

For Such a Time as This  
Fourth Sunday of Lent – The Gift of Risk Taking  
Esther 3:8-9a, 4:1-14  
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This morning we continue our Lenten series on offering our best gifts to God during this tithe of a year by looking at the gift of risk taking. We began the season by talking about focusing on our specific callings. In subsequent weeks, we looked at perseverance and obedience. I hope you are beginning to see how all of these gifts are inter-related, and how they will all be necessary as we move into the next stage of our life as a family of faith.

This week's Scripture passage is a great story – it has mystery and suspense, evil villains and heroes and heroines, political plots and counterplots, and even a little romance. So let's start with the back story to the passages that we heard just a minute ago. This story is set in the Persian empire when Ahasuerus was King. One day, the king decides to host a banquet for all of the inhabitants of the capital city. At the banquet – after he'd had a few too many drinks, the king summons Queen Vashti so that all might admire her beauty. For some unknown reason, Vashti refuses, so the king strips her of her title and banishes her from the kingdom.

After some time passes, the king decides that he needs a new queen, and a nationwide search begins. All of the eligible young women in the realm are taken into the king's harem where they are given extensive make-overs before they each meet the king. We need to note that the women have no choice about participating here. To deny the king would be suicide for themselves, and possibly their families.

One of the recruits is Esther, an unlikely heroine for our story. You see, Esther is an orphan who is being raised by her Uncle Mordecai. As an orphan, she is the least powerful member of the less powerful gender (women) of a powerless group of people (the Jews)<sup>i</sup>. How so

like God to choose the lowest of the low to redeem the Jews! Once she arrives at the palace, Esther wins over everyone she meets, including the king, who chooses Esther to be the new queen. Not long after, Mordecai, who has some standing in the community, learns of a plot to assassinate the king. He tells Esther who tells the king and the king is saved.

Some time later, the King promotes Haman, a descendent of the Amalekites to be his vizier. A vizier is the equivalent to a modern day prime minister – second in power only to the king. In the Ancient Near East, the Israelites and the Amalekites were enemies, so long standing tensions enter the story with Haman’s ascent to power. He wants everyone to bow down to him, but Mordecai refuses. No one knows for sure why Mordecai refuses. Jewish law doesn’t prevent it, and to disobey is unwise on Mordecai’s part. As revenge for Mordecai’s disobedience, Haman contrives a plot to slaughter all the Jews in the land.

When Mordecai learns of the plot, he beseeches Esther to intercede before the king on behalf of the Jews. As we heard earlier, there are two problems with Mordecai’s plea. First, no one in the palace knows that Esther is Jewish. Second, the king has not sent for her in over a month, and if she approaches him unbidden, she can be put to death.

Mordecai is not terribly sympathetic to Esther’s plight, is he? He replies, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows,” he continues, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

The next thing that Esther does is to instruct Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for three days on her behalf. This is the most religious thing we see in the whole book. If you read the story through, you will notice that God is never mentioned, and no one prays. There is no

concept of keeping the law – Esther is married to a non-Jew (though not by her own choice), and she doesn't keep kosher or follow other restrictions set forth in the law. But none of this disqualifies her from being the one who is chosen to redeem her people. Over the next three chapters, Esther takes great risk and works craftily and diligently within the existing palace power structure to achieve her goal – to save her people. She invites the king and the evil Haman to a series of banquets (she follows the adage keep your friends close and your enemies closer). At the final banquet, she tells the king that the Jews are to be slaughtered, herself among them, and she asks the king to spare them all. When the king asks who is behind this planned genocide, Esther finally reveals that it is Haman, the king's right hand man.

As the story resolves, the evil Haman is hung on the gallows he has built for Mordecai. Mordecai is honored for his part in saving the king and then he is elevated to the role of prime minister. All of the enemies of the Jews throughout the land are destroyed. Mission accomplished. (PAUSE)

Perhaps for such a time as this. Even though God's name is never mentioned in this short story, it is clear that God is at work behind the scenes, making sure that the right people are in the right places at the right time. Each of the characters retain their own free will and agency of course, but Esther, particularly, answers the call and steps up to take the risk when the situation requires it.

And what of us? What if Farmville Baptist is right here on Main Street in Farmville Virginia, for such a time as this? What if the people who are sitting in this room and worshipping from home are the very people that God has put in the right place at the right time to be ready to take the risk and act when God calls? What do we need to do to be ready to hear and respond?

In an article that came out just this week, our friend Bill Wilson suggests that churches must begin to move from a position of Risk Management to a position of Risk Taking. What does he mean by this? Well, for the past year, since this pandemic began, we have all been doing Risk Management.

Opening and closing buildings, limiting or eliminating in-person events, monitoring our health and our interactions have all led us to become keenly aware of our risk management obligations. Early in the pandemic, we wondered about legal liability if someone were to become infected while participating in events at our church, and so we severely cut back on those events. We sterilize. We wash our hands. We've become adamant and diligent about not infecting others, so we wear masks and keep our distance from one another.

Risk management has become a prioritized way of life for us. The pandemic has heightened our awareness of our vulnerability and forced us to grow more risk averse in the process. All of that is fine with regard to the virus and its transmission, but there is another reality at play for many churches. Our risk management awareness and wariness may well bleed over into our spiritual lives and cause us to become so risk-averse that we miss the opportunity before us.

Bill notes that the church universal is at a moment we may not see again for many years. The disruption of the last year has opened doors for risk-taking that wise churches will recognize. Rather than revert back to "normal" when restrictions are lifted, thoughtful churches and their leaders will recognize that this is a chance to reverse the ominous downward trends of the last 20 years.

In order to reverse these trends and thrive, churches must be willing to do several things. Here are four that Bill mentions:

1. We must spend time reconnecting with our reason for being and reconnecting with those priorities.
2. We need to confess that much of what we do and how we do it are simply preferences and not Gospel priority. This means humbling ourselves and acknowledging where we've drifted from the church Jesus envisioned.
3. We must put aside personal comfort and preference and embrace the idea of being part of a gospel movement rather than a member of a church club.
4. Finally, we must personally pledge to engage in and participate in some form of risk-taking that makes us uncomfortable, so that our church may not only survive but thrive. We commit to criticize less and pitch in more.

These are not easy things, but they are necessary. Helen Keller, who lost both her sight and hearing in childhood but became a renowned activist and author, said that there is no such thing as a secure life. "It does not exist in nature.... Life is either a daring adventure or nothing." Risk, then, is not just part of life. It is life. You see, the place between our comfort zones and our dreams is where life takes place. It's the high-anxiety zone, but it's also where we discover who we are. Karl Wallenda, patriarch of the legendary high-wire-walking family, nailed it when he said: "Being on the tightrope is living; everything else is waiting."

Friends, the waiting is almost over for us. Soon the pandemic will be end and you will call a new pastor to help lead you boldly into the next chapter of your story. Like never before, you will need to listen as God calls you to focus on specific mission. Like never before you will need to obey that call in order to thrive. Like never before, you will have to persevere through the discomfort, loss and challenges of getting from here to there. My prayer is that each of us, and Farmville Baptist as a family of faith, will be ready to step out in faith for just such a time as this. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther," Women's Bible Commentary. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012