

For Such a Time As This

Esth. 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Jas. 5:13-20, Mk. 9: 38-50

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The story of Esther was one of my favorite books in the Bible when I was a kid, no doubt because it was short, a coherent and dramatic story, and a young girl was the hero. Esther is an unusual book that almost didn't make it into the canon. It is the only book of the Bible that does not even once mention God. It was included mainly because it told the story of the Jewish holiday of Purim. I was rather surprised to see it show up in the lectionary, and quite pleased. I'm going to recap the story for those of you who don't know it, but it is a quick read. You might want to check it out when you go home tonight.

The story takes place during the time of exile. Esther is a young orphan girl being raised by her cousin Mordecai. King Ahasuerus is on the lookout for a new Queen, and he picks Esther. She pleases the King immensely. They get along very well, and her cousin Mordecai even foils a plot to overthrow the King.

Yet the Jews have enemies, including an official named Haman, who gets angry because Mordecai, being a Jew, refuses to prostrate himself before Haman. So Haman gets the King to sign an order to destroy all Jews in the empire. Mordecai learns of the plot and calls upon Esther to intercede with the King, but Esther hesitates. Anyone who approaches the King uninvited risks death. But Mordecai warns her, "Don't think that just because you live in the King's palace you will escape the Jews' fate. 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 house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Esther agrees to do what she can. She appeals to the King, who listens to her. During the course of a special banquet, she uncovers the plot to the King, and Haman ends up being hung from the very gallows on which he had planned to kill Mordecai. And the Jews are saved.

I'm glad this story was included in the Bible, not only because it is such a great story about a heroic young woman, but because it also provides a sort of case study of a prophet in the making. Often these days I decry what I perceive as a lack of leadership in our world. Oh, there's leadership out there, but not the kind I want. Things feel directionless, confused. People lack confidence in leaders -- whether political or business, global or local. Our institutions seem to fail us: the governor's race in California, the debacle of Enron, the Catholic Church's cover-up of abusive clergy, the economy going down the toilet. Where are the true leaders? Where are the people who can save us? Who will speak the prophetic and healing word? Who will set us on the right path?

The answer is right here in his room. Look around you. The prophets we are waiting for are right here. All the prophets in the Bible were ordinary people just like us, no more or less qualified for the task than any of us. Yes, certain names have become famous, but the underlying implication is that anyone could play that role. As Mordecai says to Esther, "If you keep silent, relief will rise from another quarter, but you and your family will perish." In other words, if we refuse to act, God will find another way. But why we should refuse to act? Why should we refuse to be the leaders God is calling us to be? The New Testament readings today also indicate that the calling of prophet or leader belongs to each of us. Jesus has

commissioned seventy of his followers to go out and do ministry. When one of inner circle of twelve complains that someone is casting out demons in Jesus' name without authorization, Jesus says, "Don't forbid him. Anyone who is not against us is for us." That's a pretty broad standard. James, too, in his letters speaks of a number of things that Christians are called upon to do: to pray for one another, to hear confessions and forgive sins, to teach and admonish one another. Everyone should do these things, not just the minister. Everyone, regardless of age, gender, level of education or any other qualification, is called to be a leader, a prophet for the people. That said, there are some things we need to do in order to step up to the challenge. Let's look at Esther, then, to see the makings of a prophet.

The first thing is that the prophet does not exist in a vacuum. We are not alone. We exist as part of a larger community. As Mordecai tells Esther, "Don't think that just because you live in the King's palace you'll escape the Jews fate." If we want to be leaders, then we must know what community we're a part of. This goes for any community, whether small, such as our family or congregation, or large, such as the entire Christian family, or the United States of America, or even the world. We live in many different communities, some of which overlap and some of which have little to do with one another. But if we are to lead, we must first know who our community is.

Secondly, we must know the story of that community. Mordecai reminded Esther of her people, but it wouldn't have done her much good if she didn't know the Jews' story. Every community has a story, and not just a literal history. History is simply a collection of facts that must always be interpreted. In addition to history, there are myths and fables and folklore that we tell to convey our values. We create a common culture through song, music and the arts. Schools create community through mascots and sports teams and pep rallies. Families create community through traditions, usually informal ones. How does your family spend its Sunday mornings? How do you spend your holidays? Who are the relatives that you get together and gossip out? And what about the community of San Antonio? I was born in Houston, and Houston doesn't have much of a mythos, but San Antonio is positively dripping with it. Indeed, Hollywood is making yet another movie about the Alamo.

But every community's story has a good side and a dark side. The story of Columbus looks very different if you're Native American. The Alamo looks different if you're Mexican. Families are not always places of nurture and love. But a true prophet, a true leader, will acknowledge that dark side as well, and will draw the very best of that past to lead the community into the future. The prophet, in my view, is really nothing more nor less than the teller of the story. The prophet keeps us in touch with where we've been, and calls us to where we're going to go. What is the best in our history that we want to preserve? What can we learn from the mistakes of the past? How can the examples of our history help us to meet the challenges of the future? Perhaps Esther looked to stories of women in the Bible who used their wits to save the day. Perhaps she remembered how Pharaoh had threatened her people, and Moses had lead them to safety. She used examples from her community's story to speak up and save her people in her own time.

And that is what the prophet must do: speak up. Tell that story. Remember the past, and cast its light on the present so we can move into the future. Do we look for leaders today? Then why don't we look at ourselves? Are we not members of our communities? Do we not know the stories? "Those who are not against us are for us," Jesus said. Well, are we not for our communities -- our families, our neighborhoods, our country? Then let us speak out. Let us interpret the stories. Let us call our communities to the higher ground.

Esther hesitated to speak up because she feared the King would kill her. Perhaps we don't fear that, but we do fear disapproval and disagreement. But do we really think silence will keep us safe? As Mordecai said to Esther, "Don't think

that just because you live in the King's palace you will escape the Jews' fate..... Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time is this?"

In such a time as this... who will tell our story? Who will lead our people?

God is waiting.