

For Just Such A Time As This (Esther 4:5-17; II Timothy 1:1-14; Mark 8:31-37)

When you think of the holidays celebrated in February, what comes to mind? Well, let's see...There's Groundhog Day, Lincoln's Birthday, Valentine's Day, Presidents' Day, and Washington's Birthday. But there's another holiday that our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate in February, and this is the holiday of Purim.

Now Purim would be a great holiday for us to celebrate too, for it's a celebration of the deliverance of God's people, as described in our Older Testament Book of Esther. The Jews celebrate Purim by listening to a reading of the Book of Esther. And as they listen to the reading of the Book of Esther, whenever they hear the name of the villain in the story, Haman, they make a lot of noise, in a symbolic effort to blot out his evil name. Upon hearing the name Haman, listeners to the story boo, hiss, stomp their feet, and twirl their noisemakers similar to the ones we all use on New Year's Eve.

We don't have time to read the whole Book of Esther, but we do have time for an abridged Reader's Digest version. So I want you to listen closely, and whenever you hear the name of that villain Haman, make noise, ok? Boo, hiss, or stomp your feet. So let's begin our own little celebration of Purim.....let's listen to the ancient story.....


When the Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BC, the Babylonians took many of the Jews away from their homeland, the Promised Land, and forced them to live in Babylon. More than half a century later, however, the Babylonians themselves were conquered--by the Persians. And even though the Persians said that the exiled Jews could now return home, many Jews chose to stay in the Persian Empire.



These Jews were thus living in the Persian Empire when the Persian King Xerxes held a six-month (180 day) drinking feast for his army, civil servants, and princes. And at the end of this, the king held a seven-day drinking feast for the inhabitants, rich and poor, of the town where he lived, Susa. The king himself got so drunk that he ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to display her beauty before him and his officials, wearing her royal crown. She refused. Furious, the king asked his advisers for a suitable punishment.

They advised him to get rid of the queen. After all, what if all the women in the kingdom followed her example and started disobeying their husbands?!

Before too long, the king wanted a new queen. So a contest was held among all the eligible girls in the kingdom. One was a beautiful Jewish girl named Esther. Esther was instructed by her guardian, Mordecai, not to let the king know that she was Jewish. She did as Mordecai instructed, and she ended up winning the beauty pageant and becoming the new queen of Persia.


But Esther wasn't the only one who impressed King Xerxes. The king was

also impressed by a man named Haman , who was a descendant of Amelak, the traditional enemy of the Jews. King Xerxes appointed Haman

 to be his chief advisor. But Haman  was a wicked and vain man who expected everyone to bow down to him. And Esther's uncle Mordecai

refused to bow down to Haman  because Jews are to bow down only to


God. Not content to just punish just Mordecai, Haman  decided to



destroy all the Jewish people in Persia. Haman  went to the king, slandered the Jews, and convinced the king to go along with his plans. Lots or *PURIM* were cast to determine the exact day when all the Jews in the Persian Empire would be killed. Upon learning of this, the good Mordecai tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and began walking through the city, crying loudly.

When Esther, back at the palace, heard of Mordecai's behavior, she sent a messenger to discover what was troubling her relative. Mordecai explained the details of the evil decree and instructed Esther to intercede on behalf of her people. Problem was: the queen was never to intrude upon the king. To do so was punishable by death. But Mordecai told Esther, "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, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish.

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (Esther 4:13-14) So Esther agreed to appear before the king, but because this was such a dangerous undertaking, she asked Mordecai to have all the Jews join her in a three-day fast, a time of prayer for a good outcome for her, as well as for themselves.

At the end of the three-day fast, Esther entered the king's inner court dressed in her fanciest royal robes. The king asked Esther what she wanted.


Esther replied that she wished to invite the king and Haman  to a banquet. The king agreed, and after that feast, Esther asked the king and


Haman  to return for another banquet the next night. Haman  left that dinner party with the king and queen all puffed up with his own self-importance and pride, but his feelings turned to anger when he happened to see Mordecai. Still fuming about Mordecai when he arrived


home, Haman  was advised by his wife, Zeresh, to just go ahead and

build a gallows to hang Mordecai. Haman  ordered work to begin on the gallows.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, the king discovered that Mordecai had never been rewarded for saving him from an assassination plot of two servants. So


the king decided that he'd have his chief advisor Haman  advise him on how Mordecai should be rewarded. So the next time he had the opportunity,


the king asked Haman,  "What should be done for the man the king


wishes to reward?" Haman,  believing that the king intended to reward him, replied that the honoree should be dressed in royal clothing, ride upon a royal horse, and be led through the city streets by an official proclaiming, "This is what is done to the man the king wishes to honor!"


The king agreed and instructed Haman  to carry out all this for

Mordecai! Crestfallen, Haman  followed the king's orders. Haman's

 daughter, mistakenly believing that her father was being led by Mordecai, dumped garbage on her father, the horses' leader.

At Esther's second banquet, Haman's  downfall continued. Esther

revealed Haman's  villainous plot. She was even so bold as to reveal the fact that she was Jewish. She asked the king to spare her people. The king,

consumed with anger, ordered that Haman  be hanged on the gallows he had built for Mordecai. The king elevated Mordecai to a position of great influence and took steps to save the Jews from annihilation.

Ever since, Jews have observed Purim. The day before Purim is a day of fasting, in memory of Esther's fast. The fast is then followed by two days of dancing, merrymaking, feasting, and gladness. (From Purim On The Net)

It's a great story, isn't it? Commentators always point out that the name of God is not mentioned in the story. But it's clear that God is off-stage, watching what his characters will do, isn't it? And isn't that the way we, for the most part, experience God? God doesn't speak to us, as he did to Abraham, to Moses, to Samuel. But we know that God is nonetheless off-stage watching the choices we make, how we live our lives, whether or not we're living our lives using the time, talents, and resources he's given us.

Several years ago a police officer received a call to respond to a drowning in a small lake. Aware that at its deepest place, the lake was only five feet deep, the officer assumed that the victim was a child. When he arrived, however, he was shocked to discover that the victim was a six-foot-tall man who had fallen out of a boat. The officer imagined the man thrashing and fighting the water until he was completely exhausted and gave up, accepting

his fate. If the man had only used his God-given legs and feet, if he'd only stood up, he wouldn't have drowned.

Often when the storms of life hit, we don't think of taking action ourselves, of doing something to save ourselves or to save others. We tend to look around, expecting others or even God to do something. We wonder why someone doesn't do something. Sometimes we hold back doing something ourselves, for we know that if we take a stand, we'll put ourselves at risk. So we think, "Let someone else stick his neck out." We forget that we are the ones who have been called to stand up, to take a stand. We forget that Jesus has told us, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:31-37). We forget that, as our epistle lesson for today reminds us, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline" (II Timothy 1:7).

God has equipped us to do his work in the world. He's given us minds and talents and abilities and resources and opportunities to solve our problems and the problems of the world. And he's given us each other, placed us in communities, so that working together, we have even more resources than we have alone.

God has given us all that we need to make the choices that he hopes we will make, to do the right thing. He's off-stage watching how we live our lives, whether or not we're living our lives using the time, talents, and resources he's given us, answering the call he has placed on our lives, to love him and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So as situations arise in our day-to-day living, let us call to mind those words that Mordecai spoke to Esther: "Do you think that by burying your head in the sand that you will escape any more than those around you? If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise from another quarter, but you and your family may perish. Besides, who knows? Perhaps you have come to this situation for just such a time as this." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 16, 2010

