

Esther 4: 13-17

“Our Own Place in Time”

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If whistleblowers were ever looking for a patron saint, it would be and should be Queen Esther. As you probably know, a whistleblower is a person – employee or insider – who becomes aware of some kind of wrongdoing within the corporation or agency. They learn of products or policies that stand to harm the customer, the stockholder or the employees themselves. If the danger is being concealed, the whistleblower takes it upon him or herself to make the information public. Many people who blow the whistle on corporate shenanigans are motivated by a concern for the common good. Such persons often feel that it is their responsibility to speak up for those who can't.

Even though whistleblowers are protected by laws, it is risky business. Many whistleblowers either lose their jobs or become pariahs in the company. Often they are harassed, branded as “tattletales,” followed by investigators, forced to spend their savings on legal defense and end up emotionally exhausted. Inexplicably, they are sometimes treated with hostility even by those who *benefit* from having the wrong exposed and/or corrected.

Clearly, whistle blowing is not an activity one should enter into without doing some accounting of the cost. But we also need them. In 2001 it was Sharron Watkins, a vice president at Enron, who informed officials about those funky accounting practices that led to the collapse of the company. A whistleblower helped to build a case against an insurer who denied thousands of claims from policyholders whose homes were destroyed in Hurricane Katrina in 2006.

According to an attorney prosecuting the case, the whistleblower supplied reports showing that one insurance company pressured engineers to change their conclusions so claims could be denied.

Then there is one of the latest whistle blowers, U.S. intelligence leaker Edward Snowden. It might come as a surprise to hear that the European Parliament nominated him among seven nominees for this year's Sakharov prize, the top human rights prize. The finalist for the prestigious 50,000 euro (\$65,000) award will be chosen next month. Previous winners include Nobel Peace Prize laureates Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela.

All of the above may be more information about whistleblowers than you ever wanted to know. The topic might even make us squirm a bit. But it takes us to our text, because although “whistleblower” is a

modern word, coined in the 70s', the practice itself has ancient roots. Before there were Watkins and Snowden, there was Esther.

Let me remind you of the story: Esther's chronicle concerns Jews who remained in the Persian Empire after the exile was over. In 486 B.C., a king named Ahasuerus (Xerxes) came to the Persian throne. He was the chosen man of the moment, not given too much forethought or meant for a particular purpose. Some years into his reign, he married a beautiful young woman named Esther, after having dismissed his previous wife, Queen Vashti. Esther was Jewish, but neither Ahasuerus nor anyone in the royal court was aware of it.

Some time after Esther was made queen, her cousin Mordecai overheard a plot to kill the king. He sent a warning to Esther, who, in the name of Mordecai, warned her husband. The plotters were executed and the king was saved.

Highly placed in the king's court was a devious man named Haman, a minion with substantial power and wealth, and the need to brag about it. Haman hated Mordecai, mainly because Mordecai could see through his pompousness. In a calculated response, Haman persuaded the king to issue a death edict against "a certain people" living in the empire. Haman did not tell the king the targets were Jews, and the king didn't bother to ask.

When Mordecai learned of this edict, he asked Esther to intervene with the king. He tells her that if she keeps silent and does nothing, the Jewish people will be annihilated, including both of them. She is their only hope.

Esther knows that this could cost her life because even as the queen she has no real power in the king's court. But she also can not argue with Mordecai who suggests that maybe God has put her in the position she is in for exactly this moment, for just such a time as this.

And what does Esther do at this decisive moment? She stops denying, stops ignoring, stops making excuses, stops running away. She realizes this needs more than her own strength, so she falls back on the devotional habits of her people and calls on the Jews to fast with her. She resolves that she will face up to her responsibility and go to the king. She recognizes that what she must do must include disclosing her true identity as a Jew. She takes stock of the realities of her situation and says simply, "If I perish, I perish." She goes to the heart of the empire to save the Jewish people.

What followed was an intricate and carefully planned approach to the monarch. She was in effect functioning as a whistleblower and having to do so in the face of the king's own edict, and with Haman breathing down her neck.

She was successful, however, and in the end, Haman was hanged on the very gallows on which he had planned to execute Mordecai. Though the original edict could not be withdrawn, the king issued a second edict that permitted the Jews to defend themselves.

As a result, the Jews were saved. This whole story and the good outcome are celebrated to this day in Judaism in an annual festival called Purim.

The book of Esther within the Hebrew Scripture canon is not without controversy. God is never mentioned in the book. Nothing is said about Jewish customs or keeping the law. It is, in fact a very violent book filled with revenge and bloodshed. Not the bedtime story I would choose to read to the kids.

So why though should we not ignore the story of Esther especially in this sermon series on vocation?

First of all, it is still a great story about God's providential care for God's people, a woman's courage in the face of lethal danger, the triumph of good over evil, and the power of faith in difficult times.

But I think there is an even larger lesson to be drawn from this story. The lesson lies in Mordecai's statement that perhaps Esther was made queen for such a time as this. Was this her destiny? Are we people of destiny?

Ancient wisdom suggests that all of us are people of destiny, born for such a time as this, that all our lives have a sense of destiny (or call) beyond the ordinary. Aristotle famously said, "He who grasps the helm of fate firmly in the moment of fate, forces fortune; therefore, believe in thy destiny.

Winston Churchill promised that "to every man there comes in this lifetime that special moment when he is figuratively tapped on the shoulder and offered the chance to do a very special thing, unique to him and fitted for his talent."

Do every one of us have a special destiny, and are we obliged to find such a destiny? In the Christian tradition there is a strong belief that each of us has such a special destiny. That God calls all of us to something unique and special. This belief often says that God made each of us to one certain thing and it is our task to find that one thing and do it. Usually that special something is a profession or job to be used in God's service.

And power to each and every person who finds that special something to be used in God's service and actually gets adequately compensated for it. More often than not one's calling might not pay for the rent or put food on the table.

What about people who have terrible jobs or who hate their work or whose work seems to have no redeeming value or noble purpose? What about the guy in an automobile factory in Ohio who spends

day in and out bolting the left tire on Ford trucks? What if your work does not seem to fulfill some noble purpose or does not serve humanity in any obvious way? What about the people who have no profession or job? What about the young mother whose days are filled with crying babies and dirty diapers?

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a chapter on vocation (or call or destiny) in her book "An altar in the world." Taylor currently is a Christian writer, a teacher, and minister. On vocation she writes: "I have been a babysitter, an Avon lady, a cashier, a cheese packer, and horse back riding instructor, a nursing unit clerk, a cocktail waitress, a secretary, a newspaper reporter, a fundraiser, an editor, a special events coordinator, a teacher of creative writing, a hospital chaplain, a pastor, a preacher, and a college professor – and those are just the jobs that I have been paid for." (p.108)

And she has not given up on becoming a chef, a zookeeper, a bookstore manager or - the most secret thrilling vocational desire of all - a member of the French Canadian traveling circus Cirque du Soleil, not as an acrobat, but manning the ticket counter would be fine. (p. 109)

For much of her early life, Taylor thought there was one special thing she was supposed to do with her life. She went to seminary to find it. She searched in vain. One night she climbed up the fire escape and sat on the roof asking God what she should do with her life.

Eventually the answer came: "Do anything that pleases you," God told her, "and belong to me." Not the answer she was looking for but eventually it made sense. (p. 110) The answer is not so much what she did but how she did it.

The answer is not what we do, but how we do it. No matter what our job, or profession, or lack of work are, our lives and our work have the purpose to love God and neighbor. No matter what we do, it is an opportunity in time to choose kindness over meanness.

Every kind of work – from mopping the floors to performing open-heart surgery can be an opportunity to grow closer to God and to actually do what Jesus told us to do – to love with justice and mercy. In any job or position in life, we can point our life at working for the good and opposing evil. No matter what, we can promote what the Hebrew Bible calls shalom, the health and wellbeing of everyone.

Taylor said that what she learnt that night on the roof was that food on a serving tray, saddles on ponies, articles written, or checks written from her check book are all opportunities to choose kindness, love, mercy, and do justice, to see the divine in human form, as opportunities to reach out from herself and touch another life with the life God has given her.

Our purpose in life, no matter what each of us might do, is God's purpose in our life: our transformation from what we naturally are to what God wants us to be and to use our life in the transformation of others and this world toward the norms and values of the kingdom of God.

And no matter what we do or who we are, if we are part of the Christian community, we are part of something much larger than ourselves and our faith. We are in covenant with God and each other and called to participate in God's mission in the world.

The church has a vocation, a call, a destiny as well you know - to love, and heal, and care, and forgive, not just ourselves, but each other, and the world. To be Christian is to entangle our lives with dozens of other lives for the sake of love, justice, and mercy, and to share our common life with the world.

Maybe you are still seeking your call; maybe you have found the "it" for just such a time as this. Maybe you want to keep as many doors as open as possible. I don't know; but I know this: God calls human beings, equips them, and expects them to take initiative in positive, loving, and wise ways to whatever place or time or situation we are called into.

There is something about that ancient whistleblower Esther I think that makes us take stock of our lives and wonder what God is up to in us. And maybe, just maybe, it is God's gift to us for just such a time as this. Amen.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World – A Geography of Faith*; Harper Collins, 2009