

Be Bold

Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO

September 27, 2015

Esther 7:1-4

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me -- that is my petition -- and the lives of my people -- that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king."

When was the last time God spoke to you? he asked. For a moment I could only stare back at him. The last time God spoke to me? I don't know, was it this morning, or was it never? *God speaking to me...*, I spoke, internally, to myself...*wow, that would be great.* "I, I don't know," I spoke, out loud, to him and to me. "I don't know what's God and what's just me." *Was it a crazy question coming from a crazy person, or was it a perfectly sane question coming from a perfectly faithful person who recognizes God's voice better than I do?* All of a sudden I found myself envious, insecure, and even a little judgmental. Who was this person to make me feel this way? What right does he have to know *when the last time God spoke to me was??*

And then *I* started feeling a little crazy, because really, what right did I have to respond to that question with such defensiveness, even if just in my own internal monologue? Of course I wanted to hear God speak to me.

"When was the last time God spoke to *you?*" I asked back. Yes, it might have been a *tad* sarcastic, wanting to prove that he thought he was better than me, and then judge him for judging me. But some of it was just pure curiosity, too – had he really heard God speaking to him, more concretely than my "I don't know what's God and what's me"?? What had God said??

So, here's a question. Did Esther hear God speaking to her? Did her cousin Mordecai? Is *that* why they risked their lives to save the Jewish people in Persia? What would you do if you heard God speaking to you? Would you give up everything in order to do what God asked? Or, would you ignore it, and pretend that you weren't really sure that it was God who was speaking?

Where is God in this story? Esther's story is one where we get to ask *that* question in a context with not very much direction, and so maybe plenty of interpretive opportunity – where is God in this story? Not much direction, because “God” is never mentioned in the Book of Esther. The Jewish people are prominent in the story, and of course they follow God, but it is never spelled out for us exactly where God is acting to direct events.

The Book of Esther takes place in the time of the *diaspora* of the Jewish people – away from their native land, away from the temple in Jerusalem, they are living in the lands of kings who do not know the One God. In the land where Esther, a Jewish girl, lives, where she has been orphaned and adopted by her cousin, Mordecai, King Ahasuerus seems to be guided primarily by his vanity and his counsellors. The story starts with a great banquet that the King gives in the third year of his reign, and the banquet lasts for *six full months*, 180 days, with a 7-day after-party thrown in.

Through a series of events, Esther becomes favored, and becomes King Ahasuerus's Queen, and Mordecai spends a lot of time at the city gates keeping an ear out for her.

Now, the villain enters the story. Haman. Haman advances over all the other officials in the King's favor. But Haman has a huge ego, and when he goes out to the city gates and everyone bows down to him, at the king's command, he gets really really mad when Mordecai, hanging out as usual, doesn't bow down. Haman knows that Mordecai is a Jew, and in order to destroy Mordecai, Haman convinces the King to put out an order to destroy *all* the Jews in his Kingdom. He tells him that there is a people that is different from everyone else, whose laws are different from the king's laws, and they don't follow the king's laws, so the king should not tolerate them to exist. The king, not really being very wise, as we've seen, says sure, whatever.

Faithful Mordecai hears the news, and goes into mourning – exchanges his clothes for sackcloth and ashes and weeping. He sends a message, asking Esther to go to the King and ask him to save her people.

Now the King doesn't know that Esther is a Jew. When Esther first went to the Palace, Mordecai told her not to tell anyone about her people, and she has followed that command. So Esther's kind of scared, for a few reasons. First, there's a law that says that if anyone goes to the King without being summoned, that person will be killed. Esther hasn't been summoned to see the king for 30 days. There is one loophole – the King has a golden staff that he can hold out if he chooses so that the person isn't killed. BUT, even if he spares her life then, if the king doesn't grant her request and the law holds, and Esther has revealed herself as a Jew, she will be killed along with everyone else.

She sends a message to Mordecai, basically saying "I could die." But Mordecai persists, and tells her that if she keeps silent, the Jews will be saved by another means, but that she and her father's family will die. And then, he says the line that the book of Esther is most famous for: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity *for just such a time as this.*" She responds, "Ok. If I perish, I perish." If I die, I die. This is the crucial turning point in her life. She cannot get away from her identity, from her calling, from her purpose. She is a Jew, and a Queen, and *she is powerful*. She is frightened, yes, and she could lose her life, but she could also save her life and the lives of a million others.

Did she hear God speaking to her?

Esther comes up with a plan. She goes to the King, even though she has not been summoned, and he immediately pardons her with the golden staff. At first she only asks him to a banquet. At that banquet she asks him to *another* banquet the next day. Finally, when he asks her request again, Esther finally answers.

Save me, she says. Save me *and* my people, because we are slated to be destroyed.

Audre Lord, a powerful writer, feminist, and breast cancer survivor, said, “When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”¹

Esther must have been terrified. She wasn’t sure just how much influence she had with the King, and whether it was more or less than Haman’s. **But there was something more important than her fear.** She cannot afford to keep silent.

Has fear kept you silent?

Do you know your mission?

Do you recognize God’s voice calling in your life?

It turns out that the person who I was having that conversation with apparently *could* recognize God’s voice in his life. He had heard God leading him to love others whom he did not want to forgive. He had heard God calling him to love those whom he had previously not valued. Some of those calls weren’t specific words. But of *some* of them came in direct words and sentences. God had given him a commandment, he said. This new commandment was the most important, and would change his life in the ways that he approached the world. God said: *Treasure each individual you meet, whether in thought or in person. That is how you will know my love.*

Treasure each individual you meet, whether in thought or in person. That is how you will know my love. This person had experienced God’s word, and had put that commandment at the forefront of his vision that guided his actions. God spoke, and he listened. He began to help others whom he had previously ignored. He began to talk more freely and openly about his God – a God of love for all. He cared more deeply and patiently for those closest to him, as well as those with whom he disagreed. God spoke, and that vision became more important than whether or not he was afraid to listen.

¹ *The Cancer Journals*, 1980 “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

So did Esther hear God's voice speaking to her through Mordecai? Did Mordecai hear God's voice, giving him the words to say that would persuade Esther? Did King Ahasuerus hear God's voice when he chose Esther as his Queen, putting her in just that position, in just such a time for her to persuade him?

I don't know.

"The Book of Esther doesn't tell us that God spoke to Esther through a burning bush or on top of a holy mountain, as God does for Moses. It doesn't describe Esther arguing with God, and telling God why she isn't the right person for the job. It doesn't describe her hearing God's call in the middle of the night, as Samuel does. There are not mysterious hardenings of hearts, or plagues, or seas being separated, or floods. As Commentator Kate Huey says, God's deliverance of the Jewish people in this Book isn't done through miraculous, mysterious events, but through the actions of flawed but courageous human beings who were probably never sure they were doing the right thing. And yet, as Ted Kennedy said at the funeral of his deceased brother, Robert, they "saw wrong and tried to right it." It isn't always easy, however, to know how to go about righting wrongs, and we're not always confident that we're the ones who are called to do so, at least in a particular situation, and we're often unsure about how to proceed.... [And yet, as another commentator, Sidnie White Crawford, says,] humans are limited in their knowledge of God's purposes and their own role in them, but "[t]hey must act, with profound hope that they are thereby participating in the divine scheme" ("*Esther*," *The New Interpreter's Bible*)."²

Esther may not know her purpose with the confidence of having heard it from God. And yet she acts with courage and boldness in the midst of fear and uncertainty.

If God is leading you, and if your work is honoring God's call in your life, every step that you take will work according to God's purpose. I can't say that you won't fail. You might, but you must keep moving forward, keep learning from the things that go wrong, and dare to use your strength in service of God's vision.

² http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_september_27_2015

God will work in the little things, even if we don't know it. God will work, even if God's name is not invoked, even when it could be called coincidence, or luck.

What are you afraid of right now? Are you afraid of failure, or are you afraid of succeeding? Are you afraid of what might be asked of you if you succeed? Are you afraid of the unknown?

What would you do if you were *confident* that God were calling you to be in that time, in that place, for just such a time as this?

I don't think that Esther knew, I don't think that she was all that confident. But I think that she allowed herself to imagine. I think that those words – *maybe you are being called for just such a time as this* – got into her imagination, and set her vision on something more important than herself. I think that they allowed her to be bold, and live into that possibility.

I'm going to ask something of you. Do whatever you need to do – close your eyes, or get out pencil and paper, or get out your phone and open the Facebook app and write a note to yourself and to all your friends. Whatever you need to do to be able to imagine that God is speaking something real and important to *you*.

Ready? God is talking to *you*. Imagine that these words are being spoken directly to you, starting with your name.

“ _____, I am calling you for just such a time as this. I need you to speak, and be bold.”

Open your eyes. I can't say for sure whether or not you have ever heard God speak to you. But I *do* know for sure that God is calling *you* for just such a time as this.

Amen.