

“What’s a Nice Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This?”

Esther 4:12-14

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The Journey, by David Whyte

Above the mountains
the geese turn into
the light again

painting their
black silhouettes
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything
has to be
inscribed across
the heavens

so you can find
the one line
already written
inside you.

Sometimes it takes
a great sky
to find that

first, bright
and indescribable
wedge of freedom
in your own heart.

Sometimes with
the bones of
the black sticks left
when the fire has gone out,

Someone has written
something new
in the ashes of your life.

You are not leaving.
even as the light
fades quickly now,
you are arriving.

Esther was a nice girl. We know this because in the Veggie Tales version of the story of Esther – and I don't know about you, but that's how *I* learned this story – Esther is a green onion. And what could be nicer than a green onion? It has mild flavor, plays well with others, doesn't scream for attention. It's slender, makes room in the veggie drawer, is inexpensive and useful. It's nice.

Her uncle Mordecai is a pea, the clueless King is a cucumber, and the evil Haman is a potato.

Need I say more?

The story of Esther is a favorite for children's Bibles and the focus of the Jewish spring holiday of Purim, where everyone gets to dress up and make lots of noise. The plot of the Esther story, according to the children's versions, is that she is a brave girl who becomes queen and courageously saves her people.

The actual story of Esther is complicated, violent and morally ambiguous. It takes place in the great Persian Empire, 475 years before Christ. A hundred years previously, the Jews had been taken into exile in Babylon. Fifty years after that, Babylon was conquered by the Persians and they were allowed to return home. Some Jews chose to stay where they were. Mordecai and Esther were among them.

No matter where they were, the Jews of the 5th C BC lived under constant threat. They were hated by many, including, Haman, the king's chief advisor who persuaded the king to issue a decree to slaughter all the Jews in his Empire. In those days, the Persian king was truly all powerful. When he passed a law, that law could not be changed, even if it turned out to be a disaster.

In other words, they lived under an unworkable legislative system and an unreliable monarch, controlled by forces that hated them and wanted to eliminate them.

Esther's personal situation was even more precarious: she was a young, orphaned female who had managed - by dint of her beauty and a fair amount of deception encouraged by her uncle Mordecai - to find her way into the court of the king, a pompous man who was not concerned with much of anything beside himself. The king had done away with his first queen, who had refused to let him humiliate her in front of his friends. And then he chose Esther as her replacement.

What was a nice girl like her doing in a place like that?

Perhaps you have felt something similar....

I am not the smartest or the most charismatic or physically attractive, you may have thought. I have a few helpful skills; I offer them in service Christ and the church. I am doing the best I can with what I have. And then - all around me, in ways predictable and unpredictable -- the church starts falling apart! Or at least it threatens to. What am I supposed to do now?

What's a nice person like me doing in a place like this?

Esther was doing the best she could with what she had. She had followed her uncle's advice. She had been polite and obedient. She'd kept quiet about being Jewish and she'd gotten pretty far, all things considered.

But being queen did not give Esther the power one might imagine. Remember what had happened to Queen #1. And no one, not even Queen #2, got to address the king without his permission.

This is the context for Mordecai's conversation with Esther.

"Look, Esther, you're the only one who can do something about this." You can feel Esther's stomach muscles tighten; her breath gets short. She tries to escape: "But don't you realize that if I approach the king without his permission I could die?"

"What makes you think you're going to survive this massacre?" Mordecai says coolly. "Being queen won't help. If you keep silence and do nothing at this moment, God will eventually turn this whole thing around. But it'll be too late for you and me."

"Maybe this is exactly *why* you became queen. You thought it was for saving yourself, but God thought it was for saving God's people. Maybe God put you here for exactly this moment, for just such a time as this."

We might call it a Mordecai Moment. He challenges Esther to claim her inheritance. He calls her to be the person God created her to be. Mordecai calls Esther to find the one line, already written inside her.

David Whyte, the poet who wrote that line, also says this about being the person God created us to be. That "location" in the world, he says, "is the meeting between inheritance and horizon, between what has been told, what can be told and what is yet to be told, between our practical abilities and our relationship to the gravitational mystery that pulls us on."

The soul of leadership, writes Ruth Haley Barton, “begins with who we are – really. Not who we think we are, not who we would like to be, not who others believe us to be. God’s call includes (yet is not limited to) the particularities of our life, our heritage, our personality, our foibles, our passions and deepest orientation, and even our current life situation.”

“Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given to me at birth by God.”

To be a bold and effective leader “is not about making a brilliant career move. It is not about security. It is not about success or failure or anything else the ego wants for us. It is not about choosing among several attractive options. This is about the Spirit of God setting us on our feet and telling us, ‘This is yours to do.’ It is the call to be who we are and at the same time to become more than we can yet envision.”

“If you don’t speak up at this very important time,” Mordecai said to Esther, “relief and rescue will appear for the Jews from another place, but you and all the rest of us will die. But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be where you are and who you are.”

Have you had a moment like that? Who or what has been your Mordecai?

Usually, it takes you by surprise. Someone stops you in the parking lot after worship, or runs into you – apparently by coincidence – in the supermarket aisle. You can tell by the tone of voice that what you are about to hear is something different. Perhaps your stomach muscles tighten and your breath gets short. This could change everything...

- Have you ever thought of...
- You have the gift of...
- What are you waiting for?
- We need someone like you...
- I see God calling you to...

Much is made of the fact that God is not mentioned in the Book of Esther. Did you notice that? God does not speak or act in the whole story. No God, no Torah, no Jerusalem, no Temple. No burning bushes, no miracles by the sea. Not only is God not a character in the Book of Esther, God is not even mentioned – not once, not even in the course of a prayer.

But it was true then and is true now that there is no chance thing through which God cannot speak. God is present even when God is absent. And if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we may be able to discern where God is acting in our lives.

So I would like to propose that God does show up in this story, right at the moment we are talking about: in the gap between verse 14 and verse 15.

Mordecai says what he needs to say, “Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be here”... and Esther replies, “Go, gather all the Jews and tell them to...help me be brave.” Right there, in that space, that gap, God’s Spirit moves and Esther recognizes the line already written inside her. Now she knows what she, such a nice girl, is doing in a place like that.

Sometimes God shows up in burning bushes, or descending doves, or blinding lightening that knocks you off your horse. Sometimes God shows up in the gaps, in the silence, in the tightening

of your stomach muscles and the almost imperceptible pause for breath in which you consider in a new way just what it is you are doing here.

Esther had some things going for her: She had beauty. She had a certain kind of training. She had a prophetic uncle and a powerful husband. But she didn't have everything: she didn't have any real power over her own life. She didn't have any security in the face of those who planned to kill her and her people.

What about you? You have some things going for you. You lack other things. Here's how Sam Wells describes the ambiguity of being a leader:

- Maybe you have the gift of great intelligence. Maybe you don't have great brains, and are free of the burden of feeling you have to be clever all the time.
- Maybe you have good looks. Maybe you don't have good looks, and are free of the projections and expectations good looks can bring.
- Maybe you have had a calm and stable family life, and understand what trust and promise-keeping and security mean. Maybe you have known none of these things, and your experience of hardship and anxiety and fear is of value to others.
- Maybe you have a prominent public role, as a pastor or a business person or some other job that provides you with a big desk. Or maybe you have the freedom of being out of the limelight, your actions not being perpetually judged and your words not being endlessly evaluated.

Esther did not have everything, but she had enough.

And what does Esther do? She resolves that she will face up to her responsibility and go in to the king. She recognizes that what she must do includes disclosing her true identity as a Jew. She takes stock of the realities of her situation and says simply, “If I perish, I perish.” She goes to the heart of the empire to save God’s people.

But note! Esther does not immediately run headlong into the palace and demand to speak to the king. She realizes that she needs more than her own strength, so she uses a spiritual tradition of her people and calls on them to fast with her.

She prepares, she bides her time, she plans for effective action. Even as she reveals her true self to the king, she does so carefully and strategically. She organizes two luxurious banquets to which she invites both the king and Haman, and she leads the king to see for himself what is really going on. He orders Haman’s execution and gives the Jews permission to defend themselves against his previous decree to slaughter them all.

Esther did not have everything, but she had enough. So do you.

She used what she had – courage, spiritual discipline, patience, strategy, community. So can you.

She endured a long period of preparation, the final purpose of which for most of the time she didn’t understand. Maybe this is how you feel too.

Esther could have hidden her identity and enjoyed the luxury of being queen, but she listened to her Mordecai. So should you.

God needs you. Christ needs you. The church needs you.

- Maybe you've been coming to Annual Conferences for decades now. You have seen church fights come and church fights go. Maybe you are thinking, "I'm too old to get involved this time. This too will pass. We just need to wait it out."
- Maybe you're a mid-career professional thinking, "Just let me get my kids through college and my parents into assisted living and then I'll speak up. I'm too busy to get involved. Let someone with more time handle this."
- Maybe you're a Provisional Member thinking, "I'll wait 'til I get my Full Membership."
- Maybe you're a Local Pastor thinking "I don't have any power."
- Maybe you're young and sharp and ready to rock and roll, and you're thinking "There's got to be an easier denomination to be part of."

Maybe.... Or maybe God has called you to this place for just such a moment as this.

Sometimes everything
Has to be inscribed
Across the heavens

So you can find
The one line
Already written
Inside you.

You are not leaving.
Even as the light
Fades quickly now.
You are arriving.

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