

For Such a Time as This

Readings: 'A Morning Offering' by John O'Donohue
'A Journey' by Nikki Giovanni
'The Envoy of Mr. Cogito' by Zbigniew Herbert

One of my mentors always introduces ancient wisdom stories with these words: none of this happened, all of it's true. It reminds us that ancient stories hold meaningful truths – that's why they're told over and over and passed through the generations. It reminds us that these ancient stories are not history. They did not happen in fact, but that is not why the story matters. They are not historical truth, but they are truth.

I have an ancient story to tell you today. None of this happened; all of it's true.

This story is set in ancient Persia, in the fifth century before the common era. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had been defeated and the members of the Jewish elite were taken into exile in Babylon and later Persia. That context is history. The story isn't. The story is told in the book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible.

There is a King named Ahasuerus. His queen disobeys an order so he takes away her royal title and sought a new queen. All of the most beautiful women in the empire come to the palace so Ahasuerus can choose his next queen. Mordecai is a low level official in the King's palace. He is also a Jew. That detail is important for our story. When he hears about the search for a new queen, he volunteers his niece, Esther, a beautiful orphan who he had raised. He tells her not to tell anyone that she is Jewish.

So off Esther goes to the palace, where she is among many other young women hoping to become queen. They are cared for by palace servants and given cosmetic treatments for a year. Then, each takes their turn with the King, spending a night with him. When Esther has her turn, the King declares that he loves her more than all the other women and she becomes queen.

Meanwhile, Mordecai overhears two palace guards plotting to assassinate the king. He passes this information along to Esther, who tells the king and the plot is thwarted. The fact that Mordecai told Esther about the assassination plot is recorded in the King's record book. That's another detail that matters later.

Now, our villain enters the scene. Haman is the king's top official. He and Mordecai do not get along. The reason is never fully explained. One day, some time after has become Queen, Mordecai fails to pay Haman the respect Haman thinks he's entitled to. In response, Haman decides to destroy all of the Jews in the Kingdom. Haman approaches the king one day and says, 'There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries.' (Esth. 3:8-9). Haman bribes the king so he will commit genocide. The king has no animosity to the Jews, but he lets policy be made by the highest bidder. The king then issues a declaration. Eleven months from now, all the Jews in the Kingdom will be killed.

Of course, the Jews were frightened. Some wept; some moaned; some mourned; some started strategizing. Mordecai sent a message to Esther, encouraging her to speak to the king about this, to change

his mind. Esther was frightened too. She knew the king had a temper and it would be breaking protocol for her to approach him like that. He might get rid of her the way he got rid of the last queen. Esther has a pretty good life. Why should she stick her neck out for the Jews? We can infer from the text that Esther is not a very observant Jew. By this point in the story, she has lived in the palace for over a year and no one knows her religious identity. If she was observant, she would be keeping kosher and following other distinctive Jewish religious practices. Her servants, at least, would have noticed this and known she is Jewish. But her Jewishness is still a secret. We know she's non-practicing. That's the only way the story makes sense. Maybe Esther isn't particularly connected to the Jewish community. Maybe Esther thinks her high position and her lack of practice will keep her alive while the Jews around her are killed.

Mordecai responds to this in another message to Esther, again encouraging her to act. "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent 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 such a time as this." (Esth. 4:13-14). For such a time as this. Esther is in the right place at the right time to save her people. She decides to act.

Meanwhile, the villain Haman, is not content with his plan to kill all the Jews in eleven months. He wants to see Mordecai dead sooner. He starts building a gallows and hatching a plan to have Mordecai hanged. He works on this late into the night.

That same night, the King can't sleep. He asks his servant to bring him his record book. The text doesn't say why, but I suspect he intends to read boring records until he can fall asleep. But he does not find a boring record. He finds the details of the assassination attempt that Mordecai thwarted earlier, the one I already mentioned and told you to remember. The King realizes he needs to honor Mordecai for his courage, for saving the King's life.

The next morning, Haman comes to see the King. He's hoping to have a death warrant signed for Mordecai. The King takes the conversation in a different direction. The King asks Haman, "what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" Haman, thinking that he is the man that the king wishes to honor replies, "For the man the king wishes to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and a horse that the king has ridden, with a royal crown on its head. Let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials; let him robe the man the king wishes to honor, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.'" (Esth. 6:6-9). The King responds, "great idea! Can you do all that for Mordecai?" Haman does and he is enraged further.

Shortly after that, Haman and the King go to a banquet thrown by Esther. The king is pleased with the banquet and says he will give her whatever she wants, up to half of his kingdom. Esther says, "let my life be given me... 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, to be annihilated." (Esth 7:3) The King grants her request; he rescinds the order to have all of the Jews killed. He asks Esther, "Who is it that has planned to destroy your people? Esther responds, "this wicked Haman!" The king orders Haman to be hung on the very gallows Haman had intended for Mordecai. Esther has saved her people and Haman is no longer. Mordecai is promoted and takes Haman's former post as chief advisor. In every corner of the kingdom, the Jews celebrate the courage of Esther and Mordecai.

This is a powerful story, a story of palace intrigue and courage, a story of being in the right place at the right time. It is a story told annually on the Jewish holiday of Purim, which begins next Saturday night. It's

one of the most joyful days in the Jewish calendar. Traditionally, Purim is celebrated by the community reading The Book of Esther together. Children are encouraged to dress up in costume and to drown out every reading of Haman's name with booing, hissing, and noisemakers. Adults celebrate by drinking wine until they can no longer tell the difference between the phrases "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai."¹ People give gifts to one another and give to charity. It sounds like a great party.

But it is not just a party, of course. On Purim, people remember the courage of Esther and Mordecai and all of the others who have kept the Jewish people from destruction across the centuries. A few days ago, I spoke to Rabbi Matt Zerwekh, who serves Temple B'nai Israel, Kalamazoo's Reform Jewish community about this story. He shared that it's especially meaningful for his community this year to remember the story of Esther and Mordecai's triumph over Haman who would have destroyed them. It feels more important to remember that story as the Jewish community in our country grappled with the increasing threats made against Jewish community centers and rising incidents of anti-Semitic vandalism and violence. He also showed me a picture of his child in her Purim costume. His ten-month old daughter will be dressed up as a fuzzy pink monster. She's adorable.

If you don't know Rabbi Matt, you all will get a chance to this spring. He and I are planning to swap pulpits in May. I'll be preaching at the Temple and he'll be preaching here. There's a long and beautiful history connection our two congregations in Kalamazoo and we get to write the next chapter.

In the Book of Esther, Mordecai tells his niece, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." He tells her that she is in the right place at the right time to act to save her people. "For such a time as this," is the title of the sermon today because it is a phrase that I have been reflecting on in recent months. We have seen public policy shift. There have been immigration bans and lowered protections for transgender students in public schools. Our Jewish friends and neighbors and fellow congregants are feeling less secure in this country – as are people whose identities include being an immigrant or female or sick or disabled or Muslim and so many others. So many in our community, both within and beyond these walls feel less safe now. What am I called to do for such a time as this? What are we called to do as a church for such a time as this?

There is a position we might be in as a church for such a time as this. People's Church has been approached by some of our community partners about becoming home to a person or a family at risk for deportation. They have asked if someone could come live in our church. They have asked if we can provide a temporary home to a person or a family at risk for deportation with an especially sympathetic case—perhaps a parent at risk or being separated from their young children who are U.S. citizens or a young adult who was brought to this country illegally as a child and has known no other home than southwest Michigan. By housing a person or people, we might be able to give them time to get a hearing and a chance to stay in the country. We would also become part of a movement calling attention to injustice and advocating for a change in policy. We would be engaging in civil disobedience and publicly claiming that our current immigration system goes against our religious commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We would join with a much larger movement advocating for reform of our immigration system, working in all kinds of ways.

¹ Wylen, Stephen. *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989. Page 149

We have been asked to become a sanctuary church. We would be stepping into the ancient tradition of houses of worship as sanctuary, a tradition that is even older than the story I told you today. Churches legally had sanctuary status in medieval Europe; law enforcement could not enter. That is not the case here and now though current Immigration and Customs Enforcement policy states not to raid schools, hospitals, and houses of worship. The modern sanctuary movement relies on churches' status as a moral authority in our communities, a voice for our values in the public square. Sanctuary is something that we can offer only because we are a religious congregation. Should we answer this invitation? Are we here for such a time as this?

Several years ago, People's Church couldn't have even explored this idea because several years ago, there were no showers here. Someone could not live here without showers. You all included showers in the bathrooms that are part of the building expansion, a project we'll be talking about a lot in the coming weeks as we embark on a campaign to pay off the remaining construction debt. The showers make it possible for us to even consider this possibility. I know People's people didn't decide to expand our building for this purpose. I want to lift up that the expansion opens up so many possibilities, including this one.

Just because we can do this doesn't mean we should do this. We know that. We know we need to think and learn and reflect before we make a decision about something this significant in the life of our congregation. We know that this is a big decision, not a decision that I could make on our behalf or the board could make on our behalf. This is a decision we need to make together. To get to our decision we're going to be learning and talking about this a lot in the coming months, on top of everything else we're doing in the coming months. There will be opportunities to learn about our current immigration system and how we got to this place where 11 million people are in this country illegally, where so many industries rely on the labor of these undocumented people. We are going to seek legal advice and find out what risks we would be taking if we do this. We are going to be talking about what it would mean to engage in civil disobedience together as a congregation, to open our doors in this way, to take a public stand together. We are going to continue to build relationships in the community with those who have asked us to become a sanctuary. We will learn more about what we are being asked to do and how decisions about who might live here would be decided. If, in all this learning and reflecting and partnership-building, it becomes clear that we as a community want to act in this way, members of our church will vote on this at our congregational meeting in May. If it becomes clear that this is contentious, that a vote on this issue would weaken our congregation, there will be no vote. We will not do it.

In this time of reflection, exploration and discovery, I invite you to focus on "do we want to do this?" not "how are we going to do this?" The details of how are best worked out when we know if we want to. We have the capability, though it will take careful planning and some adjustment to how we are used to doing things around here.

We act in so many ways, individually and collectively to make our values real in the world. The question we will be answering in the coming months is if we want to live our values in this particular way or in other ways.

So let us discern, reflect, explore what this particular moment is calling out for us to be as a community. May we act, individually and collectively, to bring more love and justice to a time such as this. May we be courageous like Esther and Mordecai. May we keep on moving forward. May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.