

Celebrate! (Yes, Even *More!*)
Esther 4:9-17
November 24, 2019
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

We have been celebrating! With streamers and balloons; with bubbles and kazoos! With.... (oh, not yet! You will have to wait until after the sermon to find out!) We have been celebrating the past and all the amazing things God has done in our midst in just the last twelve months. We have been celebrating the future and our hope for building on new relationships and understandings of ourselves and our community. And so today we celebrate the present: thankful for God's activity in our lives in this moment. So yes, celebrate...more and even more!

The question is, *how* do we celebrate the present? It's not hard to celebrate the past; in fact, it's so easy that sometimes we get stuck there, erasing from our memories what was negative and hanging on to other times and events as if they really were "the good old days." Of course, celebrating the future can bring its own challenges. It's easier to be worried or anxious about what is to come than trust that we can celebrate it. But here's the thing: it's the "present" all the time! How do we live in that space? What does it offer to us that the past and future don't? How does it inform our faith? How can it call us to celebrating God?

Our story from Esther helps us to focus on an important "present" moment experience in the biblical text. Remember how it goes? This story is told by our Jewish sisters and brothers at the festival of Purim, a sort of mash up of Thanksgiving and Halloween, when folks dress up in costumes with lots of food and celebration. There's a tradition of reading this story on that day, but with the sense of Stephen Colbert or The Daily Show rather than our usual scriptural sobriety.*

The playfulness of Purim is set against the seriousness of Esther's situation. She has been orphaned and taken in by her uncle only to be tapped for the King's harem, an offer one *did not* refuse. Sequestered for a year of "training" (think trafficking of women here), she finds favor with the king because of her beauty, which she decides to use to her advantage when she discovers a plot to kill all the Jews. The sexual and political intrigue here is pretty stunning even in light of our lack of experience with imperial powers (kings and queens) and our distancing of ourselves, we hope, from the exploitation of woman as property. But that's where she finds herself, in her "present" and Esther has to decide what to do. She can choose to do nothing and continue to play the game to please the King at the risk of her nation or she can act. Esther decides that there is no time like the present.

And that's a thing we say, right? "There's no time like the present!" Which means there is no better opportunity than *this one* to act, to speak, to share, to love, to resist, to give, to become, to live. No time like the present. When her Uncle Mordecai hears that Esther didn't think she had any special way to challenge the murderous plan, he reminds her that she also has no special protection to survive it. If *any* of them are going to live, someone has to do something *right now*. "Perhaps," he says, "you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

"For such a time as this", the present. There are times when it doesn't really matter if we speak out; what's going to happen will happen anyway, or so we think. And there are times when we convince ourselves that we aren't the one who has to act; surely someone else will come along, more equipped to handle the situation than we ourselves. How many times might we have been in a place "for such a time as this" without knowing it and ignored the opportunity, missed the boat? In how many situations have we refused to respond or get

involved when we *could have* actually *made* all the difference? We might never know. But Esther understands she couldn't take that chance.

And so, she acts. She transforms from a passive, orphaned, disempowered outsider to a motivated, determined, collaborative, thoughtful actor. She honors the moment, the present, and dares to infuse it with as much power and authority as she and those around her could muster. Esther takes charge and instructs Mordecai and all the rest to begin a three day fast and to pray. She does not do this alone; she knows the strength of community. She and the other women join in and prepare themselves for the moment when Esther will dare to go before the king, reveal the plot to kill the Jews and save them all. She was ready; she was willing. She was called "for such a time as this."

And so are we... called "for such a time as this". This present moment is the only moment we have. If we are fortunate, we will have another moment and one after that. Out of desperation, Esther found her will and her voice in the moment, and as a result, she did what was necessary to save herself and her people.

Would we be doing what we have been doing if, we too, were not experiencing some sense of "desperation"? Probably not! Deb Winters and I have commented on how wonderfully different and open you are now from who and what you were five years ago. We suggested moving out into the community, working more closely with CCLU, experimenting with new ways of doing ministry then, but you were pretty sure everything was going to be ok just as it was. Now look at us today! In *this* moment, things are different. In *this* moment, the need to act is stronger than perhaps ever before. Perhaps **we** have come to this time and place and

relationship “for such a time as this!” Could *this* be *our* moment? The moment *we* dare to risk everything in order to bring life to ourselves and to our community?

As the Stewardship Committee was talking about this, Nancy remembered a familiar saying: “Yesterday is history, tomorrow a mystery. Today is a gift; that’s why we call it the “present.” Cute, right? But also, true. Today *is* a present! And so, I ask you, *what is the gift of this moment?*

The boxes on the communion table remind us that God has already blessed us. The past has brought us here and the future is wide open but the “present” to each one of us is this moment, the one we have been called to, to love God and to welcome God’s reign. What does that mean for us? “Esther’s struggle ... raise[s] critical questions for Christians today,” Dr. Amy Oden says suggests. Consider these:

- How do we maintain our witness of faith in a culture dominated by material consumption and political brinksmanship?
- What power does any one of us really have to make a difference?
- What kind of risks are we willing to take on behalf of those vulnerable and threatened?
- Which of our identities ultimately shape our lives? Am I first and foremost a parent? An American? A Christian? An employee?
- What complicit agreements do we make with cultural or political powers to maintain our own status and privilege?
- How might God be preparing us to step forward to speak truth to power?***

There *is* an urgency that motivates us today; we might say it’s our aging building. We might say it’s our small numbers. We might say it’s our increased expenses. Any one of those

might be enough. But if those are *not* enough for you (and they are *not* enough for me!), then perhaps *this* might be enough: I believe we have come to God's realm for "such a time as this"! To speak truth and to value community. To build relationships and support leaders. To transform money and to create wellness. To ensure justice and to promote God's peace.

We *can* do that here, now, together. This is our moment! Your commitments of time, talents and yes, money, will make the difference whether we live or die, that's no exaggeration here. We are at *this place*, in *this moment*, together. You are a gift to this community, to this neighborhood, to the world. Together, we can be a gift to each other and those around us if we dare to commit ourselves to that work for the year to come. We can build on the past; we can trust God for the future. But it is our action *in the present* that will bring transformation to our community and the world.

* Rev. Susan Davies, Retired UMC Clergy

<http://urbanabbeyoldmarket.blogspot.com/2017/07/esther-4-9-17-sermon-and-discussion.html>

** Dr Amy Oden.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2239