

**“FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS”**  
**Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22, September 29, 2024**  
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I love good stories, especially when they have clear plot lines, when you can tell who’s the bad guy and who’s the good guy. Those stories make the choice to be good easy, but I submit to you that such a choice is never easy. To become a partner with God in fulfilling God’s dream for the world is to risk it all, but if we are willing, the promise is that we will gain life. How does God do it? That’s a deep mystery. The fact is God does it.

Take the story of Esther, for example. In a time and place long, long ago, there was an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia. The Persian Empire was ruled by King Ahasueras. One day the king threw a party, a seven-day binge. All the important and the little people, all feasted on caviar, puff pastry, and down-home barbecue, made with that special Persian mustard sauce. The highlight of the party was when the king wanted to show off his wife, Queen Vashti. “Bring her out, so everyone can see what a beautiful wife I have!” the king shouted. But Vashti refused. One of the great feminists in the Bible, she wasn’t going to parade around in front of a bunch of gawking men. So, the King summoned his counselors, “What do I do about her?” “You better do something fast, King,” they said, “or all the wives in the Kingdom are going to make it difficult on their husbands at home.” So, the king banished the beautiful Vashti from his palace and issued a decree: “Every man will be the boss of his home.”

When it came time to find a new queen, another decree went out, summoning women from all parts of the Kingdom to the palace so that the king could make his choice. Not only did they have to be submissive, but they also had to be beautiful. One of the candidates brought to the palace was Hadassah, the beautiful cousin of Mordecai, one of the King’s counselors and advisors and a Jew. Like other Jews living outside of Palestine at this time, Hadassah had a non-Jewish name to keep her Jewishness secret. Her other name was Esther. When the king saw her, he proposed on the spot and threw a big, splashy party. (Boy, did he love having a good time!) Mordecai stayed close to the palace to make sure his cousin Esther was well treated. On one occasion he overheard a plot to kill the king. He told Esther about it who told the King, giving Mordecai the credit. The would-be assassins were arrested and hanged, but Mordecai’s role in saving the king was forgotten.

Meanwhile, the king made Haman his chief of staff. Haman’s ego was as puffed up as a blowfish. Haman expected everyone to bow to him. All did - except Mordecai. And Haman was furious at the insult. Not wanting to look petty by punishing Mordecai for his disrespect, Haman concocted a plan to kill all the Jews in the Kingdom. Talk about overkill. Lots were cast to determine, according to pagan superstition, which day was most favorable to carry out the genocide. Haman paid a visit to the king to get him to issue a decree and said to the King: “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your Kingdom; their laws are different from those of the other people, and they do not keep the King’s laws, so it is not appropriate for the King to tolerate them. If it please the King, let a decree be issued for their destruction.” (3:8-9) Haman is lying. The Jews do obey the king’s laws, but they also happen to follow Jewish law and customs which sustains their identity, and that makes them different.

There is something within our human nature which loathes and despises difference. We are quick to note how “the other person differs from us in appearance, belief, custom, language, nationality, or race. Perhaps we feel endangered or threatened by it. And we come to vilify and to exclude the one who by virtue of such dissimilarity from ourselves must be labeled inferior and evil.” (Edward Paul Cohn, “Dealing with Difference”, [The Pulpit Digest](#), July/August 1999, p.26) Haman’s words reveal the source of every hate crime and every form of genocide—the fear of difference.

Jonathan Sacks, the late Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, said that a major fact of life today is the immense diversity we encounter in our societies. Some of us in our society think that’s a problem. But Sacks says, if you go back and read the Bible, the one command re-iterated more than any other to the Jewish people, 36 times says the rabbi, is the command to love the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt. Because the

ancients Jews were strangers, then they should love the strangers themselves. Or another way of saying it is "Love the stranger because to him you are a stranger too. The sense that we are enlarged by people who are different from us, not threatened, means that the very time in which we live should be full of blessing, not fear."

Well, back to the story. The King honored Haman's request to destroy the Jews. When Mordecai learned of the plot, he asked Esther if she would approach the King. "Oh no, I can't," she said. "There is a rule that if anyone enters the King's court uninvited, that person is to be put to death." Mordecai tells her, "Do not think that in the King's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For 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."

I have often wondered: if I had been German and a Christian between 1933 and 1945 would I have been brave and spoken out against persecution of the Jews? In our own context today, for whom do I take risks? Where do I play it safe when it comes to defending those who have no defenders?

In baptism God has given us our royal dignity, claimed us as royal sons and daughters of the King of the Universe. He has placed us in his creation to mend it and bring wholeness to it. Are we brave enough to take risks for God, to be unpopular when the defense of the defenseless is called for? When hate bellows its nasty tones, do we sing the melody of love and justice for all? Or do we cower?

Moved by what Mordecai said, Esther put on her royal robe and went before the King. The King was glad to see her and asks, "What is wrong, my dear? What do you want? I'll give you anything, up to half of my Kingdom?" Esther asked that the King and Haman attend a dinner. They did, and when the King asked her what else she wanted, she said that she wanted the two of them to come again to dinner the next day. Haman was so excited. He told his wife and friends that he was now an FOE, a friend of Esther. Even though he was one happy man, one thing festered in his heart: his hatred for Mordecai. He couldn't enjoy anything for the one thing he didn't have: Mordecai's subservience. His wife and buddies told him, "Just build a gallows, and tell the King to hang Mordecai. You're his head honcho. He'll do anything for you." That night the King couldn't sleep, and so when he couldn't sleep he pulled out a sure-fire cure for insomnia, the history of his kingdom. And there he read the story of Mordecai who had saved his life from would-be assassins. "Mordecai," he thought, "I remember now." Just a co-incidence that the king couldn't sleep, that he read his history. Although God's name is never mentioned in the book of Esther, somebody is working behind the scenes to take care of his people. I wonder who it is.

The King was so happy remembering what Mordecai had done that when Haman showed up the next day to ask permission to hang Mordecai, the King asked a question first: "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" "My day has come," thought Haman. Thinking that the King was getting ready to honor him, Haman said, "Well, dress him up in royal robes, place him on a gorgeous stallion, and put a royal crown on his head." The King said, "Do that for Mordecai." Haman's mouth dropped open. He obeyed the King, but it killed him. Almost. When he told his wife what had happened, she saw the handwriting on the wall. "If Mordecai is a Jew, it's the end of the road for you, hubby."

While she was talking and thinking how she could get the bank accounts in her name, the King's servants arrived to pick up Haman for the dinner. Over dinner and in plain sight of the gallows that had been built outside of the palace, the king asked Esther if there was anything he could do for her. Esther said: "Let my life and the life of my people be spared this day, for someone wants us to die." "Who?" the king shouted! "A foe and an enemy, this wicked Haman," Esther said. The King was so angry that he left the room, and when he returned, he found Haman groveling at the feet of Esther for mercy. It looked like Haman was trying to take advantage of the Queen. A servant pointed out the gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai. At that moment, the King ordered, "Hang Haman high!" The King gave Mordecai his royal seal and made him the Grand Vizier of his kingdom.

On that day, the tables were turned on Haman, and the Jewish people were saved. Through the bravery of Esther, through the providence of God, through his mysterious ways, God's people were saved. "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side [the Psalmist says] when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth." God's purposes for his people will not be deterred.

How does God do this? Through people, like you and me. If you haven't seen the movie, *One Life*, I encourage you to do so. It is the true story of Sir Nicholas 'Nicky' Winton, a young London broker who, in the months leading up to World War II, rescued 669 predominantly Jewish children from the Nazis. Nicky visited Prague in December 1938 and found families who had fled the rise of the Nazis in Germany and Austria, living in desperate conditions with little or no shelter and food, and under threat of Nazi invasion. He immediately realized it was a race against time. How many children could he and the team rescue before the borders closed? In one scene in Prague, he is sitting with his fellow compatriots. Someone muses about what can they do. "I am just an ordinary person." Nicky says, "I am an ordinary person too." One by one they each affirm how ordinary they are until someone finally says, "We are an army of the ordinary."

Isn't that who we are, O Church, an army of the ordinary? Regular folk who have been raised to royal dignity through Christ, who pioneered and perfected the way to salvation through his suffering. We have been raised with him to royal dignity. For such a time as we live in—fearful and divided—may we find the courage to bear witness to the God who loves all people in their immense and wonderful diversity.