



## For Such a Time as This • *Patrick D. Miller*

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I want to focus this lecture on the theme of this conference, which comes from a verse of Scripture, indeed from a very well-known biblical verse. Furthermore, it is a kind of climactic moment in a story that from my childhood to right now remains for me one of the most fascinating and compelling stories of Scripture. I never knew as a child that God does not appear in the Book of Esther. I'm not sure I would have thought that was necessary. Or maybe there was a childish naïveté that did not presume one needed to have God speaking and acting in a story of Scripture because God was always around. In fact, I have returned to that naïveté in my old age, but I will come back to that. I never knew that the Book of Esther was to be regarded as on the margins of Scripture precisely because it did not seem to tell us much about God. Of course, it is about a woman, so it is not all that surprising that the story is often marginalized. In my Old Testament introduction courses, I gave it about ten minutes in the whole semester. In that respect I was consistent with the rest of the history of interpretation, which has given sparse attention to the book; the Eastern tradition did not even regard it as canonical. Luther, who, you may recall, was quite free about the canon, was perfectly willing to toss it out altogether. The Greek translation cleaned the book up a bit—and made it more acceptable—by adding verses that frequently mention God.

So we have for this lecture series not just a theme but a text, and as I have thought and written I have found myself constantly being drawn back to the text, stopping to read something in the story again, not able to avoid the constraints of the text or its tremendous opportunities and possibilities. All of which is to say that in this lecture, I want to speak again about time, consistent with the theme, “For Such a Time as This,” but I am going to do so very much out of the context and listening to the resonances and reverberations of the text that has given us our theme.

I know the story of Esther is familiar to us, but because the text or theme is so rooted in the story, one cannot avoid a brief recapitulation. Esther's story

begins as another woman's ends. It opens as the king of Persia gives a prolonged and lavish banquet, a virtual orgy of food and drink that lasts for days. In the midst of this orgy he summons his beautiful Queen Vashti to show her off. She rather impertinently refuses to come, presumably aware of why she is being summoned. For that she is banned forever from the king's presence, and he and his servants begin the process of finding a beautiful young bride to take her place. Esther, an orphan, a Jew, a virgin, and a beauty queen, is the one chosen. There are two other characters in the story—Esther's older cousin Mordecai, who adopted her as his daughter, and a high official of the king, Haman. They don't hit it off from the start, especially when Mordecai refuses to bow down before Haman, as the king had ordered. Haman uses this incident to go after Mordecai indirectly but horrendously. He persuades the king to decree the destruction of all the Jews (and thus get Mordecai) and to plunder their goods. (Reading this story as a child during World War II, I immediately identified Haman with Hitler, totally unaware of how close the comparison really was.)

Here is where the Shoah really begins in Jewish history. And here is where our text is set and where Esther's story lodges. For Mordecai, in great anguish and fear like his fellow Jews, sends a copy of the decree to Esther and asks her to go to the king and make supplication and entreaty for her people, the Jews. She points out to Mordecai that anyone who goes to the king without being summoned is put to death, unless the king holds out his gold scepter toward the one who enters. In the only place in the book where Mordecai is actually quoted, he then says these words to her:

Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you insist on keeping silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, and you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (my translation).

So Esther goes to the king's court. He extends the gold scepter, so she is allowed to live and make her request. That request is for the king and Haman to attend a banquet she is preparing. At that banquet, when the king offers to grant whatever her petition is, she simply asks them to come back to a second banquet.

Meanwhile, Haman is unaware that Mordecai had earlier found out about a plot against the king and by revealing it through Esther saved the king from assassination. So just as Haman is about to get the king to decree Mordecai's death, the king unwittingly preempts that move by asking Haman how best to honor someone in the king's favor. Thinking the king has him in mind, Haman proposes a lavish reward, in effect clothing that person in royal robes and parading him around as the king's favorite. Only at that point does he find out that the one to be honored is Mordecai. So Haman knows then that he cannot get the king to order Mordecai's death, as he had planned. At the second banquet, when Esther reveals Haman's plan to destroy all the Jews, the king reacts in anger and has Haman executed. Because the king cannot rescind his decree, a new decree is sent out allowing the Jews to defend themselves when they are attacked. They do this effectively and in the ensuing celebration create the feast of Purim as an annual remembrance of the event.

That's the story and the text from which comes our theme. So where do they take us? I think they take us in several directions. To follow some of those pathways, I want to discuss four things: time, Esther, Mordecai, and God, who, you remember, never shows up in the book.

I begin with time because that is where we left off in my first lecture, and it is also still very much the subject matter before us, though not in the same way as in Ecclesiastes. There is only one other use of the word for time in the whole Book of Esther outside this text, but here Mordecai speaks of time twice: "If you insist on keeping silent *in this time*"...and then in his climactic question: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for *such a time as this*." It is this moment, a propitious time, not like any other time, one filled with danger and promise, with risk and great possibility. One may read these two references to time as simply facets of the story. They are indeed that, but they also outrun the story. They are what takes the story beyond its own time and place to make it both timely and timeless.

I would pay close attention to each of Mordecai's references to time. In the first instance, he raises the issue of *keeping silence in this time*, that is, in a time such as this. Esther, he suggests, is now in a position of great moment. But it is not quite that contentless or neutral a time. There are all sorts of critical moments in time. What is significant about "this time" to which Mordecai refers? The answer is clear. It is precisely a time when one may not keep silent. "In this time," when imperial power threatens a whole nation, when hatred is turned into political plots to do in a people, when there are members of the

community whose well-being and lives are in danger, “if you insist on keeping silence.” This is not any time. It is a time for two things, if I hear Mordecai correctly. It is a time for risking and for speaking, for risking to speak, for risking to speak in behalf of her people. The Book of Esther is about many things: a beautiful young Jewess who becomes a Persian queen, the origins of a Jewish festival, the subversion of an evil man’s plot against one and against many. Yes, it is all these things. But at its heart it is about not keeping silent, about a young woman’s willingness to risk everything—her position, her life, everything—to see if she can save her people.

As I read and reread Esther’s already familiar story and listened to Mordecai’s words to her, I could not help but think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge’s reporting how Bonhoeffer responded to the events of the German pogrom remembered as *Krystalnacht* when the German SS troops destroyed thousands of Jewish shops, nearly two hundred synagogues, and hundreds of Torah scrolls; began the Aryanization of Jewish property; and took twenty thousand Jewish men to concentration camps. It appears as if Bonhoeffer kept silence at such a time. But, in an essay titled “One of the Silent Bystanders?” Bethge notes two small items that point in a different direction.<sup>1</sup> One is the only marginal note in Bonhoeffer’s Bible that has to do with anything other than a parallel passage or hymn. It is in the margin alongside Psalm 74:8, where he penciled “9.11.38,” the date of the *Krystalnacht* pogrom. That verse reads:

They said to themselves, “We will utterly subdue them”;  
they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.

And then it goes on: “How long, O God, is the enemy to scoff?” This was the Psalm that Bonhoeffer and his students were reading that day in the clandestine seminary where he taught. He saw a direct connection between the Jews of that earlier time of deportation and exile and the events of the preceding day. A few days later he sent out a circular letter to all the former seminary students, although circular letters were forbidden by the German government. The letter had already been prepared, but, Bethge notes, he inserted one sentence relative to the events of November 9, 1938: “During the last few days, I have been thinking a lot about Psalm 74, Zechariah 2:8, Romans 9:3f and 11:11–15. That really makes one pray.”<sup>2</sup> The Romans 9 and 11 passages have to do with the mystery of God’s way with Israel. The other

Old Testament text, Zechariah 2:8, says with regard to Israel that the “one who touches you touches the apple of my eye.”

“During the last few days,” Bonhoeffer wrote. “In such a time as this” Bonhoeffer did not keep silent. His letter and the Scriptures he quoted were a call to his seminary students to rethink at their depths the anti-Jewish instincts in which they had been nurtured, even as members of the German Confessing Church. Bethge argues also that this was a turning point in Bonhoeffer’s thought and action. Here is what Bethge wrote with regard to the sentence in the circular letter:

Two things in particular must have concerned him. First of all, the role of the ordained preacher of unbounded salvation in a church which existed and exercised its office so far from the hunted Jews. Can this role be fulfilled without solidarity with them? Can one continue in this calling without some changes?

Second, it seems to me that Bonhoeffer’s attention was caught by the double “how long” of Psalm 74. When will there be an end to the pogrom? How will an end come about? What role will fall to me in it? What will be the cost to Christians of having allowed things to come to the point of November 9?<sup>3</sup>

Today we know what his answer to the question of the Psalm turned out to be: beginning in 1940 he collaborated in the failed conspiracy against Hitler that eventuated in Bonhoeffer’s death.

## **Not to Keep Silence, Even unto Death**

So if we have to ask what characterizes “this time” as the story of Esther addresses us, it is a time when keeping silent will not do, when hiding is not an escape, when speaking out is risky but the only way to change things, to oppose power, to resist oppression. Bonhoeffer confronts me not only as an example of a later voice that would not keep silent in the face of oppression of Jews, he also makes me ask if I can read Scripture, including the Book of Esther, as he did, that is, as prayer, and see if Mordecai may be turning his head to look at me with his words about keeping silent in “this time.”

But, of course, Mordecai follows up his challenge to Esther with a second word about time: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.” If Mordecai’s first reference to “this time” serves to iden-

tify the time as one when keeping silent is not an option, his second reference has to do with discerning the possibility that this time was made for you and you were made for the time. It is obviously a time of crisis and great danger, but Mordecai's question presumes that and probes deeper to ask if the contemporary situation may not be a time to find your calling, why you are here, to use the situation and circumstances in which you find yourself for the common good. To all intents and purposes, Esther, you came to your place as queen because you won the beauty contest and the king fell in love with you. So it would seem; that is what has happened. But who knows? Maybe this is why you became queen. Perhaps you have come to the throne not to enjoy all its wonderful benefits and accoutrements but to take advantage of your place and position in behalf of a larger good, to save your people.

So on the surface, but importantly, the "time like this" is one of crisis and endangerment of the Jewish people. Yet at a deeper level, a time such as this is a time for not keeping silent and for finding one's calling in the midst of one's circumstances. Recently I read a letter a young man had written in applying for a job. Here is part of what he said:

Education in our country has fallen behind what it needs to be. Yet it is through education that we persevere intelligently, productively, and gracefully with the rest of the world. Through education our poor can gain more and be able to leave poverty behind. Through education our contributions to science, medical science, global trade, local communities, local and federal government can flourish. Only through a large, sincere, and long-term commitment to education can we hope to regain lost ground and bring about a better life for many American citizens and other peoples. I believe my responsibility now goes beyond that which I may have held in any business I created or for whom I have worked. I hope the skills I have developed can be useful in behalf of that greater responsibility.

I think that letter is precisely a way of asking if he has not come to the kingdom for such a time as this, if he has not found "in this time," which he clearly defines in his words about education, his true calling, why he is here, and toward what end all that has happened before is leading. Who knows?

But let me come back to Esther. She is after all not only the one to whom Mordecai's words about time are directed. She is also the central character of

the book. We learn some things early on about her. She is young, an orphan, a virgin, and very beautiful. One would infer as well that she has a lovely personality. The admiration is clearly for her beauty, but there is more. This young woman finds herself moving from orphan to queen and thus being drawn into the circles of power and intrigue. That is, in part, the result of planning, intention, and desire—on her part as well as that of her cousin, Mordecai, who adopted her. That is all part of the story and interesting to read about. What catches us, however, is the way in which time and circumstance draw her into dimensions of her role she never expected. That is what happens in “such a time as this.” The movement of the story, of course, and what is meant to catch our attention, and does indeed do so, is around how this young person lives and acts when thrust into circumstances for which she is unprepared and that are of great consequence. Very few young people, any more than Esther, can know ahead of time when they will find themselves in such a time as this. How will they know they have come to their place for such a time as this? How will they act? How does she act? Well, this is just one old story. But because it is clearly didactic, one must ask if there are not features of the story and Esther’s role that are paradigmatic and instructive for “such a time as this.” Let me suggest a few:

1. Such a time as this requires both *realism* and *courage*. That is evident all through the report of this young woman’s response to what happens. Heroism may finally characterize her act, but her perspective is quite realistic—about herself and her situation. That is evident at several points in the story. For one, she reacts to the news of the lamenting of Mordecai and the Jews with her own terrible anguish. She literally writhes in anxiety when word reaches her about what is going on. She may be queen, but these are her people, her adopted father. Their trouble tears her apart. She may be queen, but she is human and lives in relationships from which she does not separate herself. Furthermore, she is realistic about the possibilities and reminds Mordecai of the risks she faces if she dares to try to intervene. Her confrontation of the reality before her reaches its height when she concludes, “I will go to the king...and if I perish, I perish.”

So in this case, at least, in such a time as this, being realistic calls for courage on this young woman’s part. Living in a world of luxury and wealth and sitting on top of the heap and fully aware, she risks everything for her people. “I will go to the king though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” I wonder if we have not removed from our practical notions of

discipleship the expectation of risk and the possibility of daring. But that may be because we do not see discipleship as countercultural and against the stream. We are at ease in Zion, so why be daring? I do not assume that risk is a constant feature of the Christian life. What I wonder is if we assume at all that we need to be prepared “for such a time as this” when risk and bravery in the face of real danger may be called for. Where does that come into Christian nurture?

2. In such a time as this, Esther’s story suggests that what is needed is the joining of *wisdom* and *faith*, of sensible thinking with commitment to the faith and practices that have kept the community through thick and thin. I have tried in my mind to separate these, to think of good sense as one thing and keeping faithful as another. But the story really does not allow that, and so I may need to change my way of thinking. The young may survive and flourish when they plan *and* pray. When Mordecai’s question Who knows? comes to her, we read that she says: “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 and day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king...” One commentator says of the verse that “it sounds like a battle plan, and she is clearly the general,” and notes that in the next verse Mordecai goes away and does all that Esther told him. We also hear in the following chapters of Esther’s daring plan, the two banquets that seem strange—why not do it in one banquet?—yet clearly serve to lead the king ever more willingly to give Esther whatever she wants. She has used her beauty, her good sense, and some careful planning, all in a courageous risk of her status and even her life, to try to save her people.

But I hope you noticed how the “battle plan” began—with the three days of fasting on her part and on the part of all the other Jews in the capital of Susa. Remember this is supposed to be a secular book, so we are not to read anything too religious here. Except this fasting is probably a penitential rite, and as one scholar has hesitantly noted, Esther is probably dependent upon God’s gracious response.<sup>4</sup> Lest, however, we think we are sticking our necks out too far with such an assumption, the Greek edition clarifies things for us by placing a long prayer on Esther’s lips; prayer and planning. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). I think that is the first verse my parents taught me: to pray in reverence and to use my head. Maybe that is why they were always quoting either the Psalms or Proverbs. They knew that as a young person I needed to learn both ways, and that those two ways

were really only a single path by which I might be faithful: good sense and the love of the Lord. Is this what that very wise man Paul meant by being foolish for Christ's sake?

3. In such a time as this, the young person of this story knows that in relation to her elders she is both bound and free—bound to listen and free to act. Or to put it another way, the young listen to their elders but have to find their own way. The story of Esther centers around precisely that juxtaposition. Her obedience to Mordecai from her youth to the present is noted in the text (2:20). He has guided her through the years and given her direction. That direction is crucial now as well. For it is he who uncovers for her what time it is. It is Mordecai who throws down the gauntlet. But it is Esther who must take it up. And as her being bound to Mordecai is not slavery but a relationship, so her being free is not license or abdication of responsibility. Quite the contrary. Her freedom is the freedom of responsibility to find a way, to take the lead, to risk and dare. [And Mordecai knows that. He lays the charge on her to go to the king and entreat his mercy. He helps her see her strategic place and calling in such a time as this. But she will have to work it out. Within two verses of his question *Who knows?* we hear that “Mordecai then went away and did everything Esther had ordered him” (Esther 4:17).]

This takes us more specifically to Mordecai. For it is the dynamic relation across the generations that is the real key to the Book of Esther. Mordecai is the older generation, the substitute parent and teacher. I have noted that while there are several reports of actions and messages sent by Mordecai, the two verses that are our focus—where he addresses Esther about keeping silent in such a time as this and asks if perhaps such a time as this is why she has come to royal dignity—are the only quoted words of Mordecai in the whole book. I assume that is because there is something fundamental in the two parts of his words to her. His counsel is a mix of realistic assessment of the situation and its dangers and possibilities and a challenge to act. He helps this young person understand what is going on and challenges her to see in this time and place her calling in behalf of a larger good.

So where is God in all this? We have already noted that there is no reference to God in the whole of the book. But from the earliest supplementary texts of Esther to the present generation of commentators, there has been unease and dissatisfaction at writing God out of the book. If God is present and at work in this story, that presence and agency are hidden. We do not even have a Joseph to interpret God's hidden and providential work for good where

others are doing evil. Yet many aspects of the story are intimations, coincidences that belong to the general claim at the center of the story: Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. That is a claim; it cannot be documented. It is itself a pointer to God's providence. And what we hear in it is precisely an openness to the question and a willingness to stake our life, our work, our place in this world on that possibility. The question may not always be applicable. But it should stay in the background and come to the fore at critical points, none of which can be anticipated. Are Mordecai and Esther in some sense like Joseph, God's agents in this story? I could work with that. It is not something one can say with any proof or even confidence. Esther suggests a possibility in our acting that we need to allow for without ever being sure of, that God indeed works in a mysterious way through us as human agents for the human good, to make and to keep human life more human, to rise to the occasion in such a time as this.

I have been reading this story against the backdrop of our common interest on this occasion—a faithful ministry among and to the young people of the church. As I do so, I puzzle, and expect you do as well, as to whether this is about you in your ministry or about those young people you lead and guide in such a time as this. I have decided we should just live with that puzzle or confusion. Who knows?

## Notes

1. Eberhard Bethge, "One of the Silent Bystanders? Dietrich Bonhoeffer on November 9, 1938," in idem, *Friendship and Resistance: Essays on Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 58-71.
2. *Ibid.*, 65.
3. *Ibid.*, 67.
4. Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library), (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).