

SPEAKING UP. Esther 3:14 "If you keep silence at such a time as this..."

Bishop Desmond Tutu went up the stairs of the cathedral pulpit in Cape Town, South Africa to preach once more against the wicked system of apartheid. As he did so, a group of machine-gun toting, government soldiers surrounded the nave. Incredibly, as he surveyed the tense scene below, Tutu paused and then began to laugh! Slowly members of the congregation joined in. Even the soldiers began to laugh in the end. After the laughter subsided, Tutu preached...yes, once more against the wicked apartheid system. And the soldiers listened, with respect. Bishop Tutu used his position of influence to speak up against the injustice of a system in which a minority of wealthy whites exploited and enslaved a majority of mainly poor disenfranchised blacks. Tutu was the right person, raised up at the right time to courageously speak up for his voiceless compatriots. Thanks to his consistent protests and the brave actions of so many like him, finally, in 1994 democratic elections were held in South Africa. 46 long years of racial segregation were ended.

Esther, in our Old Testament reading today, was a poor Jewish orphan in the foreign land of Persia. Amazingly, her fortunes radically changed and she became the Queen of Persia. When her Jewish compatriots were threatened with extermination, Queen Esther used her position of privilege and power to speak up for them. To this very day, Jewish people still joyfully celebrate their salvation in the Feast of Purim, acting out the story with costumes, cheers for the good guy and booing for the bad guy.

Long ago, and far away, (at the end of the 5th century BC, in Persia, now Iraq), the Babylonians had conquered the Jewish homeland of Judah, and taken all their people as slaves back to Persia. The Persian king divorced his wife and held a beauty pageant to replace her. Enter Mordecai (cheers!), a faithful Jew. Mordecai had a beautiful orphan niece whom he had adopted, called Esther. Esther was taken to the king's court with all the other fair young virgins for the beauty pageant. Marvelously, the king chose Esther for his new wife. One day, Mordecai (cheer) was sitting by the city gate, and heard two servants plotting to kill their king. Mordecai spoke up and told his niece, Queen Esther. She then spoke up and told the king whose life was saved. This kind deed of Mordecai was recorded in the historical books of the kingdom.

The plot then thickens. The King promoted Haman, also a foreigner in his court. You can boo! All the king's servants would bow down as Haman passed by. Except Mordecai who refused to bow. Haman was furious! When he found out that Mordecai was Jewish, he vowed to annihilate all the Jewish people. Lots were cast to decide which month and day to kill the Jews: the 13th day of the 12th month was chosen. The Hebrew name for lots is Pur, Purim in the plural. Haman sowed seeds of suspicion in the king's mind about the Jews: "the Jews are rebellious against you. You should make a decree to destroy them." Haman sealed the deal by offering a hefty sum of silver. The king, a weak, drunken tyrant easily acquiesced. The decree went out throughout the 127 provinces of the Persian Empire to destroy, kill and annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children on the 13th day of the 12th month.

When Mordecai heard the fate of his people, he was MORDI-fied (haha!)and went through the city of Susa wailing and crying aloud in great anguish. Esther sent a servant to find out what was up with her uncle. Mordecai gave the servant a copy of the decree to show the Queen. He told her "You must speak up on our behalf, Esther!" Esther informed Mordecai of the King's court's rules: no-one can enter the king's presence without being invited or they risk certain death. Mordecai said "If you keep silence at such a time as this Esther, someone else will deliver the Jews, but you and your family will perish. Maybe you've been made Queen for such a time as this." So, Esther tells Mordecai to get the Jewish people to fast for her for 3 days. "Then I will go into the king and speak up to save my people. If I die, so be it."

Queen Esther spoke up, but she was strategic, both in the words she used, the timing and the setting she chose to make her case. Knowing her hubby's penchant for good food and wine, she planned TWO banquets. The first one, she said nothing, and just invited the king and Haman to enjoy themselves. Haman thought " Hey man (Haman!!!! Groan!), this is great. Look how powerful I am; everyone loves and honors me! I rock!" But when he saw Mordecai outside, refusing to bow before him yet again, it ruined his day, TOTALLY! His wife and friends told Haman to make a gallows 75 feet high, and hang Mordecai on it. Boo! (pause) However, that night, the king could not sleep. He had his historical books brought to him and read how Mordecai had once saved his life. The king decided to reward Mordecai.

This is where it gets comical and ironic. Haman came in for work that day, pleased as Punch with himself, and the king asked him how he would honor someone whom the king wanted to honor. Thinking that the king wanted to honor himself, Haman grandiosely said: "Dress the person in royal robes; let him be led around on horseback through the city and acclaimed with great honor." What a shock when the king replied: "Great ideas, Haman! Now, go and dress Mordecai in royal robes, and lead him on a horse throughout the city, so that everyone will honor HIM!" Not exactly what I had in mind !!!

Queen Esther then gave a second banquet, and invited the king and Haman. On the second day of the feast, the Queen finally saw that the right moment had come. When the king asked what he could do for her, she answered " Please save both my life and the lives of my people. For we are going to be destroyed, killed and annihilated." Knowing the king's self-centeredness, she added wisely " and this will also damage YOU, O King." When the king asked who had done such a wicked thing, Esther replied " An enemy, this evil Haman." (boo, hiss!) As suddenly as Esther and Mordecai's fortunes had changed for the better, so the wicked Haman's fortunes were reversed in a moment! He was hung on the very 75 foot gallows he had prepared for Mordecai!

Then Queen Esther spoke up again, and the king thus revoked the edict ordering her people's death. Mordecai ordered his people to celebrate their salvation every year on the 14th and 15th days of the 12th month. To this day, Jews continue to hold a banquet and to give gifts to the poor at the Feast of Purim.

What can we learn from Esther and Mordecai today? Like them, we must be willing to speak up courageously, to defend the voiceless, the oppressed, and the poor, whatever the cost to ourselves. We must avoid being like Haman who spoke in such a way as to poison people's minds with hate, engaging in racial and religious profiling, stereotyping and demonizing those who thought and acted differently from himself.

Esther is an interesting book because the name of God is never mentioned. Today as then, our world is too often filled with the persecution of whole groups of God's children. In the face of so much human suffering, wrought by evil people, it is easy to wonder where on earth God is. Well, friends, God IS at work in the world through US, His faithful people. In a paraphrase of the words of Edmund Burke "for evil to succeed, all it takes is for good men to do nothing." One way we can speak up in a democracy is by voting. Our voices and our votes count! Did you know that Adolf Hitler catapulted to power in Germany LEGALLY by only ONE VOTE!! (google, "The Importance of One Vote"). (Dr Seuss "Horton hears a Who".) Where, if anywhere, are we selling out our faith in God by staying silent, and thus being complicit in the spread of evil? In your school, place of work, in this church, city, and country, in this world that God loves so much, where would God have YOU and ME speak up strategically? How can we give picked-on people something to celebrate? Like Bishop Tutu and Queen Esther, we have been raised up for such a time as this.

(pause. Look at people, lean forward) Speak up! ...I can't hear you! Amen.