

McCabe United Methodist Church

“Here We Are, Lord”

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

Sermon on sel. vv. of Esther 4 & Matthew 3:13-17 Jesus' baptism

(2/7 & 2/8/15)

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Once upon a time in the ancient Persian Empire, a young orphan named Esther became Queen as a result of a beauty contest held by the king, King Xerxes. Esther was Jewish, but her adoptive father, Mordecai, had warned her not to tell anyone in the royal palace about her religious and ethnic heritage. (The Jews in Persia were a minority group and many of them did what they could to keep a low profile.)

While Esther was Queen, the king's top advisor – an evil narcissist named Haman – plotted to kill all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. Mordecai told Queen Esther about the pending genocide against the Jews and he begged her to ask the king to put an end to Haman's plan.

Though ambivalent at first, Esther agreed to speak to the king to plead on behalf of her people. Esther revealed her own Jewish heritage and, in the end, King Xerxes had Haman hanged for his plot – a plot that would have killed his beloved Queen.

The king could not stop Haman's plot, but he did have Esther write a companion law allowing the Jews to defend themselves against those who would try to kill them.

When the day came that the Jews in Persia were to be killed, they rose up against their enemies and found themselves safe and victorious. In honor and memory of this historic victory, Jews the world over spend two days every spring celebrating a feast called “Purim.”

On Purim, Jews dress in fun costumes, they feast together with special foods, they give each other gifts of food and drink, they make a point to donate to charity, and, perhaps most importantly, they read through all ten chapters of the book of Esther.

Because the Jewish holiday of Purim is a joyful feast, celebrating the Jews' victory over their ancient Persian enemies, they delight in this holiday. They especially delight in their victory over Haman, who was responsible for the plot against them.

In fact, when Jewish people gather together on Purim to read through the book of Esther, they make all sorts of noise whenever Haman's name is read: they “boo,” stomp their feet, and shake noisemakers...all 54 times Haman's name is read in Esther's 10 chapters! If you were here last week, you had the opportunity to try this out. And it was quite fun, if you ask me!

Esther is a fascinating book of Scripture and, if I'm being perfectly honest, I'm a little sad that this weekend marks the end of our series on this fascinating book.

When you read through the book of Esther, it feels like you're reading a fairy tale...but not a sanitized, Disney-like version of a fairy tale: when you read Esther, you find yourself reading an old-school, Grimm's brothers-style, grown-up-themed story.

But, instead of an *actual* fairy tale, you have to remind yourself you are reading *Holy Scripture*.

Each week of this series, our liturgists have read a significant chunk of the book of Esther – many weeks, reading the majority of up to three full chapters. As I prepared their readings, I picked and chose what to leave out...and I was strategic: I left out the difficult names of many minor characters, I slimmed-down some plot points, and, most importantly, I left out pieces of the story with particularly grown-up themes.

We've spent good time really delving into this biblical book the last month in worship here at McCabe, but there is a lot we did *not* delve into. If, after today, you remain curious about the book of Esther, I strongly encourage you to read through it on your own...but I would caution you to scan it before encouraging *children* to read through it!

I don't think it's wise to sanitize Scripture – we need to be clear about all that is in the Bible – but there is a reason why the versions of Bible stories we learn as children are often not the *complete* versions.

At any rate, Esther is a book of Scripture that has puzzled and frustrated biblical scholars and people of faith for centuries. And one of the primary reasons for that is that, in the ten chapters of Esther, *God is never mentioned*. Traditional Jewish religious practices are mentioned, but *God* is not. Which is kind of...*strange*...for a book within the Holy Bible, don't you think?

We look at the Bible as the over-arching story of God's loving, merciful, saving action in the world from Creation to the end of time. Sometimes God's people are faithful, sometimes they are not...but God's presence is always a factor in each biblical story. Except for the story of Esther.

No mention of God, yet Esther remains part of our Holy Bible. And the only explanation for that lies in the fact that we believe in something called “providence.”

Providence is the hand of God at work in our lives and in the world even when we are not aware of it...even when, for whatever reasons, we choose not to search for or acknowledge that Holy Hand at work.

Even though God is never mentioned on the pages of the book of Esther, God is *everywhere* within it – perhaps especially in the most famous verse from Esther, which is found toward the end of today's reading from chapter four.

Through a servant, Mordecai told Queen Esther about Haman's evil plot to kill the Jews...he begged her to ask the king to put a stop to it...Esther balked because she was afraid she might get hurt...and then Mordecai said this to her:

“Don't think 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!”

“It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!” If that isn't a statement about God's providential action in Esther's life and world, I don't know what is. The challenge Mordecai placed before Esther was truly a calling from God – even though God's name was never spoken.

“It could be that you were made queen for a time like this!” And when Mordecai extended this holy challenge to Queen Esther, she accepted. In the end, the lives of her people were spared and Jews celebrate Esther's heroic action every year. *Once upon a time like this...*

Here at McCabe United Methodist Church in Bismarck, North Dakota, it's likely that none of us are being faced with the decision to prevent an entire group of people from being killed because of their religious and ethnic identity. It's also likely that none of us are in the kind of position to affect that level of change with one single decision.

We are not the kings or queens of entire geo-political empires. And, unless I've completely missed something in my seven months here, we do not have among us at McCabe the Governor or First Lady of North Dakota. Yet, because we are each given the gift of choice, we do not have to *be* kings or queens, governors or first ladies, in order to make a significant difference in our particular corner of the world.

Because God's providential hand is at work in *each* of our lives. No matter who we are. No matter how old or young we are. No matter what kind of work we do – or do *not* – do.

God presents each of us with daily opportunities to respond to one kind of holy calling or another...and with each opportunity – with each call – God invites us to say, “Here I am, Lord” or “Please, God, find someone else...”

While we've been exploring the book of Esther in worship these last five weeks, some pretty great things have been happening – things that serve as reminders of God's hand at work among us...and that serve as reminders of how God has called and will continue to call us to make a difference in our community and beyond.

If you were here the second week of our Esther series, you heard part of the story of our McCabe Christmas Eve offering. For the first time, we decided to give away our Christmas Eve offering as a gift to others this year. \$1,800 of it went to the Haiti Solar Oven Partners and about \$4,800 went to both the Spirit Lake Ministry Center and our local Abused Adult Resource Center.

The second week of this series, in my sermon, I talked about God's timing and how mysterious and wonderful it can be sometimes. We had no idea how much money we'd bring in for our Christmas Eve offering, so neither the Spirit Lake Ministry Center or the Abused Adult Resource Center knew we would be making a donation toward their work.

Well...when Spirit Lake Ministry Center found out we'd be giving them \$4,800, they were elated! And the timing was incredible because they had just decided they needed to buy a \$4,800 oven to help with a growing meal ministry on the Spirit Lake Nation...but they had no idea where that \$4,800 was going to come from.

Not long after that, I had fun delivering a \$4,800 check to the Abused Adult Resource Center here in Bismarck: I walked in, greeted the receptionist and I told her I was there to give them some money.

The receptionist said, "Well, that's nice of you!" I handed her the envelope with our check in it and explained a little about our McCabe Christmas Eve offering. As I was explaining, she opened the envelope and saw the amount. Her jaw dropped and she immediately picked-up the phone to call their Executive Director, Diane:

"Diane," she said, "There's a lady down here from McCabe Methodist Church with a check for \$4,800." Diane pulled herself out of a meeting to personally thank me and we even had one of those fun pictures taken with the two of us holding the check! A couple of weeks ago we got a lovely thank you letter in the mail from them which read,

"Dear Pastor Hallenbeck and Congregation members: Thank you so much for the generous donation of \$4,800 from the McCabe United Methodist congregation. What a wonderful gift! Your contribution will

help us continue to restore hope, build futures and change lives for families facing violence... Please pass on our appreciation to the members of the congregation. Sincerely, Diane Zainhofsky, Executive Director.”

So in the midst of this series, we've been able to give generously to several organizations that do wonderful, important work.

In the midst of this series, we also purchased a piece of property on our block that we'd been hoping for years to purchase in order to add space to our parking lot. The purchase of this property will mean more room – not only for the people who already connect with McCabe, but for people God has not yet brought to our property and through our doors.

In the midst of this series, we also began and had our first successful month of our new One Thing mission initiative. In January, we collected an estimated \$1,000 worth of paper products for the Ruth Meier's Hospitality House. The table we set-up for January's One Thing collection was full to overflowing with toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, plates, bowls, and cups. Thank you for getting that started so well!

In the midst of this Esther series, we also opened our full-time Director of Discipleship position. We're looking to find someone with expertise and experience in developing discipleship and small group ministries in churches like McCabe...so that we can all grow ever deeper in our faith and make an even bigger impact for Jesus Christ in Bismarck and beyond.

It is critical that God sends the right person for this position...and that the right person says, “Here I am!” So please pray that God sends the right person because this *is* the right time for McCabe to be making a greater impact through ever-deepening faith in Jesus Christ. *Once upon a time like this...*

Last week in worship, we celebrated the joyful feast of Holy Communion. Communion is a time to be nourished by the grace we find in the bread and cup. It's also a time to be strengthened to go forth in the world to say “yes” to God's call on our lives.

But there is another ritual we offer in the church that reminds us of God's call on our lives. That ritual is, of course, Holy Baptism. Baptism in The United Methodist Church is both a blessing and a call. It's a blessing from God to the one being baptized – a reminder that they are a beloved child of God. But baptism is also a holy calling...the beginning of a lifetime of saying “yes” to God's invitations.

Before Jesus began his public ministry of teaching and healing, he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Jesus' baptism was the moment he officially said “yes” to his own holy calling.

Of course, Jesus' calling was far more broad and all-encompassing than any call you or I might have on our lives. But, as Jesus' followers today, we know that he calls on us to be his hands and feet in the world. We know that Jesus invites us to pay attention to God's providential hand – the holy hand that invites us to say, “Here we are, Lord,”...to bring love, mercy, and hope to this community and beyond.

As we close out this series on the book of Esther, we're going to close it out with a reminder of our baptismal call. So, in just a bit we'll go through our liturgy for baptismal remembrance...

But, before we do that, our Interpretive Worship Choir is going to invite us *into* baptismal remembrance through Carrie Underwood's song “Something in the Water.”

[Interpretive Worship offers “Something in the Water.”]

“Perhaps you were made queen for a time like this!” *Once upon a time like this...* Though we are not kings and queens, governors or first ladies, God still calls us. And, like Esther, we are challenged to say “yes.”

As we move into a celebration of the call God places on us through baptism, I invite you to turn to page 50 in your red hymnals and we'll begin our liturgy for baptismal remembrance.