

Sermon – 6/10/18
“For Such A Time As This”
Esther 4:1-17, Romans 12:9-21
3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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Coming back to college for this reunion weekend brings to my mind that autobiographical novel that defined the college experience for several generations of students. Thomas Wolfe’s, *Look Homeward Angel*, is about one young man’s struggle to find his way in life. Growing up in a dysfunctional family in a fictitious town in North Carolina, Eugene falls in love with literature. Then he falls in love with a young woman who breaks his heart. He goes off to college where he is a misfit before he achieves some stature as a writer. After college, his mother wants him to come home to work at the local newspaper, but Eugene knows that he has to leave home to find his life. Wolfe writes:

[Eugene] knew he would always be the sad one: caged in that little round of skull, imprisoned in that beating and most secret heart, his life must always walk down lonely passages. Lost.

Lost. We spend much of our lives seeking to find ourselves: who we are, where we are to go, what our purpose in life is, and what God wants of us.

We have just come through the season of high school and college graduations. With graduation comes the inevitable question, “What are you planning to do?” Some can answer with certainty: grad school, an internship, a new job or military service. Other graduates who do not have any certain plans may just want to stay in bed and pull the covers up over their heads. Later in life, we face our own questions. Some of us may be so invested in a career that we do not think much about these things; only to wake up one morning after many years of turning out the work and wonder if it is enough. The children have grown up and moved away; we retire from a career; we move to Florida to get away from the cold. We ask ourselves, “What’s next? What is my purpose now? Shuffleboard?” It is a hard question when we catch ourselves simply skating across the surface of life.

Esther was a young Jewish girl who had to face the tough question of her purpose. The King’s advisor Haman sought to destroy the all the Jews of Persia. What will the young Queen Esther do? On the surface, we might think that Esther had it easy. Her life was set. When we look more deeply into the story we realize that Esther did not have the kind of choices that most of us have; she did not have the luxury of making decisions about her own future. For the most part, those decisions were made for her. Her parents were dead; she was the ward of her cousin Mordecai. Esther was a member of a minority living in exile in Persia. Like displaced persons today, her status and the status of her people could change in an instant. Even more than that, Esther had no say in the matter when she was chosen to be a part of the King’s harem. For a year, like a treasured object or a household pet, she was fed special foods and received endless beauty treatments. She was perfumed and petted. What may look like a palace from the outside, can be a prison from the inside.

Esther was elevated to be Queen only because Queen Vashti defied the King and was put to death. Her destiny did not consist in simply being Queen. Being Queen was her fate over which she had little control. God had a destiny in mind for her. Our destiny, or our God given purpose in life, cannot be defined simply by what we do at home as a parent, a spouse or a child, or by what we do at school, in the office or in our profession. Our purpose, or our destiny, may appear suddenly while we are involved in other things, surprise us as we going along our accustomed routines, or come to us as a kind of divine disruption.

In our lives, there are so many things that press in upon us that are beyond our control. Each one of us comes with certain genetic makeup; we grow up in particular families; we are shaped by our environment, our opportunities and our relationships. Like Esther, we may find ourselves in situations over which we have little power. You might say that there is a *fated* character to human life.

In his remarkable book, *Against Fate*, Glenn Tinder says that when we recognize the fated character of human existence – that is, when we recognize that we are bound by many factors in life – then we are free to create a destiny. In other words, in the midst of the pressures upon us, the circumstances of our lives, the work we do, we may listen to the voice of God and discover what God wants of us. Like Esther, our divine purpose may arise from how we respond to a crisis. When the crisis comes to the exiled Jewish people, Mordecai puts the need before Esther. She is in the palace; she alone can get the king to change the terrible royal decree to slaughter the Jews. She does so at the risk of her own life. If she goes unsummoned before the king, the king decides whether to receive her or to punish her with death.

Mordecai sends her word, “Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 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 family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (4:13-14). Her fate is to be the Queen. Her destiny is to risk her life to save her people. In her cousin’s words, she hears the call of God.

We are all familiar with the German pastor Martin Niemöller who became famous because of his courageous resistance to the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews. During the Second World War, he was incarcerated in two different concentration camps. *We may not be aware* of the fact that as the Nazi movement was gaining strength in the early 1930’s in Germany, Niemöller was attracted to some of its ideals. He even made certain anti-Semitic statements. It was his fate to be born in Germany in a particular time and place, when anti-Semitism was a part of the socio-political landscape. As he began to realize the horror of Hitler’s plans, he listened to the voice of God and found his destiny in standing against the Nazi movement. He later repented of his early pro-Nazi ideas. It was Niemöller who said the familiar words:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out –

Because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Homosexuals, and I did not speak out –

Because I was not a Homosexual.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

We are called for such a time as this.

We live in *this* particular moment and *this* particular place. Every day, the animosity, suspicion, callous indifference, greed, political deception, misogyny and prejudice that infect our culture threaten to destroy our common life and tempt us to accept the unacceptable. Yet, God is always calling us, cajoling us and sometimes knocking us in the head with a two-by-four to listen to that divine voice. God comes to us in times of crisis and in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives and invites us to do what is right, just and life-giving even when it means swimming against the stream, taking a risk, speaking out and keeping the faith.

What is God saying to you now, in this place and in this time? In Romans 12, Paul urges us not to be conformed to the world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may discern the will of God. To visualize the shape of a transformed life, Paul writes:

Let love be genuine.
 Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
 Contribute to the needs of the saints;
 Extend hospitality to strangers.
 Do not repay anyone evil for evil;
 If your enemies are hungry, feed them;
 If they are thirsty, give them something to drink;
 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

How do we do it? If it depended upon me, I would blindly accept my fate and go with the flow.

One of my favorite cartoons in *The New Yorker* was an old one that shows two men in boat going with the flow of a river. Just ahead of them is an archway with the name of the River Styx carved across its face. Lurking behind the arch are several demonic figures waiting for their prey. The caption reads, "The only problem of going with the flow is where the flow is going."

How do we live transformed lives of destiny? How do we do it? We don't, but God does it in us. Human transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. The good Calvinist word for this is sanctification. God setting us apart for a holy purpose, a divine destiny. All we do is open our lives to the presence and work of the Spirit to lead us, to encourage us and to equip us. We to respond to God who speaks to us in the clutter of daily life, in quiet moments of prayer, in the beauty of sacred music, in the voice of the stranger, in the pain of our world, in labor of our hands and in the thoughts of our minds. It may have been our fate to grow up in a southern racist culture, or a society that silences the voices of women and makes light of sexual harassment, or a nation that ignores the civil rights of LGBTQ persons, but that does not have to be our destiny. Our destiny is to live transformed lives by the grace and power of God.

We live in perilous times. Will we be a compassionate society? Will we insure justice for the poor? Will we welcome the stranger and give shelter to immigrants and their children? Will we speak the truth in love? There is more to life than simply going with the flow and succumbing to our fate. There is the possibility, by the grace of God, of discovering and creating a destiny. Mary Oliver invites us to live such a life in her poem, "The Summer Day".

Who made the world?
 Who made the swan, and the black bear?
 Who made the grasshopper?
 This grasshopper, I mean-
 the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
 the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
 who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
 who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
 Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
 Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
 I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
 I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
 into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
 how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
 which is what I have been doing all day.
 Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

*Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

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