

On April 28, 1969, a band called “The Chicago Transit Authority,” later simply called, “Chicago” released their debut album. Any of you remember that? I probably would remember it...but it was before I was born. The second song on the album was titled, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?” It asks some hard questions: Do we know the time? Do we care? Well, apparently, we do care about time, because we have our schedules, most of our clocks are all now synced together so they’re exactly the same...and most importantly: we all want more time. So, we do care about time.

But do we really know what time it is? And the question being asked isn’t about looking at the clock and knowing if it’s 10:00 or 11:30. It’s more philosophical than that. Some of the lyrics are:

People runnin' everywhere
Don't know where to go
Don't know where I am
Can't see past the next step
Don't have time to think past the last mile
Have no time to look around
Just run around, run around and think why

Now, song lyrics are like poetry and sometimes there’s some clarity or precision missing...but I think the general idea being conveyed here is that we’re too busy...we have our noses to the grindstone, we’re focused on what’s right in front of us, that we don’t see the big picture...don’t see what’s going on around us and the beauty of life, and the opportunities we have to connect with people and impact people around us.

But if we’re aware of what’s going on around us, and sensitive to the time and place in which God has called us, we will see that God is giving us opportunities with the time we have to do something or say something that can have a profound impact on our world. And as we continue in The Story, this series that is a chronological walk through the Bible looking at the

big picture of who God is and what God is doing, and what it means to be in relationship with Him...as we continue in that today, we come to Esther, who is an example of someone who could have been caught up in some navel-gazing, but got her head up to look around at the world, and when she saw that things weren't right, she did something about it. **In the words of Chicago: Esther realized what time it was, and she cared deeply about the time, and the people of that time.**

Let's understand what's happening before we read today's passage. Israel, the Jewish people, is captive to the nation of Persia. This is the great Persian empire that you learned about in school, along with the Babylonian empire that they conquered, and the Roman Empire that Alexander the Great initiated that conquered the Persian Empire starting in 333 B.C. In fact, my 6th grade daughter is studying the Persian Empire at Kirkland Middle School right now, and she was assigned a report on the women of the Persian Empire. Guess who she got to focus on? Esther, who we're reading about today. I thought that was pretty cool, and so I had her write the sermon for me! 😊

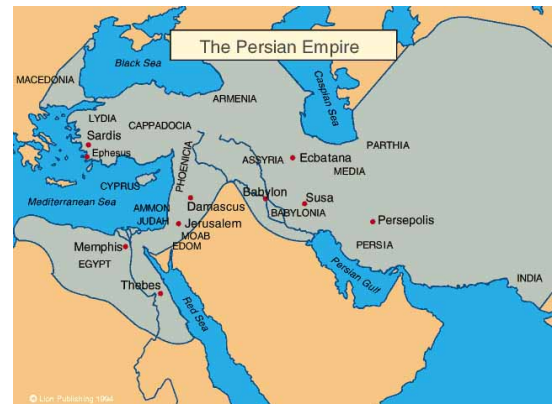
Now, I said something wrong last week, and I tried to figure out where I got this from, but I couldn't find it. Somehow I mis-understood something I read. The correction is about the time-frame between the first group that returned from exile under Zerubbabel's leadership when King Cyrus let them return, and then Ezra and then Nehemiah, who we will look at next week. After more reading on this, I can say with certainty that the time frame between the initial group of people to return, and Ezra's own return to Jerusalem is larger than what I said last week. Last week I indicated it was 7 years, but after more research this week, what I should have said, is that it was 70 years.ⁱⁱ I guess I just dropped the 0 somehow...but there you go.

And in between the first wave of people to return (about 50,000) and the second wave comes Esther. **Esther was a Jewish woman who became Queen of Persia, married to King Xerxes, who reigned from 486 BC to 465 BC.** She got into that position when the first queen, Queen Vashti, wouldn't let herself be paraded around in front of the King's friends at the end of a 7 day celebration he hosted for his own leaders and others from

other countries, where he showed off his stuff. The last thing he wanted to show off was his wife – not because of her wit or intelligence, but her beauty. She refused to participate. If hashtags were around then, she could have been part of the #metoo movement speaking out against sexual harassment toward women. As a result, Xerxes decided to ditch her as queen and find a new one.

How do you suppose the king decides to pick the next queen? Do you know? They had a national beauty contest. I know it's hard to believe in our sophisticated society that there was once a culture so superficial that middle-aged men tried to show off their wealth, power, and charisma so that they could attract a wife with youth and beauty. We are so far past that today aren't we? It's hard for us in the 21st century because as the Virginia Slims ads used to say: You've come along ways, baby. But, believe it or not, a culture like this once existed, where women were primarily valued for how they looked. ☺

Anyway, even though we wouldn't know *anything* about that today (If you're reading this online or on paper, please inflect the last several sentences with sarcasm!)...after a lengthy national search, the next woman chosen to be queen was Esther. Now, unbeknownst to the king, Esther was a Jew. If you think it's odd that he wouldn't know that, then you may not realize how large the Persian Empire was and how many different cultures it covered. Even extends into India and Mongolia, off the edge of this map. Additionally, Esther is several generations removed from when Jerusalem was captured. She's something like the great-great-great grandchild of people who were in Jerusalem when it was invaded and they were brought into this foreign land. So she's pretty engrained in this culture.



So Esther ends up as queen. And I won't go into all the twists and turns here, but her uncle Mordecai, who raised her, gets word to her through one of her trusted attendants, that one of the king's closest associates, Haman, has it in for the Jews, and is devising a plan to eradicate them. In fact, the edict has

been sent out into the city of Susa, where they live. Mordecai sees Esther as the one who can intercede and save her people, because of her relationship with the King. Here's the conversation that took place between them through this messenger (this is our Scripture passage for today, Esther 4:9-17):

Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." (In other words, they haven't had a good conversation as husband and wife in over a month. That's not a good sign for a marriage!)

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My attendants and I will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions (Esther 4:9-17).

So, Esther is a little hesitant. And who can blame her? Xerxes already banished Vashtii from his presence and ditched her as queen because she wouldn't come out when he wanted her to...and now Esther is being asked to go against the law and do just the *opposite* of her predecessor: go speak to the king when he *hasn't* called on her. And after 30 days since they last talked, it's not as if their relationship is A+ right now.

And the end of the story (spoiler alert for any of you who don't know how

this finishes up!) is that Esther does indeed go to the king, tells him of Haman's plot...the king has compassion, Haman is executed, and the Jews are saved, all because Esther stepped out in faith.

And it's all because Mordecai made her aware of the times and got her thinking about how God might work through her at this crucial moment when he got word to her: **“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)** He's foreshadowing Chicago's lyrics by nearly 2500 years.

“Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?” It's as if Mordecai is saying this to Esther: Do you see that it's about to strike midnight and the beautiful dress is going to turn back to rags, and the carriage to a pumpkin, and the horses to mice...and the lovely classical waltz music will turn into country music? Lord have mercy, don't let that happen! ☺ (As an aside: Ed Stetzer said at a conference I was recently at: God can use any music to bring glory to himself, including country music. But because he's a loving God, he chooses not to.) So Mordecai is saying to her “You, Esther, are the only one who is in a position to do something about this situation!” He's saying to her: “Do you realize what time it is? Do you even care?”

And at the heart of his question is the notion that: **God has in fact put Esther where she is for this exact moment in time.** It's ironic that in the book of Esther, God's name is not once mentioned (Same with Song of Solomon). Not Yahweh, not Adonai, Jehovah...none of the Hebrew names of God are mentioned. And yet here, at the crux of the whole thing with this largely rhetorical question, Mordecai is showing us that God is in the midst of it by raising the point that “maybe...just maybe”...God has put her in this position as queen for this very moment.

Have you ever had the sense that God had put you in a particular situation for a particular purpose? To accomplish a task, for a certain relationship, to shape something, to encourage someone, to lead someone to a place of faith? Gwen and I have had a few of them in our lives. Let me share a few of them.

God put me in Sun Valley 23 years ago. It was not where my friend Dusty and I wanted to go. We wanted to go to Colorado: to Vail or Aspen or Steamboat Springs, to be ski instructors for a season at a big resort after doing it around here for several years. But through a family friend of his, Sun Valley offered temporary housing when we arrived in town that we didn't have at any of those other places. And so that's where we went. And because of that I met Gwen who became my wife...and for over 20 years she's been wondering why we didn't go to Colorado. ☺

The story of Gwen ending up in Sun Valley a few months before I got there is even more remarkable. She interviewed for a Children's Ministry position at the Presbyterian Church there, and after the interview she decided it just wasn't the right place for her. Several months later she was in the area on vacation, stopped by the church to see how things were going, and the interview committee happened to be meeting right then at the church to talk about where God was leading them because they hadn't filled the position yet. Gwen walked in on that meeting, and collectively they all had an Esther moment that God had put them there for such a time as this, and Gwen became their children's ministry director.

Later, Gwen was on staff at Bellevue Presbyterian working with the Deacons and the visitation and care ministry. The very first memorial service she was involved with was for Claire Willard, the wife of Harlow, the beloved former pastor of this church. Some of you have heard this before. But at that service, she heard all about this church. She called me that evening – I was out of state at the time – and she said, “I just helped facilitate a memorial service for an amazing woman whose husband was pastor at a church in Kirkland called Rose Hill Presbyterian Church...and it might be a great fit for us if they ever are looking for a new pastor.” 12 years later, I discovered that Rose Hill was looking for a new pastor. I emailed Gwen and asked, “Isn't this the church you heard about several years ago?” And by the grace of God, here I am. And many of you are thinking, “If only that Memorial service had been on a day Gwen couldn't make it.” ☺ Those are all “For such a time as this” moments where God put us in places for His purposes.

God, in His providence, gives each of us those opportunities all the time. And oftentimes we're tempted to respond with excuses, or with a "no" as Esther first tried. Do you know that Gwen told me in August of 1996, about a year after we first met, that she would never date me? It's true. I tried to convince her, in different words, that God had brought us together "for such a time as this" to be more than ski buddies. She said, "No way, Jose." About six weeks later God changed her heart and we started dating, six months after that we were engaged, and about 6 months after that we were married. So sometimes we are tempted to say "no" to God's "yes."

Now, we all know that **God accomplishes his purposes through other people, too.** We're not the only ones...we aren't called to be "the saviors of the world"...that job title belongs to Jesus. And Esther put up some excuses: No one could go to the king unless he requested them. There wasn't anything close to a request from him for her for 30 days...she couldn't even go to him on the pretense of following up on something they'd talked about a few days ago. But Mordecai addresses that with Esther and with us, too, when he got word to her: "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance or the Jews will arise from another place..." In other words: **God *could* raise up someone else. God *could* devise other plans. But the fact is, you are in this position right now, so step out in faith and trust that God has you there for such a time as this.** Do we know the time? Do we care?

And God has put each of us where we are for such a time as this. This is the way God works. In fact, we see this same idea expressed in a number of places in the New Testament, including in Galatians 4:4-5, where Paul writes about the timing of Jesus' arrival and ministry on earth, and he says, "**But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to be His children**" (Galatians 4:4-5). Jesus was put where he was, when he was, among the people he was, for a particular mission. In other words, he came for such a time as this.

And God continues to do that. He continues to work in our lives in much the same way:

He's given you your neighbors for such a time as this.

He's given you your co-workers for such a time as this.

He's given you your clients for such a time as this.

He's given you your classmates for such a time as this.

He's given you your time, your treasure, your talents, for such a time as this.

He's given you your passions for such a time as this.

He's given you your family for such a time as this.

He's given your kids and grandkids their friends for such a time as this.

He's given you their teachers for such a time as this.

He's given you your friends for such a time as this.

He's given you your church for such a time as this.

He's given you this moment, the people around you, this worship service, for such a time as this.

We can wrap it all up by saying that in God's providence: **He's put you how you are, where you are, when you are, and with whom you are, for such a time as this. The question is: Do we really know what time it is?** Are we aware of what's going on around us? I pray God would open our eyes up, help us to see what the times are, to see where God's people are needed, like Esther did...like Jesus himself did in going to the cross...and then to step up and speak out in love and come along side people in their time of need, bringing glory to our Heavenly Father. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 20 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.

ⁱⁱ Here are a couple places where you can see the likely chronology of all these events, and the people who were a part of them:

<http://www.muncherian.com/ChronologyofEzraNehemiahEsther.pdf>;

<https://juniaproject.com/queen-cupbearer-connections-esther-nehemiah/>;