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Good
News
from
the
Jews

Carrie
Sanders



*The Esther
Moment*

Sunday, August 6, 2023
“The Esther Moment”
Carrie Sanders | Esther 4:14

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

-Esther 4:14 (NIV)

Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Today, we are looking at an example in the Bible of a woman who was in the right place at the right time. A woman who had been uniquely and perfectly prepared by God to step up in a crisis moment, with courage, to save her family and her community. The story of Esther provides an example of what happens when one hears and heeds God’s call to action. It’s a story of a woman who had the wisdom to understand the right thing to do in the right moment, knew how to leverage her influence for good, and had the courage to act.

Some of you may know the story of Esther very well; and some of you – like me as I was preparing this sermon – may not have had the opportunity to spend a lot of time with the book. No matter how you may be coming to the scripture today, I invite you to listen carefully for the circumstances in which Esther found herself and how God, though never mentioned by name in the Book of Esther, is behind the scenes, to save the Jews from destruction by exalting Esther as queen of Persia, all the while directing each of Esther’s steps:

Esther’s family was among the Jews taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. The Jews remained in Babylon when the Persians took over the area. Esther’s

only remaining living family was her Uncle Mordechai, an officer of King Xerxes. Under a set of very strange circumstances where the King decided he needed a new Queen, Esther – in a literal beauty contest culminating after 12 months of living in the King’s harem - vied for and won the position of Queen. Esther’s Uncle Mordechai, her stand-in parent, and only living relative, advised Esther to keep her Jewish identity a secret.

In the meantime, King Xerxes elevated a man named Haman above all the Persian princes. All workers for the King were required to pay homage to Haman and bow down to Haman. Esther’s Uncle Mordechai, an officer usually positioned at the King’s gate, exercised his personal agency and Jewish faith - and refused to bow down to Haman. Haman was offended by Mordechai’s unwillingness to show homage and bow down to him. Haman’s ego could not handle that Mordechai could not be controlled by him. Shortly after Xerxes crowned Esther as Queen, Haman set an evil plot in motion. He informed Xerxes that the Jews weren’t keeping the King’s laws and were a threat to his kingdom. Xerxes allowed and supported Haman’s genocidal plan to kill the Jews in Persia.

When Mordechai found out, he was deeply devastated. Esther became aware of his distress and communicated with Mordechai from the palace to the gate via a messenger - one of her eunuchs. She was concerned about her Uncle as she heard that he had torn his clothes and was wearing sackcloth and ashes and while walking around the city wailing loudly. Mordechai communicated back to her about Haman’s plot to destroy her people, the Jews, and he urged Esther to go before Xerxes to seek mercy on behalf of her people.

Esther resisted, fearful, saying that the King could kill her if she appeared to him with a request without being called in by the King for it. Mordechai’s response to Esther is our key scripture for today:

“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” Esther 4:13 - 14

In the world today, I see a lot of apathy. A lot of indifference. A lot of turning away from the problem. A lot of violence. We see mass shootings in the news on a nearly daily basis. We see rampant, seemingly unabated racism in our communities. Just two weeks ago our planet faced the four hottest days on record. We see neighbors systematically working to keep “those people” - the poor, the hungry, the hurting - out

of their neighborhood. We see oppression based on gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and more. *Esther gives us a model of courage in times like these.*

Here's the hard news from the pews today: In these treacherous, broken times, are we asking ourselves: "Who knows but that I am here for such a time as this?"

Mordechai opened Esther's eyes to her assignment. Before Mordechai told her what was happening with Haman's plot to eliminate the Jews in Persia, she didn't know what was going on – she was not aware. She didn't understand her power and her position to influence the King to stop it. Mordechai reminded her of the unique agency and influence that she held as Queen, a *Jewish* Queen. Mordechai importantly reminded Esther that it was her beloved people who were being attacked. It was directly relevant to her. And she was the *only* one who could save her people in that time, in that place. It hit home. It must have been hard news for Esther.

This moment, when Esther not only **realized the problem** but **also realized her unique position** to say what needed to be said, to do what needed to be done, is what I call **the Esther Moment**. That moment when you, and only you, are the one who God has called to do what God is asking to be done in that moment. That Esther Moment when we need to ask ourselves as Mordechai asked Esther, "Who knows but that I have come to my position for such a time as this?"

Darrell "Bubba" Wallace Jr., the only black driver in NASCAR's top racing series, had his Esther Moment when he led the charge to get the Confederate flag banned from races in a largely white sport. How did Bubba Wallace become a central figure in the sports world's upheaval regarding race? The killing of Ahmaud Arbery broke his heart, he said, and opened his mind to the urgency of fighting for racial justice. Not long after came the murder of George Floyd. According to the New York Times, "Wallace sent a text to other top drivers, telling them he was frustrated that so many of them had been silent about it as people protested around the nation." A series of horrific, heartbreaking, devastating events - the killing of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, caused Bubba Wallace to speak up. He found his voice, even as others in the NASCAR sport stayed silent. For many years - since age 13 - Wallace's public comment was that although he acknowledged he was the first and only black driver at his level in NASCAR, that he would enjoy the journey and stayed silent at sight of the Confederate battle flags displayed in his presence. After the death of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, Wallace said he finally believed that the Confederate flag should not be flown at NASCAR races because it represented hate, not heritage. Two days after telling CNN

that, and hours before he raced his No. 43 Chevrolet with #BlackLivesMatter emblazoned in it, NASCAR banned the flag. “My mom texted me just last week to say that God has a bigger plan for me than just being a racecar driver,” Wallace said. “And she was right.” This was Bubba Wallace, Jr’s Esther Moment.

How can we tell if it’s an Esther Moment where we are being called to speak up and act? In the scripture, we can see how:

- 1. You have the wisdom to know what to do in the situation, and you have a hard choice to make.** Esther had the critical, insider information about what was about to happen to the Jews in Persia given her relationship with Uncle Mordechai. He told her what was going on so she could act from her unique position as Queen. Esther saw what was going on and knew she had to act. This “knowing I have to speak up, do something, and to act” for me is often felt as the Holy Spirit convicting me to do the hard, right thing. What are you seeing that is breaking your heart? How might God be calling you to act? In some ways, this is the essence of the Esther Moment: She found herself in a place with a decision to make. Would she.... Or would she....not?
- 2. You have been uniquely prepared, by God, to do something, in this moment.** The conditions under which Esther came to her position were redeemed by what she was called to do in that moment. Remember, Esther won a beauty contest after 12 months of living in a harem. She spent a night with Xerxes and he chose her. All the while, she kept silent about her Jewish heritage. And yet, God used her. God doesn’t waste any of our steps - as traumatic and difficult as these steps might be – God doesn’t waste them.
- 3. You find that you have unique positional influence and empathy to make a difference.** Esther was in the right place, at the right time. She was the Queen. She was Jewish. She had positional influence and empathy with the persecuted that no one else had. What positions of influence and empathy do you find yourself in? Are you a grandparent who has a special influence and understanding of your grandchildren who can speak up in a special that they will hear? Are you a neighbor who understands more fully the challenges of homelessness in this community? Have you been through the pain of this yourself, and have something unique to offer?
- 4. With God’s help, you choose to speak up, and act, courageously.** In that moment when Esther found herself in a place with a decision to make as to whether she would act courageously, Esther was afraid, but ultimately, she

had the courage to do what she was uniquely called to do. She said, in Esther 4:16, “If I perish, I perish.” I imagine that she eventually came to that “I have everything to lose if I don’t do this” feeling, created by this call to action.

I want to share a personal story about one of my Esther Moments. This one is specifically for the young people listening today. As a young kid and for as long as I can remember, I always found myself drawn to the kids who had no one to play with at recess. The kids who were last pick for dodge ball. The kids who never quite “fit in” and didn’t seem to have many, or any, friends. The truth is, I could relate and we were kindred spirits. Jimmy was one such friend of mine. He was always alone, always an outcast. I was drawn to him. Over time, we became math partners and reading partners. One day, in 5th grade, Jimmy confided in me that his parents were physically abusing him and asked me to go with him to tell our teacher. My heart broke – I can still feel it – and, after the bell rang at the end of the day, we went up to the teacher and told her the situation. She basically brushed us off and said something to the effect of, “I’m sure they aren’t really hurting you.” Heartbroken and angry, I devised a plan to get the teacher’s attention and get her to do something. The following day, without sharing the details of Jimmy’s situation, I quietly organized the class and got them to agree to stay in the bathrooms and not come back to class after lunch until the teacher agreed to help Jimmy. It worked. Twenty-five of us stayed in the bathroom. Teachers started coming down to the bathroom, telling us to get into the classroom. We didn’t go. When the school counselor came down to see what was going, I told him what was going on. He agreed to help Jimmy. You see – in that moment -- I had a special influence in that school. I knew that staging a class “sit-in” in the bathroom would not have consequences for me, but could possibly help Jimmy. You see, my dad was the school superintendent. Yes. I knew I had positional influence. I knew that my dad was in charge. And - I knew I had to help Jimmy – he asked me because he knew I would help. I didn’t care if I got in trouble. I was 11 years old, and God gave me an Esther Moment. Yes, my dad asked me about what happened. I didn’t give him any details about it but just that, “Jimmy is going to get help.”

Though there is zero mention of God in the book of Esther, my read of this book (and several theologians’ read) indicate that God is all over the Esther story. That God placed Esther in this place, in this time, for a very specific reason. The problem came, Esther’s purpose and the reason for her journey to her position were revealed. God used her. She realized that it was her problem to solve, and courageously used her position and influence to do something, and willing to do whatever was required, saying, “if I perish, I perish.” She had the wisdom to know what to do, and the courage

to do it.

I encourage you to take comfort in the scripture we looked at today – it's hard news, yes, but it's good news. To see what you have been uniquely prepared and positioned, by God, to see, hear, feel, and have courage to answer God's call in your Esther Moment. Speak up! Do you feel your heart prickling when you witness racism? Do you feel your heart breaking when you see hurting people? Is there something going on at work, or at school, in the mission field, or at home where you have unique position and influence to make a difference? To make it better? To, with God's help, redeem a situation? There is a reason your heart is breaking. There is a reason you have a pit in your stomach. This could be an Esther Moment for you. Take heart – God has prepared you for this.

So, let's pray: "Who knows, Lord, but that I have come to my position for such a time as this? Give me the wisdom to know what to do, and the courage to do it, with love." Amen.

Closing blessing:

You might be wondering, what happened to Esther? How does the story end? Well, very briefly, she hosted a couple of grand banquets for King Xerxes and Haman, where she identified Haman and his plan to eliminate the Jews. King Xerxes responded, with Mordechai's help, and wrote a decree that reversed Haman's plan, enabling the Jews to take the offensive against their enemies – to this day, this feast is celebrated in the Jewish tradition in March and is known as Purim. And then, Uncle Mordecai took Haman's place as second to the king.

The Book of Esther is a great example of God's presence and power in the midst of humanity. As Christians, we follow Jesus, who through his life, his death on the cross, and resurrection, offers us the ultimate Esther Moment.

"Now to God who is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine, according to God's power that is at work within us, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." -Ephesians 3:20-21