

**MESSAGE: “For Such a Time”**

**Text: Esther 4:1-17**

**Purpose:** the purpose of this message is to deepen the worship experience of Advent by anticipating the timing of God’s purpose in biblical story, UM connection and parish ministry.

**Introduction: Russ Peppe’s Sermon on divine purpose/free will**

- 1. Biblical Harmony of God’s Purpose/Human Response**
  - a. Esther: For Such a Time**
  - b. Elizabeth: Impossible becomes Possible**
  - c. Mary: Bridging the Gap/Incarnation**
- 2. Application Harmony of God’s Purpose/Human Response**
  - a. Jesus: Bridging the Gap/Incarnation**
  - b. “A Way Forward”: Impossible becomes Possible**
  - c. Pastor/Parish Partnership: For Such a Time**
    - Visioning & Homebound Communion (Macy’s Commercial)**

**Response to the Word: Advent Communion**

On my first Sunday as your pastor, Russ Peppe preached a message which posed the questions, “Do things happen as God determines?” or “Do things happen by serendipity and other factors, such as human will?” Before the message was concluded, we could see that it is a matter of “both...and” rather than “either...or.” Some things happen according to God’s design, others by human decision or circumstance.

Last Sunday, we began with Habakkuk’s chapter 1 lament, “Why doesn’t God intervene when faithful people suffer the tyranny of those who do not fear God?” In chapter 2, God counsels the prophet to wait until the time is right for God’s intervention; and in chapter 3, Habakkuk promises to trust God regardless of outward circumstance.

Today, we reflect on the courage of Esther, Elizabeth and Mary as they anticipate and participate in God’s intervention. Judaism celebrates Esther’s story on the holy day Purim which is observed on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the Hebrew month Adar, in late winter or early spring. The Book of Esther makes no reference to the coming Messiah, but it is a salvation story that anticipates God’s deliverance to come. In short, the story takes place during the Jewish diaspora, when exiled Jews live in Persia, during the reign of Ahasuerus. He takes the very beautiful, and (unknown to him) very Jewish Esther as his queen.

One of his chief advisors, Haman, is intensely anti-semitic, and seeks the total destruction of the Jewish people. He persuades the King to issue an edict that permits a day of unrestricted murder and plunder of the Jewish people in Persia—in other words, an edict of genocide. Esther's cousin and adopted father Mordecai learns of the edict, puts on sackcloth and ashes, and sends a desperate plea for help to Esther. This puts Esther in a sensitive and precarious position. To request audience of the King without being sent for is potentially a fatal violation of Persian protocol. If he does not raise his scepter to receive her, she will be put to death.

Esther might have hoped that her ethnic identity would go unnoticed and that she, as Queen, might be spared. She could have remained silent and perhaps safe, but she could not live with herself if she did so. "Who knows," Mordecai counsels, "perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

For three days, Esther and the Jewish community in exile fast and pray. Taking her life in her hands, she seeks audience with the king. To her relief, he raises the scepter and agrees to hear her petition. She intercedes for her people, and the king who recognizes that he has been manipulated by Haman, allows the Jews to defend themselves from attack, and subsequently sentences Haman to death. To this day, Esther is honored and celebrated for her courage and intervention 'For Such a Time.'

Like Esther, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who through preaching and baptism will prepare the world for the advent of Messiah, possesses great courage and willingness to be part of God's Advent miracle. Though she is barren and advanced in years, she conceives and the impossible becomes possible. She embraces her pregnancy and raises John according to the Nazarite vow that prepares him for prophetic work. When Mary, who bears, not a forerunner, but Messiah himself, turns to her for counsel, Elizabeth encourages her to trust in God's providence. Elizabeth demonstrates the depth of her faith, "For Such a Time."

And when Mary, who is told by the angel Gabriel, that she will conceive and bear a Son whom she is to name Jesus, and who will save his people from their sins, learns of her singular, sacramental mission, she embraces her calling with courage and faith even though it jeopardizes her reputation and engagement to Joseph. She becomes God's vessel for bridging the gap between Creator and created, divine and human, Savior and saved. In her Advent song of praise, known as 'The Magnificat,' she rejoices in God's salvation "For Such a Time."

As we journey deeper into the season of Advent, anticipating the birth of Messiah, we approach God's time of miracle, the answer to Habakkuk's lament, the bridging of human

separation from Source and the redemption of soul and world. Like Esther, Elizabeth and Mary, Jesus embraces the plan God has for him. Some might say, “Well, he had no choice but to embrace it.” But he did have a choice! Look at his gospel tangles with temptation and tell me had no choice! He embraced it with courage, with faith, and an integrity which none of us can truly comprehend. He came to this world “For Such a Time,” and that is what we are preparing to celebrate!

The Christmas Incarnation reverses the consequences of Eden: human and divine, incomparably divorced, restored in righteous unity. It bridges the gap that separates, and makes the impossible possible.

Now. In our lifetime, our denominational, United Methodist Connection finds itself at a crossroads. At heart, there is a simple question. “Can Christians with polarizing convictions remain united in Christ?” The culture says, “No.” The culture says, “You split over slavery and abolition, remaining divided for a century, what makes you think differences over human sexuality will have any other result?” The Congregationalists split. The Episcopalians split. The Presbyterians split. How can Methodists remain ‘united?’

By keeping the main thing, the main thing. By abiding in Christ. By regarding the humanity that dwells in the opinion that is so different from our own. Can it be that the Commission on a Way Forward, which seeks to bridge the gap between progressives and conservatives, has been appointed “For Such a Time?” Can the United Methodist Church show the world that it is possible to stay in relationship while respecting profound difference?

And what about the United Methodist Church of Auburn? Has God given us a vision ‘For Such a Time’ as the one we live in? I believe so. I believe that it is no accident that you and I have been brought together. I believe God has a purpose to accomplish through us. This coming year, 2017, we will have opportunity to dream together, to reflect on our strengths, to articulate our growing edges and to identify the opportunities God is placing before us. I do not yet know what shape that vision will take, but I am confident we can discover it together. Will you join me in the adventure?

There is a first-fruit of that vision that I hope we can put into practice in January. It was illustrated for me in a recent commercial for the Macy’s Day Thanksgiving Parade. If we had an effective audio/visual system, I would show it to you. Since we don’t have that in place yet, I will relate it to you instead. A small boy visits the Parade during the early forties, judging by his attire. He sees the impressive Santa balloon, and believes it winks at him. We watch as the boy ages, always in the same place at the parade, gazing in wonder as the Santa balloon floats by. The boy becomes an adolescent, an older teen, a young man, a

family man, and a man of middle-age, an older man, a senior citizen. Then, suddenly, there is no boy or man in watching position as the Santa balloon floats along the parade route. The Santa balloon releases the ropes that tether him to the parade. He floats up into the air, out of New York City, into the suburbs, into the countryside and does not stop until he rests outside the window where the homebound man can see him. Since the boy can no longer go to the parade, the parade instead comes to him.

There are those in our parish who have come to church all their lives. They may have been baptized as infants. They attended Sunday School, participated in pageants, joined in youth group, attended summer camp. They sang in choirs, served on committees and helped with mission projects. They attended worship, Christmas Eve candlelight services and Easter SonRise. They were married here, and buried loved ones from this sanctuary. Year after year they came, and yet, now they don't—not because they don't care or don't want to, but because they can't. They are homebound.

At the heart of Christmas, there is a God who says, “If the people I created and love cannot come to me, I must and will go to them!” In the words of Luke, “While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:6-7)

Friends, since some of our members can no longer come to church, it is time for church to go to them. Time for church to visit. Time for church to send notes. Time for church to make phonecalls. Time for church to go and sing carols. Time for church to bring communion. On New Year's Day, following worship, I will facilitate a 15-minute training for those who are willing to be part of an effort to bring monthly communion to homebound members of our parish. If you wish to help, but can't make that particular training, I will repeat the training on the first Sunday of February. Has God called you “For Such a Time?”