that the Haiti Solar Oven Partners easily got their \$1800 and that the Abused Adult Resource Center and the Spirit Lake Ministry Center will *each* be getting at least \$4800. Because I was so excited about this incredible offering total, I posted about it immediately on my Facebook page – including the breakdown of which organizations were getting what amount.

Well, timing truly is everything...and I'm going to invite Pastor Mike and Libby Flowers to come up now.

Mike and Libby are the directors of the Spirit Lake Ministry Center and we're privileged to have them with us in worship at McCabe this weekend. They're going to share a little about their ministry and also about the timing of when they saw my post on Facebook regarding the \$4800 they'll be receiving from McCabe.

[Give them a handheld microphone. Mike and Libby will share about the meal they're serving and about their need / desire for a new, larger-capacity oven that happens to cost \$4800...]

Friends, human beings can't plan something this. We just can't. And so we give thanks to God for the ways in which we are called to pay attention to the needs around us – and for the ways in which God prepares us, and places us in the right place at just the right time.

Once upon a time like this... Let us pray.

Almighty God, we are so thankful that you call us and that you bless us with the ability to be attentive to the promptings of your Holy Spirit. Thank you for Pastor Mike and Libby, for the connections they make with the people of the Spirit Lake Nation. Thank you for their presence with us today and for the opportunity to celebrate the gifts we can share together. As we continue to explore Esther's story, strengthen each of us that we might respond when you call. Amen.