



*Cumberland Presbyterian Women -- Called to Serve in Such a
Time as This*

Esther 4:14; Matthew 25:34-40; Philippians 4:8

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” This timeless line from the pen of Charles Dickens speaks the truth about any age in history. Certainly, it could apply to the world of today, for in this year of 2005, we rejoice and we tremble.

We rejoice at the modern discoveries and victories of humankind.

- ♥ Think of the medical breakthroughs that bring promise of future cures and treatment for conditions that were previously painful and debilitating.
- ♥ Think of the mind-boggling research and exploration by NASA space probes and telescopes.
- ♥ Think of the advances in technology that bring us instant communication with others around the world – opportunities for negotiating peace, for building friendships with those of other cultures, for supporting and encouraging others anywhere on the planet.
- ♥ Think of the advent of the computer in most homes in America. Do you remember the times when there was no internet with instant information and so much information on a given subject that a lifetime would hardly be long enough to access it all?
- ♥ Think of the opportunities to spread the gospel message through mass communications that reach into the farthest corners of the earth.
- ♥ Think of the efforts to relieve suffering around the world, most recently in the worldwide outpouring of aid to victims of the tsunami that brought destruction of epic proportion.

We tremble at the darker side of this wonderful age. I will not exalt evil by listing examples of man’s actions that limit peace, threaten the foundations of society, and promote man’s allegiance to that which is destructive to the human spirit and soul.

It was the best and worst of times in the day of Esther and Mordecai. These two were exiles in the kingdom of Persia under King Ahaseuras, identified as Xerxes (485-465 B.C.) She was a Jewess of the tribe of Benjamin, daughter of Abihail. Her family had been deported from Jerusalem to Babylon around 599 B.C. At the death of her parents, her father’s brother Mordecai, who dwelled in Persia, adopted her.

When Ahaseuras, king of Persia became angered at Queen Vashti, who refused to respond to his invitation to attend a banquet given in the third year of his reign, he divorced her and ordered the most attractive maidens in the land be brought before him so that he might choose a successor. Among these was Esther, whose rare beauty and presence moved him to place her on the throne. Her uncle remained always near the palace so that he might counsel Esther, watch over her, and keep her close to her faith.

God plants His own in places where they can do good and work His will in the world. Mordecai, while hanging out at the gate of the palace overheard a plot to kill the king. He revealed this to Esther, who immediately reported it to Ahaseuras. The plotters were executed, and the name of Mordecai was recorded in the chronicles of the kingdom as one who had saved the life of the king.

Then enters the evil one. Haman was a favorite of Ahaseuras and had been made essentially the prime minister of all of Persia. The king ordered that all people were to bow before him. Mordecai felt that that honor was due only to God and did not prostrate himself before a mere man. Noticing this slight by Mordecai, Haman cunningly obtained the king's consent for a massacre of all Jews in the kingdom, as well as those who had returned to Jerusalem. This was indeed genocide. A nation, God's chosen people, were to be killed on a given day chosen by lot – just because one man would not bow down before another. These were indeed the worst of times.

Mordecai, seeing only one way to remedy the situation, begged Esther to use her influence with the king and save her people. This was no small request for anyone who went before the king unbidden could be killed on the spot if the king so chose. But Mordecai reminded Esther, that as a Jewess she would be killed in the massacre because of her heritage..

It is then that he speaks the words that echo down the ages to us as Cumberland Presbyterian Women today, “Who knows? Perhaps you are come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14b)

Esther goes before the king, using her grace and conviction to convince him to alter his decree. There was no massacre. Mordecai is rewarded for his loyalty to the king. Haman finds that he has dug a hole, so to speak, from which he cannot escape, and he is hanged on the very gallows that he had built for the hanging of Mordecai.

It is those words of Mordecai that I say to myself day after day, moment after moment. “Who knoweth whether thou are called to the kingdom for such a time as this?” What do those words and the examples of Esther and her uncle teach us in this world today?

First, let us look at this courageous young woman as she accepts the task put before her and faces death or benevolence at the hand of her king and husband. What is her first act in preparing for that moment when she enters the throne room? She asks Mordecai to spread the word throughout the Jews in all the kingdom to fast and pray about the situation for three days, as she and her handmaidens would be doing the same.

She turned to God with this overwhelming situation, placing it in his hands and accepting the truth that His will might result in her death, but ultimately trusting that she would be an instrument to bring about His will in the world.

I remind myself every morning when I turn on the light in my classroom that God has brought me to this place in this time. I pray silently that he direct me to say that which will benefit my students, to respond to them in His love, and to be used by Him to bring about growth and healing in their spirits.

My sister is a wonderful, effusive Christian whose sense of humor and genuine love for

others is a tremendous witness. As I began to gather my thoughts for today, I found that she also keeps this scripture at the forefront of her heart as she lives her life day after day. She had just been to Huntsville to serve the homeless in a Christian ministry there. She shared that as she held the hand of a young mother and listened to her story, she too prayed that she would say those words which the Lord would have her say as this might just be one of the times for which she was called to the kingdom. I think we are called for many moments, and many hands, and many hearts, and many acts of kindness. We have to ask for and trust God's directions and make ourselves available to carry out God's will.

Secondly, we are called to live as Christ would live in this world, even though many in this world would not feel this is the popular, "cool," accepted way to react. We are called to live as persons who respond differently when others treat us with anger, unkindness, derision, or discontent. I am not saying that we let others mistreat us, take advantage of us, or "walk all over us" as the old saying expresses it. Christians have a strength of character that the world often does not understand. It is the spirit of Christ within us that enables us to react with respect, rather than disrespect; with calm words, rather than curses; with the spirit of reconciliation, rather than physical blows or violence.

I was reminded recently of the way so many in the world now react with anger and unkindness to every day, unavoidable situations. A car had broken down on the side of the road just a few hundred feet from a major interstate off-ramp. The two gentlemen in the car were busily changing their flat tire, rushing to relieve the traffic slowdown their bad luck was causing. The driver in one of the cars involved in the brief backup pulled out of the line of traffic, screeching tires and almost causing a wreck. At that point the two passengers yelled obscenities at the poor, stranded motorists and emphasized their anger with the ultimate, unkind sign of the

times. How many of you had even heard of road rage twenty-five years ago? We are living in times when responding in anger and degradation is fast becoming the accepted way for many.

We are called like Esther and Mordecai to respond in the manner of God's will and thus become a strong witness in the world of today. We are not to let other people take the peace of God, implanted in our hearts by his spirit, from us. Rather we live victoriously, responding in a positive, calm manner to problems, to dissension, to conflict in our workaday world. Christians overcome evil with good. I feel that Esther was as beautiful on the inside as she was on the outside. She did not rant and rave, demanding to be admitted to see the king. She did not rail against the task she had been given - to prevent genocide. She did not make demands of the king - implying that he was foolish and not much of a king, listening to someone like Haman. Rather, she kept her head and wits about her, and approached the throne with grace, poise, courage, and calm.

Let's bring the situation to today's world. How do we behave in our fast-paced daily journeys? A teller at the bank makes an honest mistake in adding your deposit. Do your eyes flash and your fists clench as you say in a gruff voice - "You'd better count that over and be quick about it. I'm just about out of patience with this bank. Where do I find the manager?" Someone breaks in the only open line at Wal-Mart where you and others have been waiting patiently for several minutes. Now this is a crisis!!! Do you begin by glaring at the individual and then join others in openly berating the person, making him feel like a criminal. Does it make you feel good to destroy his self-esteem? The world would say that people who break in line deserve this treatment. But just maybe he's rushing to get medicine to a person in a health crisis, or orange juice to a diabetic, or diapers to a young mother late to daycare and work. God's peace in the Christian's heart will not be thwarted, but respect and kindness will be the

watchword.

In my job I deal each day with teenagers, many of whom have not been taught by example or principle to respond calmly in situations where there is conflict – particularly with an authority figure. I have learned through experience that I have lost respect and control of the situation if I do not respond in a calm, responsible, peaceful manner that conveys the truth that I have the student's best interest and success at heart. I cannot let their behavior take God's peace from me.

Likewise, we will be a strong witness as we enable others to find their strengths and gifts, to build self-esteem, and to assume their place in God's plan. Positive words, positive actions, smiles, pats on the back, words of acknowledgment and understanding are strong medicine that can change the course of lives. Psychologists say that it takes five positive messages to wipe out one negative message that a person receives. As we deal with people in the workplace, in the home, in the church, in the marketplace, we are to be positive people – people whose attitude towards others transforms rather than deflates those whom they touch.

In the basement cell of a nineteenth century insane asylum, there once was a small girl whose uncontrolled, violent behavior deemed her incorrigible. Known only as "*Little Annie*", she would run screaming and scratching at the worker who passed her food and water between the bars of the cells. No one came to visit her. No one cleaned her or combed her matted hair.

One day, a nurse was ordered to take little Annie's food down to her. Perhaps she had made the supervisor mad that day, for no one wanted that chore. As she received the same treatment from the child, this nurse was moved by her situation. She could see beyond the filth, the stringy hair, the flailing arms. She saw a child, a child who responded to her world in the only way she knew.

The nurse spent her lunch break every day sitting outside little Annie's cell. She would talk to her in a calm voice. Sometimes she would sing quietly. Each day she would eat a brownie or a cookie or some other delectable food. At first, little Annie was the same – screaming in protest, trying to get to the nurse to scratch or hit her. As time went on, however, she seemed to expect the nurse who began patiently, a little at a time, to move closer to her cell. Each day she would offer the child a bit of the wonderful treat she brought with her. Finally, she broke through the shell that Annie had built around herself. Eventually little Annie emerged from that dark, fetid place and took her place in the life of another child who was bound in a dark prison of her own making. For you see, little Annie's full name was Annie Sullivan, and God placed her in the life of the young Helen Keller. The rest is history.

I believe that God brought that nurse to that basement cell to work a miracle in the life of one of his children. Each life touches other lives in a positive or a negative way. Each of us touches the future as we walk daily.

Finally, God calls people to action. Esther did not cloister herself in her luxurious apartment in the palace, being served and pampered. She left safety and security. She faced death. She approached the king, invited him to a specially prepared feast, not once but twice. She asked him to spare her people, startling him with the fact that she, too, would be one of those hacked mercilessly to death. She risked all because she was convinced that this was God's will for her at that time and place.

Love is action. Christianity is more than good feelings about the world and others. Christianity is a matter of daily obedience to God. Christianity is demonstrating that love in action. We, as Christians, are called to serve in this time, where we are planted. Literature often haunts me with pictures of what life could become for our times. In Fahrenheit 451, a futuristic novel by Ray Bradbury, people never leave home because they are brainwashed and lulled into compliance by their friends who talk to them every waking minute on giant screens scattered throughout their homes. Christians, we must never allow ourselves to become "couch potatoes," missing out on the life God has created for us.

Christians are lights in the world of darkness. God has placed us in an age where there are so many needs, so many opportunities to do his will. Think of the ways in which women change the world. It is mind-boggling. It is exciting. It is inspiring.

- ♥ One woman can mold and instruct and develop Christian children who will serve Him in the next generation.
- ♥ One woman can speak, inspire, and move fellow Christians in her parish to serve Him in the community and world. Many hands make work light and broad in scope.
- ♥ One woman can comfort the sick and change the day for a hospitalized individual and his/her family.
- ♥ One woman can begin a new tradition that will spread His love and care. (Think of the prayer quilts that have covered those in need of prayer with warmth and assurance.)
- ♥ One woman can establish a ministry that serves those in dire need – the homeless, the imprisoned, the sick, the abused, or the lost.... (The needs are endless.)
- ♥ One woman can mentor another in the faith, in the day-to-day running of a household, in the care of children, in gardening....(The list is as varied as each of our lives.)
- ♥ One woman can serve the Lord in the workplace with competence, willingness to work, and Christian joy.
- ♥ One woman, long ago, risked her life to preserve her people and thus insure that God's Son would be born through the lineage of David, according to His will.

God speaks. Let us listen. "Who is to say that you are not called to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Patricia Smith
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