

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

For such a time as this...

Scripture: Esther 4:1-17

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 3

Advent Candle: People in Darkness vs 3 [124] (no slides—hymnal 124)

Opening Hymn: Hail to the Lord's Anointed [115]

Choruses: Whom shall I fear (God of Angel Armies), Above all

Communion Hymn: This I believe [the creed]

Closing Hymn: Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel [122]

Second Sunday of Advent

Communion Sunday

Have any of you been following the world cup?

At my home, some of us have been getting up at 5:00 am
To watch live or recorded matches.

This past week, we let our youngest stay home

To watch the final match between Morocco and Canada.

It was a decent match for Canada.

We controlled the ball for most of the game,
But had a hard time getting clear shots on net.

Morocco was stronger and more talented.

They bested us 2 to 1.

Canada and Morocco are nearly identical

When it comes to population, right around 38 million.

While are stronger at soccer,

Canada surpasses them in many other metrics.

We have better health,

Greater political stability,

Stronger civil rights.

The average Canadian's income is 14 times greater
Than that of the average Moroccan.ⁱ

I think you'd all agree
that soccer scores aside
we are privileged by comparison.

And for many Canadians, our advantages
Extends beyond socio/economics.

Many of us in Canada hold an ethnic/color privilege.
Band-Aids come in the color of our skin
And the people on TV look just like us.

Many of us in Canada enjoy a religious privilege.
Christian celebrations are civic holidays,
And churches are found in every neighborhood.

Many of us in Canada enjoy privileges
that come with our gender or our abilities.

We are treated more respectfully than others in conversation,
We don't need to inquire whether the facility's bathroom
Accommodates a wheelchair.ⁱⁱ

Sometimes a discussion about privilege turns into a discussion
About who is the most marginalised
and therefore, has the greatest claim on others.

Instead, I believe the real question, especially for Christians,
 Is whether we see these advantages
 As gifts to be used in the service of Christ.

If we confess with the Heidelberg Catechism:

“I am not my own,
 but belong with body and soul,
 both in life and in death,
 to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.”

Then how are we to be good stewards,
 Good managers,
 Of all the blessings, the privileges, the advantages,
 that God has showered on us.

PAUSE

Today’s story comes to us from the Bible’s book of Esther.
 The book of Esther stands out
 as unusual among the books of the Bible
 In that God isn’t mentioned *explicitly*.

If fact some of the ancient Bible editors were so troubled by this fact,
 That they included extra sections
 (sections you can find in the Jerusalem Bible)
 That add an explicit religious flavor,
 mentioning God at least 50 times.ⁱⁱⁱ

For those who are attentive to the narrative
 I think you’ll find that God is quite present in the story
 Whether mentioned explicitly or not.

As for the story's historical location,
Today's lesson follows directly
From our lesson last week.

Last week the prophet Habakkuk
Spoke of Israel being disciplined
With the rod of Babylon
And Babylon being punished in turn.

As promised Babylon conquered Judah.
As promised Babylon itself was conquered,
Defeated by the Persians.

When had Babylon invaded Judah,
Many of the people of Israel were deported.
In the Persian Empire that followed
these deported Jews had been allowed
To return to their homeland.

But while many returned some remained.
Some of this diaspora even made their homes in Susa,
Persia's capital city.

Which brings us to Esther.
Esther's story comes from the heart of the Persian Empire
From among that Jewish diaspora that remained.

All things considered Esther didn't start life with a lot of privilege
She was a female in a patriarchal society.
As part of the Jewish diaspora in Susa,
She was an ethnic and religious outsider.

To top this off she was an orphan.

She had no advantage of a mother or father
and was raised by her older cousin, Mordecai.

While Esther had a rough start in life,
things soon take a turn for the better.

Because of her beauty (and likely winsome character)
She becomes a contestant on Persia's version of *The Bachelor*.
She is the sole victor in this contest
and becomes the new bride of Persia's king.

But not long after her coronation,
The king's second in command, Haman
feels slighted by Esther's cousin Mordecai.

Haman convinces King Xerxes that the Jews are all lawless,
And need to be eliminated.

In today's reading we encounter
Mordecai comes to Esther seeking assistance.
Hearing about Haman's genocidal agenda,
He shows up at the king's gate, weeping and wailing,
Clothed in sackcloth and ashes.

Esther is now far removed
from her own people's everyday challenges.

So when Mordecai comes to the gate
Esther's first response is to stop him from making a scene.
She sends out a servant with fresh clothes.

Only after Mordecai rejects this 'charity' does Esther inquire
(through her servant) about Mordecai's troubles.

Mordecai gives her the news about Haman's terrible plot.
He provides a copy of the king's edict as witness.
He tells her she needs to go to the king
and put an end to the homicidal plan.

Despite now knowing what is at stake,
Esther balks at Mordecai's request.

To intervene would require breaking a law
and coming into the king's presence uninvited.
If the king didn't welcome her intrusion
She would be put to death.

[Keep in mind that the king had other women in his life (concubines).
Keep in mind that he hadn't called on Esther in over a month.
Keep in mind that the previous Queen had been dismissed.]

In her privilege, Esther did have access to the king.
But by speaking to him,
she would be risking that very privilege
She had only recently gained.

But Mordecai doesn't back down.
Mordecai challenges Esther to recognise
that the fate of her and her people are tied together.

Then he invites her to consider
The fortuitous turn of events in her own life,
Whether she had become queen:
“for such a time as this?”^{iv}

Mordecai challenges her to consider whether her advantages
Were intended for her private enjoyment,
Or whether in God’s sovereignty
she had been put in this place
So she be an instrument of God’s help.

Hearing these words,
Esther changes her position.
She resolves to risk all her new privilege, even her life,
For the possibility that others might be saved.

She won’t do it alone, however,
But challenges Mordecai
to enlist the people to fast for her for three days.

With the support of her ethnic/religious community
and the support of her own staff
Esther will step forward and take the risk.

“I will go to the king, even though it is against the law.” She says.
“And if I perish, I perish.”^v

You can read the story to find out
How things go for Esther and her people.

But regardless how things worked out
It is important to recognise this decisive moment.

Mordecai challenged Esther to realise

Life isn't simply about enjoying one's privileges.

God makes us stewards of these blessings, these advantages,

So that we can use them and risk them

For the benefit of others.

PAUSE

None of us are kings or queens,

But we all have been given many privileges.

So how are you going risk these advantages,

In the service of Christ,

For the benefit of others.

Sometimes our first reaction to cries for help

Is thoughtless and dismissive.

We are like Esther's first response to Mordecai.

"Why is my cousin at the gate wearing rags and weeping?

I'll send out a set of clothing and maybe he will leave."

Sometimes we are dismissive of requests for help.

We don't want to be bothered.

As privileged people have more important things to consider

Like what we are having for supper,

Or the upcoming weekend's activities.

But because of Mordecai's persistence

Either is forced to step into Mordecai's world

Back into the world of people without her advantages.

Esther takes the time to hear his concerns,
 To consider how their futures are intertwined,
 To imagine how God
 might have already given her the resources
 To address the people's need.

So how about you?

This season you will receive all sorts of request for assistance:
 Some will demand your time
 Some will require your money.
 Some will require your talent.

All will require you attention.

So will you be like Esther and stop and listen?
 Will you use your blessings for the benefit of others?

Have you too been placed here "for such a time as this?"

May God fill us with grace and courage this season
 to notice the needs of others
 as we seek to serve Christ.

Amen.

ⁱ see "Country comparison: Canada / Morocco." Worlddata, 2 Dec. 2022, www.worlddata.info/country-comparison.php?country1=CAN&country2=MAR.

ⁱⁱ See "5 main types of privileges | Hive Learning." Hive Learning, 30 Nov. 2021, www.hivelearning.com/site/resource/diversity-inclusion/5-main-types-of-privileges.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Esther: Apocrypha | Jewish Women's Archive." Jewish Women's Archive, 2 Dec. 2022, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/esther-apocrypha.

^{iv} Esther 4:14 NIV

^v Esther 4:16 NIV