

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2-3, 2008
Esther 4:1-17

Esther: God's Timing

The summer Olympics begin this next Friday, and so the eyes of the world will be focused on Beijing, China as athletes from around the world compete for Olympic gold. I love to watch the Olympics, and I'm sure you do as well. It is interesting to note that the Olympics begin on August 8, 2008 – that is, 08-08-08, regarded as a very propitious and favorable day because the day, the month, and the year all line up. I was talking with Cathy, our finance person in the church office, about this because she is from China, and she affirmed that this is indeed the case. She also said that the Cantonese pronunciation of the Chinese word for “eight,” *fa*, forms part of the word for “prosperity,” *fa-cai*. So, later this week as the Olympics get underway in China there is the sense that this is very much a favorable time.

Today we learn of another propitious and favorable time, a time very long ago in the lives of God's people. Our summer preaching series, “Portraits of Faith,” continues today as we focus on Queen Esther, whom we heard about in the Scripture reading. The time in which Esther came to the throne seemed anything but propitious and favorable, but as we shall see, this is the story of bold action and courage in time of need, of God's almighty power to deliver from death and destruction. This is the story of God's timing, and that becomes the theme for today's message. May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

The book of Esther, ten short chapters, makes for very compelling reading, and I encourage you to go home and read through it all in one sitting. The book centers on Esther, a beautiful Jewish maiden living in Susa, capital of the Persian Empire. Esther, or *Istar*, was her Persian (Babylonian) name, but her Hebrew name was Hadassah. She was selected for the king's harem and so delighted King Ahasuerus (also called Xerxes), that he made her his queen. Now the plot thickens! Haman, newly appointed prime minister, bore a grudge against Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who had raised her from childhood. Haman influenced the king to issue a decree authorizing the destruction of all Jews living in the empire. In this emergency Esther was able to persuade the king to proclaim a second decree reversing the earlier one, thus saving her life and the lives of her people. What followed was the destruction of Haman and those who supported his plan. Following their deliverance, a two-day celebration followed, which Queen Esther fixed as an annual observance (9:17-32). To this day, Jewish people observe the festival of *Purim* each year in commemoration of their deliverance through Esther.

From what we read in Scripture, God raised up Esther at this specific time for a specific reason: in order to save his people. When Mordecai sends word to Esther about the plot to destroy their people, Esther's response is one that we can all identify with: she is fearful and afraid. She doesn't think she can do it. Mordecai's words to her are very sobering and challenging: **“For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”** (4:14). There are propitious times in our life as well, when we, like Esther, are called to do things that seem way beyond what we think we are capable of doing. Like Esther, we too may be fearful and afraid. Like Esther, who knows whether we have not come for such a time as this? Esther has a change-of-heart, and instructs Mordecai to gather their fellow Jews for a 3-day fast. Though not specifically mentioned in the text, we can assume that not only did they fast for three days, but they also fervently prayed for Esther and the mission before her to go and see the king uninvited – an act punishable by death. At times, God does call his people to do things that are risky for the sake of his kingdom. Esther was willing to take such a risk in her day. Are we willing to do the same in our own day?

God's timing is not always our own. The story of Esther, and indeed of all Scripture, is of a God who intervenes in world events and in people's lives. God intervenes not arbitrarily or by chance, but deliberately and with a purpose. The truth is that we do not always welcome God's interventions in our life. We are comfortable with how things are right now, thank you very much. But God is not so easily put off, and he will go to great lengths to get our attention. And so at times, we may find ourselves being dragged kicking and screaming to that propitious moment which God has prepared for us. If we fight against that, we stand in a long line of others who have done the same thing; people who have done their best to get out of what God has called them to do. Think of Moses who told God to find somebody else to go back to Egypt. Think of Jonah who took a ship in the opposite direction of Ninevah. They, along with many others, were called to be deliverers in their own day, just as Esther was. The One who did not rebel or run away from what God had called him to do, the One who willingly accepted the task before him with humble obedience, is the One who has delivered us from sin, from death, from the power of the devil. This One is Jesus Christ, whom God sent forth at the right time, as we are told: **"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children"** (Galatians 4:4-5). He lived the life we could not and he died the death we deserved. In God's timing, the shameful execution of Jesus upon a cross has become for us *Good Friday*. In him, we are set free to say "yes" to God's call, knowing that we are covered with the robe of Christ's own righteousness.

As we gather around TV screens later this week to watch the opening ceremonies of the Olympics on that very propitious day of 08-08-08, may this point us to something even more propitious: the deliverance accomplished by our great God through Esther of old, and more fully through the cleansing blood of Christ Jesus. May Christ's deliverance of us move our hearts and minds to say "Yes, Lord" when he calls us to do his kingdom work. May God make it so for Jesus' sake. Amen.