

**TOGETHER WE CAN MAKE THIS HAPPEN: BLESSED TO BE A BLESSING  
ESTHER 4:9-14; EPHESIANS 1:15-19**

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True story: I'll never forget sitting in a pick-up truck overlooking a large processing plant in the Midwest. The owner of the plant was behind the wheel of the truck telling me about his business, how it started, their challenges and victories.

"As far as I am concerned," he said, "everything here belongs to God. We have been richly blessed. We did not do this ourselves. I do not take credit. There is no way this would have happened without God's presence. My job is to find ways to use my blessings to help others."

I don't think he knew it but that man was repeating one of the oldest principles of the Bible: God blesses us to be a blessing. One of the major, ongoing questions of life is what shall I do with my time, my resources, my talent. The difference between that business owner and much of the rest of the world is that he was clear: what he had come from God and was to be used by God through him to bless others.

Today is Stewardship Dedication Sunday and the beginning of Thanksgiving week. It happens to be the last Sunday of the church year. Next week, Advent, begins a new liturgical season.

Today has a special name, Christ the King Sunday. We start the year anticipating Jesus' birth, we end the year celebrating the Risen Christ's place next to God.

As we thank God for all that we have, dedicate ourselves to God's service and transition into a new year, I'd like to turn to Esther and Ephesians for insight today.

The book of Esther gets you sitting on the edge of your seat. Esther, a beautiful young Jewish woman, selected by the king to be his queen when the first queen betrays him. But a shoe drops in the story when Esther withholds her identity as a Jew for fear of the king's rejection.

From our 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective this story is filled with chauvinistic and patriarchal issues but that does not diminish the power of its message.

When Esther's uncle/guardian Mordecai learns of a plot to exterminate the Jewish people Mordecai sends an urgent appeal to Esther to convince the king to intervene. Lavera's reading was the turning point of the story: Esther balks and Mordecai urges her to reveal her Jewish heritage and take a stand for her people.

Esther's fear has to do with the king's decree that no one can approach him without being summoned. Any who do are put to death unless the king grants permission.

But Mordecai reminds Esther if the plot to exterminate the Jews succeeds she will not escape even in the palace nor will her loved ones survive.

"Who knows," Mordecai says to Esther, "perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

I want to suggest this morning that you and I may share something in common with Esther. Here she was living in the lap of considerable luxury unwilling to risk her comfort or safety to rescue her own people from one of the earliest pogroms of recorded history.

I can imagine her thinking something like this: my voice is insignificant, how can I influence these events. If the king finds out I am a Jew I will be killed. This plot has been hatched by one of his trusted advisors. Why would the king listen to me?

Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt silenced for fear that if you spoke out the forces of whatever system you were in – your workplace or family or church – would brand you an outsider and reject you?

Esther doesn't know it yet but God has chosen her to be the key player in the deliverance of the Jewish people from their planned massacre.

This is Martin Luther King, Jr. before he leaves his well-heeled Atlanta congregation to start the Civil Rights movement. Australian Helen Caldicott satisfied and content with her medical practice before she initiates the nuclear freeze campaign. This is Marian Wright Edelman Ivy League degree proud before she founds the Children's Defense Fund.

Or, any of us here today facing some problem or injustice. Thinking small, discounting our ability to have impact, denying God's impact, sitting on our gifts and privilege.

But then some persistent Mordecai poses the question that proves to be the tipping point: who knows Esther perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

One of the things I love about this little story is that it names the ruthless gentile king 190 times but does not mention the God of the Jewish people even once.

Where is God in a kingdom under the thumb of a powerful king? Where is God in our lives or nation subject to powerful institutions, concentrations of enormous wealth, self-serving wielders of political power?

When Mordecai poses the possibility that Esther's position may have been given to her to change the course of events for her people God is in the wings. God—not a puppeteer—imprints us with his own image and waits to see if Esther will claim the faith of her people and fulfill her calling in the present crisis.

Mordecai speaks. God's heart flutters, hoping the light bulb will go on. Hoping Esther sees the connection. "Yes, Esther, this is precisely why I have blessed you, so that you will be a blessing to others."

Who knows perhaps Esther, perhaps you and I, perhaps Westminster have been blessed for just such a time as this—when God chooses us to tip the balance of power from death to life for some person or this community?

And here in this Sunday School lesson is the application to our stewardship. Blessed to be a blessing. From the time God says to Abraham and Sarah "I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed" to the parable Jesus tells

how those who risked their talents were rewarded and the one who buried his was banished, we hear the tolling of the great biblical principle that God gives us blessings to bless others. How can we identify God's people? We identify them by the way they put all that they have and all that they are at the disposal of God's dream for the human family.

I have seen them use their homes and careers, their Saturday mornings and vacation time, I have seen them give away cars and wardrobes and tools and summer residences and income to bring some glimmer of hope to our world.

People who somehow got the notion that everything they have belongs to God and can be used to bring transformation and new life.

Shift with me to St. Paul. This understanding of life takes root and grows in our hearts, he says. There is truth to the old adage that faith is caught not taught.

Paul says in the opening lines of his letter, "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ will enable you to see with the eyes of your heart, that you may know what is the hope to which God calls you, what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."

The eyes of Esther's heart were closed. She did not yet see the hope to which God was calling her and all of God's people. Nor was she yet aware of God's immeasurable power to use her to bring about this new day.

But Mordecai was. "Who knows" he says to Esther. "I don't have a crystal ball but I have a hunch and I believe that God will use you to liberate our people."

The eyes of Mordecai's heart were open, awake. At some point Martin Luther King, Jr., Helen Caldicott and Marian Wright Edelman opened the eyes of their hearts. When you open the eyes of your heart you see things differently—first yourself, then others and the world. You experience the suffering of others because you find yourself continually standing in their shoes.

Esther awakens from her spiritual slumber. She trusts Mordecai that her blessing of royal privilege is for a larger purpose. She risks. She goes to the king. Miracle of miracles he asks her to let him grant her wish. The tables turn. The evil plotter reaps the fate he planned for Esther's people. The Jews are saved. Esther and Mordecai are elevated to greater honor.

I cannot imagine Esther ever doubted again why she came into royal dignity or questioned the purpose of God's blessing her life.

But I wonder about us. I wonder if we realize why God has blessed us. Perhaps we think it is because we worked hard or deserve it or have been lucky. All of those may have contributed to whatever success we have but the problem is all of those reasons start and stop with us.

I wonder if we know why we have been blessed individually and as a congregation. There are lots of churches which have been blessed and didn't know why and they don't exist today or they are preparing to die. You see, this is a very big question as we discern and dedicate our gifts for 2006.

If we know why we have been blessed then, like Esther, we see the present crisis and claim the power of God to use us to change the world.

And something else too: our giving is driven more by instinct than analysis; less by asking how much do we have left but responding—how much more is needed?

Whether we open the eyes of our hearts or not—because we have clearly been blessed—it won't be long before some Mordecai comes up to us and says, "who knows, for such a time as this God calls you to use your blessing."

In fact, Mordecai has already spoken today.

His name is John Perry, Luis Acosta, and Dwayne Robinson. They are saying to us for such a time as this when jobs and houses are desperately needed on the West Side of Buffalo and this congregation has the financial resources and individual talent to generate them, God is waiting to see what we will do.

My Midwest plant-owner friend? Twenty years ago there was one plant. Today there are plants in Louisiana and Ireland and Singapore.

The best explanation I can find for the remarkable success of his business and all the lives he has touched is that he knows why he has been blessed.

God is in the wings, this morning, hoping we will too. Amen.