

## “Changing The World Begins With You”

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Esther 7:1-10

Mark 9:38-50

*Then Queen Esther answered,*

*“If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king,  
let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request.*

*For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated.*

*Esther 7:3-4<sup>a</sup>*

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to see a new vision that is really an old one – unity of people of goodwill.

Help us to listen for how you are still speaking and calling us to be that

Beloved Community that is possible in this time and place.

Amen

In 1999, the United Church of Christ held its 22<sup>nd</sup> General Synod at Providence, RI  
and the theme of the gathering was, ‘For Such a Time as This.’

This was a reference to the words of Mordecai to Queen Esther:

*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 house will perish.*

*And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom  
for such a time as this?”*

At the time, I was disappointed that “For Such a Time as This”  
was not strong enough, not dynamic enough, not dramatic enough,  
as a vision to guide us into the new millennium.

So, what was our vision?

I felt the same way about the Stillspeaking Initiative when it was introduced in 2004  
which was based on a quote by Gracie Allen to George Burns:

“Don’t put a period where God has placed a comma” and then this postscript,  
“God is still speaking.”

Shortly afterwards, this message got a response from fundamentalists who said,  
“Don’t put a question mark where God has placed a period.”

However, over time I saw how others responded to this idea  
that God wasn’t finished talking yet, that God twasn’t finished yet.

Mainline Protestants – like UCCers, Orthodox, and Catholic Christians are less likely  
to claim that God speaks to us directly, unlike our conservative Christian  
brothers & sisters, especially African-American Christians.

Now, whether that is true or not, depends on the individuals’ relationship to God –  
and how well they are *listening*.

Willard, p.2

But this faith statement has been a liberating invitation for us as Christians of the United Church of Christ to hear this call and believe that God is still speaking, still acting in our time... And who knows how we may be called to serve God through Christ 'for such a time as this?'

The Book of Esther is about the Jewish people who remained in Babylon after the Persian king, Cyrus, liberated them from the Babylonians. Esther was a beautiful girl who had been selected to be one of the wives of King Xerxes, and she became endeared to him.

However, no one in court knew that she was Jewish.

Later, Esther's uncle, Mordecai, learned that a corrupt government official named Haman, was plotting to annihilate the Jewish community.

Mordecai sent messengers to report this to Esther in the hopes that – as queen, she could alert King Xerxes to stop it.

In our first scripture lesson, we learned how Haman was exposed and denounced, but Esther was not going to risk helping at first.

Here's the text that describes how she was convinced...

*[10] Then Esther spoke ... a message for Mor'decai, saying,*

*[11] "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law; all alike are to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he may live. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."*

*[12] And they told Mor'decai what Esther had said.*

*[13] Then Mor'decai told them to return answer to Esther,*

*"Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.*

*[14] 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 house will perish.*

*And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"*

*[15] Then Esther told them to reply to Mor'decai,*

*[16] "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day.*

*I and my maids will also fast as you do.*

*Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."*

*[17] Mor'decai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

Willard, p.3

This Bible story tells how an ancient genocide against the Jews was averted, Unfortunately in the history of our world ever since, there have been such “pogroms” actually carried out – including the Holocaust which is still in living memory.

During the most recent GOP presidential debate, political commentator and author, Ann Coulter sent a message on social media – in this case, twitter, concerning the frequency that ‘Israel’ was mentioned by the would-be candidates.

She made a contemptuous reference to Jewish people, dismissing their influence in America.

When her comment drew criticism, she regrouped to deflect criticism by trying to suggest the debaters were pandering to Evangelicals instead.

<http://www.vox.com/2015/9/21/9365277/ann-coulters-anti-semitic-tweet>

Either way, Coulter revealed a mindset that has come to characterize American socio-political debate these days – overt prejudice against minorities in this case, antisemitism, as well as racism and sexism.

By singling out the Jewish people, Ms. Coulter has set herself up as a lightning rod for reaction from the Jewish community.

It just so happened that the local Barnes & Noble hosted her for a book-signing yesterday – which became an opportunity for the Jewish people of our community to express their protest.

Temple Shalom’s president, Steve Lowe, specifically invited us to stand with them for an ‘informational demonstration’ to raise awareness that such language as Coulter’s hateful statement will not go unchallenged.

Jewish people know their history and that they cannot let such behavior pass – they cannot be silent and they have said,

‘Never again!’ to being victimized by any society.

Perhaps this instance can be a beginning to blunt the blatant racist and sexist banter that is shamelessly aired on our media against immigrants, ethnic minorities, and gender-specific people by bringing attention to its consequences.

By the way, I called Imam Sykes to join the demonstration yesterday.

He was not able to do this because of the Festival of Eid is this weekend which is the biggest holiday for Muslims as they celebrate Abraham’s unwavering devotion to God.

But Imam Sykes said he’d otherwise have been here to stand with us.

By the way, the second Sunday in December will be “Love Sunday” when we will invite Sheldon Skurow of Temple Shalom and Imam Sykes to participate in our Advent service of worship.

Willard, p.4

As the UCC at the Villages, we have benefitted from our relationship with our Jewish neighbors at Temple Shalom, who took us in for 3 years when we did not have our own church building.

5 years ago, the time came for us to move on down the road to our own home, they walked with us and sang a blessing in our narthex, and their spiritual leader, Sheldon Skurow, gave the benediction.

They have been good neighbors to us and so we are to them.

Today, we are invited us to participate in their Festival of Tabernacles called Sukkoth – a harvest festival that also acknowledges God as a more reliable shelter than anything we can construct.

To illustrate this, the “sukkah” [soo’-kah] or tabernacle itself, is a kind of pergola with a flimsy roof that you have to be able to see through.

I have never been to a Sukkoth before, but I have been told that we should bring fruit – like apples, to be used to decorate the sukkah; and we should also bring lawn chairs, as well as sunscreen.

When we go to such an event, we go to learn and gain some insight not only about Jewish people and their traditions, but also about our Lord Jesus and the ‘church’ he grew up in, helping us to be better Christians.

Such activities are an adventure of the Spirit and by doing them, we are doing what the United Church of Christ is all about as it was expressed in our church’s original motto:

“That They May All Be One” – Jesus’ words from John 17:21.

One in the Spirit, that is, if not one in custom or tradition.

What we are doing these days is a vestige of the ecumenical and interfaith movements of the post-WWII era that have fallen out of fashion.

Perhaps we are helping others to see and reclaim that hopeful vision of a Beloved Community which Jesus described as a “house” of “many mansions”.

Rabbi Hillel is thought to be the source of this quote:

*If not us, who? If not now when?*

But this belief we hold to: that ‘God is still speaking’ and calling us to be of one Spirit – the Spirit that creates a loving community, this vision of faith is something we can do– and what we are doing.

So, who knows? Perhaps this how we have been called to serve God through Christ ‘for such a time as this?’

Amen

*Our first scripture lesson today is Esther 7:1-10 from the Common English Bible.  
Her uncle Mordecai warned Queen Esther that even she would not escape  
the genocide planned by Haman against the Jews –  
but perhaps as Persian royalty, she was in position to make a difference  
for the good...*

<sup>1</sup>So the king and Haman went in to feast  
with Queen Esther.

<sup>2</sup>And on the second day, as they were drinking wine,  
the king again said to Esther,

“What is your petition, Queen Esther?

It shall be granted you. And what is your request?

Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”

<sup>3</sup>Then Queen Esther answered,

“If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king,  
let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request.

<sup>4</sup>For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain,  
and to be annihilated.

If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women,

I would have held my peace;

for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.”

<sup>5</sup>Then King [Xerxes] said to Queen Esther,

“Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?”

<sup>6</sup>And Esther said,

“A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”

Then Haman was in terror before the king and the queen.

<sup>7</sup>And the king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden;

but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther,

for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king.

<sup>8</sup>And the king returned from the palace garden

to the place where they were drinking wine,

as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was;

and the king said,

“Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?”

As the words left the mouth of the king,

they covered Haman’s face.

<sup>9</sup>Then said Harbo’na, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king,

“Moreover, the gallows which Haman has prepared for Mor’decai,

whose word saved the king, is standing in Haman’s house,

fifty cubits high.”

<sup>10</sup>And the king said,

“Hang him on that.”

So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mor’decai.

Then the anger of the king abated.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*

Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him,

“Teacher, we saw a man casting out demons in your name,  
and we forbade him, because he was not following us.”

39 But Jesus said,

“Do not forbid him;  
for no one who does a mighty work in my name  
will be able soon after to speak evil of me.

40 For he that is not against us is for us.

41 For truly, I say to you,

whoever gives you a cup of water to drink  
because you bear the name of Christ,  
will by no means lose his reward.

42 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,  
it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck  
and he were thrown into the sea.

43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off;  
it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands  
to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off;  
it is better for you to enter life lame  
than with two feet to be thrown into hell.

47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out;  
it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye  
than with two eyes to be thrown into hell,  
48 where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

49 For every one will be salted with fire.

50 Salt is good; but if the salt has lost its saltness, how will you season it?  
Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”