

“Such a time as this”

Esther 4:12-17

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Toward the end of the summer of 2016, we received a phone call from our daughter Hayley. We could immediately sense the discouragement and disappointment in her voice. We had a trip on our calendars to travel to St. John’s Newfoundland to spend a week with Hayley and her husband Jonathan. Our trips to Newfoundland were always a highlight of the year. Unfortunately, Hayley had been given an assignment with work that required her to leave Newfoundland during the time of our visit and to be at work in Houston. Our tickets were already booked. Hayley’s husband Jonathan was going to be in Newfoundland. We made the trek. Even though Hayley was not there, we ended up having a very meaningful time with Jonathan.

It was during that visit in the late summer of 2016 that Jonathan sidled up to me in a little store we were visiting and handed me a copy of a book. He said, “I think you would enjoy this.” The book was about Newfoundland, and in particular, a time when the people of Newfoundland faced an enormous and daunting challenge. When faced with this enormous and daunting challenge, the people of Newfoundland not only rose to the occasion, the people of Newfoundland met the challenge in a way that has served to inspire countless people such as theater audiences on Broadway and around the world, including a group of 20 or so members and friends of Dunn’s Corners, who gathered just a month ago to watch the musical entitled, “Come From Away.” The book Jonathan placed in my hand was, “The Day the World Came to Town.” It tells the story of how Gander, Newfoundland responded to the 7,000 people whose flights were grounded at their airfield on September 11, 2001.

What happened in Gander, Newfoundland on 9/11 ties in neatly with what happened in Susa, the capitol of Persia, sometime about 400 years before the time of Christ. What happened in Susa and what happened in Gander are separated by many miles and oceans and land

masses and mountains, to say nothing of the time difference of nearly 2,500 years. Despite all the vast differences between Susa and Gander, there is something shared, something that is at the very heart of what it means to be human. In Susa, a young woman named Esther was alerted to an impending disaster by her cousin who had become her father figure, a man named Mordecai. Esther was more than a young woman. Esther was the Queen of Persia. Mordecai was convinced that Esther had it in her power to help avert the crisis, if she would just approach the King of Persia and make the dire need known. It is the words Mordecai says to Esther that link ancient Susa on the other side of the globe and in a time far, far away to Gander, Newfoundland, a modern city in our modern world. Mordecai says to Esther, “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this.?”

Esther, who balked at stepping up to her vital responsibility until Mordecai spoke those words to her ended up approaching the king. A decree had been declared that the Jews would be put to death. Esther’s initiative, Esther’s actions, Esther’s intervention saved the day. Esther’s initiative, Esther’s actions, Esther’s intervention brought life out of death. It was her time. It was her moment. As Mordecai said, it was her responsibility. Esther had been brought to that moment and that place for “such a time as this.”

As plane after plane after plane landed on a large and largely unused airfield in Gander, Newfoundland, the residents of the town, who barely outnumbered the visitors descending on their town, came to realize they were at that moment and in that place for “such a time as this.” And here our son-in-law, at that particular moment and in that particular place dropped in my hand a book about “The Day the World Came to Town.”

I immediately began reading that gripping story, a story full of heartbreak and a story full of hope, a story full of laughter and a story full of tears. As the summer ended and fall came in that year of 2016, something else was unfolding that was directly related to both Gander, Newfoundland, and Susa in Persia. Syrian refugees were fleeing their war-torn country and making their way toward Europe. Many of them

had gathered in Macedonia and spilled across the borders. Makeshift camps were established as the numbers of refugees soared.

While I was reading about Gander and 9/11, and as my thoughts were constantly turned to Esther and her being appointed to her royal position for such a time as this, a mission worker in Albania took a group of teens from the church in Albania, and they did something that once again bridged the gap of time and space and place with Esther so many years ago. That mission worker took the teens from the church where they all worshiped and served, and they traveled to where the Syrian refugees were living in makeshift shelters. They helped with all the many needs that are present when a people have had to flee their homeland with literally nothing to cling to.

Who was that mission worker who took the teens from the church to help at “Such a time as this?” His name is Mark. He’s from California. We met Mark at a summer camp outside of Santa Rosa, California in the 1980s. Mark was a camper at the camp, then became a counselor and a staff person, and he eventually attended seminary. We knew Mark and followed his progress from camper to counselor to staff person to seminarian, but we didn’t know him that well. He was from a different church and was always living and serving and studying in a different town.

In the spring of 1992 Julie was invited to be part of a team that was going to go to Albania. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism were still events fresh in the minds and lives of all who lived under the oppressive cloak of the iron curtain. Now in 1992 the doors to bring the gospel to the people of Albania were opening, and through some unexpected relationships and through divine providence, Julie and a group from Fresno, California had been invited to come and share with the people of Albania the good news about Jesus Christ. Because of the iron-clad rule of the communist regime, many in Albania had never heard the name of Jesus. What an opportunity. What a sense that Esther was looking over the shoulder of all who answered the call to go, as if that very moment was “for a time such as this.”

As the days drew near for Julie and the team to embark on this exciting mission trip, she got this feeling that she was supposed to invite

Mark, the fellow we had known for several years, to come and be part of the team. We didn't know Mark that well. We had never really worked together. But when God taps your shoulder, you pay attention. Or you should. Anyway, Julie paid attention. Just a few weeks before the trip, she contacted Mark and explained that it was sort of out of the blue and it was a big commitment and it was short notice, but she told Mark she felt like God was telling her to invite him to join their mission team to Albania. He said yes. Isn't that wonderful. God must have been working on his heart and tapping his shoulder at the same time he was working on Julie's heart and tapping her shoulder. Mark said yes. Mark went. Mark fell in love with the people and the ministry. Not long after that he moved to Albania. He gave his life to full-time mission work among the Albanians. He married a young woman who had grown up in a missionary family. They settled in Albania. They had children in Albania. The ministry grew and developed, and when the call came to help the overwhelming flood of refugees who were gathering in Macedonia and at the border, Mark and the teens of the church felt like God was calling them "for such a time as this."

When the people of South Africa emerged from the long decades lived under the apartheid form of government, they grappled with how to address the many wrongs that had caused so much division and pain. How does a nation experience healing from a scar so deep and painful? Some favored trials against perpetrators like the ones in Nuremburg, with the focus on justice and punishment. Others favored a general amnesty, simply wiping out the crimes with a wave of the hand, with the focus on forgiveness and hoping everyone would forget or develop a case of amnesia. The country chose instead to set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where those who would confess their offenses openly and before the ones they had harmed would receive amnesty. Offenders and victims would see each other face to face and through confession and the opportunity for forgiveness the hope was there would be both truth and reconciliation.

Desmond Tutu describes this journey toward truth and reconciliation in his moving book *No Future Without Forgiveness*. He, like so many in South Africa, leaned upon the good news of the gospel,

the witness that Jesus Christ tears down every dividing wall of hostility. One story told by Tutu showed how God used this faithful religious leader and servant of the church to bring forth the truth and to plant the seeds of reconciliation.

A white officer was brought before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to confess his role in the Bisho massacre. This officer was white, but under his command had been black soldiers. These black soldiers had been ordered to fire on unarmed black demonstrators and 28 unarmed demonstrators had died. After the white officer spoke, the black soldiers would step forward. The room that day was packed with a black crowd, many whom had lost loved ones in the massacre. Tutu describes the tension in the room as palpable. The white officer spoke: **“I say we are sorry. I say the burden of the Bisho massacre will be on our shoulders for the rest of our lives. We cannot wish it away. It happened. But please, I ask specifically the victims not forget, I cannot ask this, but to forgive us, to get the soldiers back into the community, accept them fully, to try to understand also the pressure they were under then. This is all I can do. I’m sorry, this I can say. I’m sorry.”**

Tutu watched this testimony take place. He writes, “That crowd, which had been close to lynching them, did something quite unexpected. It broke into thunderous applause! Unbelievable. The mood change was startling. The colonel’s colleagues joined him in apologizing, and when the applause died down I (Tutu) said:

‘Can we just keep a moment’s silence, please, because we are dealing with things that are very, very deep. It isn’t easy, as we all know, to ask for forgiveness, and it is also not easy to forgive, but we are a people who know that when someone cannot be forgiven there is no future.’”¹ In that moment, and many others, it was so clear Desmond Tutu was in his position of leadership “for such a time as this.”

I guess I should have warned you that even though Susa, the capitol city of the Persian Empire, is halfway around the world, and even though the events of the book of Esther are more than 2,000 years

¹ Desmon Tutu, No Future Without Forgiveness, 150, 151.

removed from us, the words Mordecai spoke to the Queen as the shadow of annihilation hung over the people of God, the words of Mordecai have a way of ringing in our ears at the most unexpected of times. It can even happen in church, that tap on the shoulder from God, that tug on your heart, that sense that God has put you here “for such a time as this.” Just ask Ed and Barbara Perkins.

Ed and Barbara are now deceased, but they would never forget the morning they showed up to Christ Church here in Westerly and sat in the pews when an announcement was made to the congregation. That morning they heard that there was a ten-year-old boy named John who needed a home. They talked about it and decided they would open their home. They opened their home, they opened their heart, and through it all God gave them a new son. Ed and Barbara Perkins had a new son, and John had a new family.

I discovered this beautiful story about a couple in church who heard God calling their names “for such a time as this” when John died a few years ago. When I heard that story, I thought a lot about Ed and Barbara Perkins and that announcement on a Sunday morning in Christ Church. It is such a special story, a wonderful example of how God’s people feel a responsibility to welcome ones who are hurting, who are alone, who need a home, who need a family. Every time I think about that story, every single time I think about that story, I marvel at the amazing amount of good that can come when people recognize that God has put them at the right place “for such a time as this.” I was also thinking of another young child who found themselves in a similar situation.

When my mom was about eight years old her mother died very suddenly. Then a short time later her father had a severe stroke. My mom was one of six children. They belonged to a tight knit community of believers, part of the Brethren in Christ Church. I don’t know whether someone stood up and made an announcement to the church, or whether word spread house to house, but all six of the kids in my mom’s family were taken into a home. Not all into the same home, but they all were taken into a home. The name of the family that took in my mom was the Brechtbill’s.

Later in her life she would often reflect on the Brechtbill's. She couldn't say enough nice things about that family, about how they took her in, nurtured her, encouraged her, and supported her. Even though I knew the Brechtbill's had touched her life in a profound way, it wasn't until my mother started suffering from Alzheimer's that I realized just how much they meant to her. Because of the Alzheimer's my mom began to forget more and more things, until toward the end there was very little she remembered. But she never forgot the name of the family that took her in when she needed a home. She never forgot the name of the Brechtbill's. I hope you understand why hearing about the Perkins family here in Westerly, Rhode Island taking in John when he was about ten years old meant so much to me. I hope you can understand why my heart overflows with gratitude for those who respond when God puts them in a place "for such a time as this."

That young girl who was taken in by the family named Brechtbill, that young girl who was my mother, time and time again my mother recognized when God had placed her in just the right situation "for such a time as this." In the early 1950s the Brethren in Christ Church sent a call out for a nurse to move to the Navajo Reservation in New Mexico on a mission assignment. My mom, before she ever met my dad, felt like God was calling her "for such a time as this." Back in 1960 when the YMCA needed a nurse at their youth summer camps, my mom felt like God was calling her "for such a time as this." When the plea went forth to establish a hospice program in the county where she lived, my mom was sure she had been placed there "for such a time as this."

When my mother was in her final days, my sister helped me understand something very special that happened in my mom's last days. Abraham and Zeuide came to visit her at the hospital. Who were Abraham and Zeuide? In 1990 this couple fled trouble in the African nation of Eritrea, and resettled as refugees in, of all places, Hanford, California, my hometown. Living in a new land is not easy, but the little church I grew up in was there for Abraham and Zeuide. Along with the struggles as a refugee family, there have been incredible stories of success and blessing in their life. Their oldest daughter received a full ride scholarship to UC Berkeley in 2007, and now has a college degree.

When their daughter received that scholarship in 2007, the church wrote an article in their newsletter recounting the many people who had befriended their family. At one point in the article there was a single sentence that brought tears to my eyes. It said when the family arrived in Hanford, “Carl and Clara Eberly offered their home until the family could find an apartment.” That was in 1990. In 2012, twenty-two years later, as my mom lay in a hospital bed with death fast approaching, Abraham and Zeuide came to the hospital to visit her and to pray for her. At a time when our hearts were overwhelmed with the sadness and sorrow surrounding my mother’s time of passing, at a time when we were all so discouraged, when we all were coming to grips with saying our final goodbyes, at a time when we really needed a sign of God’s peace, of God’s power, of God’s presence, at such a time as this Abraham and Zeuide walked into her hospital room and said words of love and offered prayers to our Heavenly Father.

At moments like that, Susa does not feel so far away nor so long ago. I don’t know if you will be called on to save a nation like Esther was called to save the people of Israel, whether you will be called on to be a part of a truth and reconciliation commission like Desmond Tutu, whether you will be called to go to Albania and share the good news of Christ with people who lived under the cloak of communism, or whether you will be called like our friend Mark to take a group of willing volunteers and offer whatever help they could to Syrian refugees...that’s interesting isn’t it? We have received that call to help Syrian refugees, and so many in this congregation and in our broader community have responded with generosity and kindness, believing God has put us here “for such a time as this”...I don’t know how it will happen or when it will happen or why it will happen, but when it does happen, when you feel the tap on your shoulder, when you feel the tug on your heart, when you feel the passion swelling inside you, when you hear God calling you, answer that call. Answer that call. When you hear and sense and feel that call, answer that call. It could well be that God has placed you in that exact place at that exact moment “for such a time as this.”