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“For Just Such A Time As This”: A Mother’s Day Reflection

Excerpts from the Book of Esther adapted from the NRSV ...when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered [Queen] Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king’s servants who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa... And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai, [who] had brought up... Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother.... When the king’s order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa...Esther also was taken into the king’s palace.... The girl pleased him and won his favour.... Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell.... The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus... When the girl went in to the king she was given whatever she asked for to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back... [and] she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.... When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.... After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman... and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him... Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews... throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.... When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry.... Then Esther [sent] a message for Mordecai, saying, “[Everyone knows] that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” [Mordecai replied] “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...you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Then Esther said “I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I die, I die.”

Proverbs 31:2a, 8-9 What are you doing, my son?... Open your mouth for the mute, speak up for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

“For just such a time as this.” Do you know the story of Queen Esther? It a story of compelling courage. I thank Sue for reading this long excerpt, full of too many

tongue-twisting names, but try as I might, I couldn't shorten this scripture any further and not risk missing the profound courage displayed by Esther. The story takes place during the time of the Hebrew people's seventy-year exile and forced slavery in Babylon, under the thumbs of capricious kings. Our excerpt for today begins right after the current King, Ahasuerus, had thrown a drunken party and had ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to come out and strip and exhibit herself to the leers of the guests. Vashti refuses to do so and so the king deposes her and sets out to find a new queen by ordering every town to produce all of its young girls and send the prettiest one to be a member of the king's harem – and if one girl particularly satisfied him he might make her queen, even though the king would still maintain his harem and still invite a different young girl to his bed every night, perhaps occasionally requiring his new queen to also bed him. This is an ugly story, isn't it, of absolute power and misogyny unchecked. But it gets worse.

Esther was a Jew but she kept that from the king. And indeed the king was so delighted by his night with her that he made her his queen. But his power was such that no one, not even the one he had named queen, could come into his presence without an invitation - the penalty for doing so was death. One of the king's advisors had formulated a plan to slaughter all the Jews in Babylon. Esther's uncle Mordecai got wind of this and asked Esther to ask the king to overrule this plan. But Esther pointed out that the king hadn't asked her to his bedroom for a month and that if she went to him uninvited, he could have her killed. Mordecai then reminded her that if the plan to exterminate the Jews went forward, she would not be spared. Here's how that exchange went, when Mordecai said to 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...you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have become queen for just such a time as this." Then Esther said *"I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I die, I die."*

"For just such a time as this." Do you know the story of Antoinette Tuff? On August 20, 2013, Ms. Tuff, the bookkeeper at a Georgia elementary school, was substituting at the front desk when a young man walked in wielding an AK47 rifle and a duffel bag of ammunition screaming *"We are all going to die today."* Over the next hour or so, Ms. Tuff talked with the young man, telling him that he didn't have to do this and that she cared for him and that he had much to live for. At one point, the gunman gave her permission to go to the restroom, and, incredibly, even though she could have then escaped outside, Ms. Tuff instead came back and kept on talking to the disturbed young man. Finally, he decided to surrender and she said this to him: *"It's going to be all right, sweetie. I want you to know I love you, okay? ... That's a good thing that you're giving up.... We all go through something in life...You're going to be okay. It's going to be all right."* The man surrendered and no lives were lost.

Now, lest you think that Ms. Tuff was a super-human figure, she is not. She is a divorced mother, whose husband had just left her for another woman. She had raised and continued to care for a now-young-adult disabled son and a daughter while working three jobs. She was facing eviction from the debts her ex-husband had left her with. She had even attempted suicide at one time. And she confessed that during her ordeal at that school with that man intent on slaughter she was terrified. But she also said that he was a fellow human being and that she couldn't let him kill himself or others. After

she listened to her words on the 911 tape, she couldn't really believe it was her speaking. In fact, she said, *"it was God, ...who told [me] what to do."* Like Mordecai telling Esther that perhaps she had been made queen for just such a time and opportunity to save her people, so too does Ms. Tuff feel like God put her there that day. For, as she said, *"We all go through something in life and we all need someone to be [our] angel one day.... [and] God [had] sent people to help me in my suicide moments, [and] in my crazy moments...."*¹

"For just such a time as this." Do you know the story of King Lemuel's mother? I am very glad that I can reflect on her words on a day when Barbara Blaisdell is with us helping to officiate our worship, because it was she who first put me onto these remarkable words. Now, scholars are not sure who King Lemuel was. Some say he was King Solomon. Some say that he was an Assyrian king during the Hebrew people's exile in Babylon. We may never know, but at least he has a name. Unlike his mother, who – as is too often and much too unjustly the case – is a woman like too many other women in history who have no name and whose identify is defined in terms of a man. But as with Esther, as with Antoinette Tuff, God sent her wisdom in a time and a situation where it was needed. For it was a time, as we saw with Esther and her venal husband and king, where values were in such a state that a man could order his wife to display herself to other men and could be divorced for not doing so, where the corruption of the kingdom was such that the king could order young girls to be taken

¹ See, among many articles (quotes are from these), www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/22/the-woman-who-stopped-a-school-shooting.html and www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/atlanta-school-hero-antoinette-tuff-3453004

from their villages and paraded before him and used by him. And it was a time when the people of Israel were in vast danger of forgetting, therefore, the ethical demands of their God. And so with her wise and courageous words, Lemuel's mother reminded him of the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Jacob and Rebecca, and of what that God expected of the people He loved: that their holy calling was not to imitate the venaalities of the culture, not to worship power and might, not to ignore the poor and the immigrant and the prisoner: *"Open your mouth for the mute, speak up for the rights of all who are destitute; ... judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy."*

On this Mother's Day I have been thinking about these three women and their witness. I have been thinking about them on a day which is too often sappily sentimentalized in our culture, a day which we must acknowledge is a hard one for too many women who have lost a child or whose relationships with their mothers are strained or whose mothers are now gone or who have never had their own children and can sometimes be made to feel on this day like failures. I have been thinking about these three women on this day because what I want to say is that, in light of the gospel of God, their wisdom is for all of us – male or female, those with biological children or not – who are privileged by God to help influence, nurture, and raise up those whom God has made us family with. For you see, as a Christian on this and every day, you can "mother" whether you're a man or a woman, whether you have children of your own or not, because you have the opportunity to be there for the ones God puts in your path, to learn the lessons of these three women and to share them. For, after all, as Paul says in Ephesians, in Christ we have been made one family. Which means that you and I are given on this day and every day the opportunity to mold, nurture, inspire,

teach, uplift all of those whom God has made us family with. And with that realization, let me suggest three lessons that we can learn and pass on from these three women:

First, sometimes it's just true, whether you want it to be or not: "Tag, you're it." Sometimes life places you in a situation where you are the **only** one who can make a difference. Now, I hope that none of us will ever have to be in the position that an Esther or an Antoinette Tuff were placed in when life tagged them and made them it. And it is my fervent prayer that no human being ever again be in the position of being degraded because of their race or gender or ethnicity or orientation and that no one will ever have an assault weapon leveled at them in a place that is dedicated to education and hope. But what these women teach us is that all of us **will** find ourselves sometime in a situation where we are the only ones who can do something to make a life better, to add some beauty to the world, to show love where love had fled. May we follow the example of Esther and Antoinette, in ways large or small, and do what we can. For maybe, just maybe, God will place us there "for just such a time as this."

Second lesson: your purpose in life is not merely to be happy. I can't imagine Esther was "happy" with her situation of being uprooted from her home and forced to be the bed partner of a venal king. By her own words, Antoinette Tuff had not had a "happy" life and what she did that day in the face of that gunman made her terrified not "happy." But the wisest parents, the wisest friends, the wisest men and women who have "mothered" us with their insight and inspiration know that God has placed on this earth not merely to be happy but to fulfill our purpose. The purpose that was Esther's, that was Ms. Tuff's, that was Lemuel's mother is not your purpose or my purpose, but each one of us does have talents, abilities, aspirations, and gifts that have been placed

in our hands to better this world. And that is so, so much better than mere “happiness.”

Third, and finally, every morning King Lemuel’s mother’s words ought to ring in your ears and mine, and ought to make us ask how we are indeed doing something to speak up for those who are hurting. For whether you are man or woman, your mother’s day legacy ought to be to lay hold of King Lemuel’s mother’s words and to then make some of those weak, defenseless, hurting people your passion:

- Maybe for you it will be the one billion people in this world who lack access to clean water and the two million children who die each year because of that, or
- Maybe for you it will be the two billion people who have no sanitary facilities to take care of the most basic of bodily needs, or
- Maybe for you it will be the hundreds of the thousands in too many places for whom to be a Christian and to possess a bible is a capital offense, or
- Maybe for you it will be the one in five children in this country who are under-nourished, or
- Maybe for you it will be the ten thousand children killed or injured by guns last year, or
- Maybe for you it will be the thousands of soldiers who return from service to too often find too little support and help, or
- Maybe for you it will be helping try to change a culture where 17 billion dollars are spent in Europe and North American on pet foods when just half of that amount could secure clean water and sanitation for everyone in the world, or
- Maybe for you it will be the 1500 homeless teenagers in Colorado many of whom have and will become the victims of sex traffickers

Indeed, King Lemuel's mother's words remind us, invite us, compel to choose – whether from this list or too many other possibilities² – something on which to spend our passion, something that will indeed speak for those who often have no voice, no influence, no power, something that is oh-so-needed, indeed, in “just such a time as this.”

For it is just such a time, isn't it? And guess what? Tag! You and I are it. We are called to be mothers and fathers to those in this world who need us. That is our purpose as children of a loving God, brothers and sisters all, mothers and fathers all whatever our biology, for Christ has called us to do so. And thanks be to God that we can do so on this and every day. Amen.

²For statistics cited in this paragraph, see, e.g., www.foxnews.com/world/2014/01/12/christians-killed-for-faith-nearly-doubled-in-2013-group-finds/ and <http://www.globalissues.org/article/26/poverty-facts-and-stats> and www.nbcnews.com/storyline/jewish-center-shootings/snapshot-hate-crime-america-numbers-n81521 and <http://www.msnbc.com/the-last-word/the-toll-gun-violence-children>