

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

*And who knows whether or not you have come to the kingdom for
such a time as this?*

~Esther 4:14

*Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you
season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one
another. ~Mark 9:50*

Though not immediately obvious, there seems to be a message in today's readings about redeeming the time. With this in mind, I'm reminded of a true story I recently heard about a cross-country flight. The pilot suggested that being in the air for such a long time necessitated a bit of exercise for all of the passengers. "Everyone lift your arms and lean to the right, now to the left, and now back...and now forward...and while you're there reach in the seat pocket and clean out any trash."

How's that for redeeming the time?

It has been said that Esther, our first reading today, is the most secular book in the scriptures. It tells of a Jewish woman who has found favor with a pagan monarch, acting to prevent the genocide of her people. Boldly risking a privileged position and status with a paranoid ruler, she achieves freedom for her people and brings about punishment of the chief conspirator to the potential holocaust. Though she had a great deal to lose, Esther did not perish. Through courageous wit and wisdom she won the confidence of the king, preserved her people from slaughter and saw her cousin Mordecai elevated in rank next to the king. Today, the Jewish people keep Purim as a festival in which they commemorate these events of deliverance, and celebrate Mordecai and Queen Esther.

Some have suggested that the point of this story of Esther is lost upon us if we simply see it as one more account of militant preservation. Rather, it is an intimate story about personal opportunity, and more so, of redeeming the time. Perhaps the victory worth celebrating in this story is the one that Esther makes over herself when she confronts the opportunity, redeems the time and accepts it to her own possible detriment and quite possibly the salvation of her people.

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

Do you think it was a struggle? I'd like to think so. One theologian describes it as "a drama of inner passionate conflict between the security of the moment and the risks of the future." Like her ancestor Moses when confronted with a similar opportunity, Esther might have said, "Who me? What can I do? I can't speak, send

someone else." While opportunity may seem energizing, it can also cause great distress. While complimentary, it can also seem crude. It comes and either you seize it or the moment passes by. It does not admit of much debate.

And to a good Jewish man like Mordecai, one who had known God's providence not only to himself but his fathers as well, opportunity was no accident. It was the means by which God operated with God's people. We might not get it - understand each and every detail - but somehow the purpose is there, to be revealed at the right time. Mordecai's not so subtle advice to Esther, according to one writer's reflection, was that she had been chosen to go to the king and plead for the lives of her people. It was her specific, God-ordained assignment that yes, could have eventually been fulfilled by someone else, but was meant for her. I happen to believe the principle that everyone has a calling and purpose is just as true today as it was then. It is what it means to be human.

I also happen to believe that Jesus fully understood how much it takes to be a full human being. He often moves beyond the realm of the individual and to the idea of community. Today's reading from the gospel of Mark, though intensely obscure, provides a glimpse of what Jesus might have meant by this. Lest you think I'm going to give you a clear and concise explanation of what Jesus meant by suggesting that we should cut off a hand, tear an eye out, or cut off a foot (though I have been tempted to do such with my sprained left foot this week) I must tell you that the commentaries offer little help and I do not happen to know anyone who has received a special revelation explaining this particular text. So what is going on here?

By this time in the gospel narrative, Jesus is beginning to speak openly about his impending death. He is moving

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

toward Jerusalem; he's urged those who want to follow him to take up their crosses and get on with it. Exacting, unequivocal devotion as his followers seems to be what is needed most urgently. And there's mounting tension when he suggests, "whoever is not against us is for us." Despite all of this, as one scholar points out, Jesus displays great generosity and hospitality toward those at the fringes of his group of disciples and seems eager to include them and expects his followers to do the same. To use one of Jesus' own analogies, the reign or kingdom of God is like the start of a great dinner party, where his followers are to be as gracious hosts welcoming the guests. The best hosts draw their guests into a group and out of themselves, forming a sort of community. Jesus has stern, harsh warnings for those among his more established followers who put up obstacles or "stumbling blocks" for others.

The point is that these passages - Esther and Mark - perhaps envision coherent communities of faith in which it has been suggested, "the lives and challenges of believers are integrated into the vision and purposes of the community." Esther appeals to the Persian king that both "my life be given me" and the "lives of my people." Jesus' words in Mark, "whoever is not against us is for us" with closer examination could suggest an insecure community - even a nation - might say the opposite: "if you are not for us, you are against us." Rather, Jesus' admonishment in Mark encourages an assurance and integrity that attracts others and generates allies.

Needless to say, our examination of Esther suggests both an example of personal, individual opportunity as well as community, which is further illustrated by the fact in Mark that becoming an integral part of the reign of God, the body of Christ, does not mean losing our individuality, personality, or creativity or what it means to be human.

Our gospel reading concluded today by Jesus calling us individually and collectively to "saltiness," where he says, "have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with another." Perhaps today we can imagine such a body, such a community regenerating its members and consequently

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

rejuvenating the world around it. It might speak too for those marginalized on the fringes, promote comprehensive economic justice and fair public policy, and work for global reconciliation and peace.

If I could ask for your indulgence for just a moment, I want to say something to those here this morning who are new students at Stanford especially, and continuing students as well. You come from near and far, anticipating all this exceptional university has to offer, having been through an energizing, albeit overwhelming week of orientation, selecting and attending new classes - all of which reveals the limitless possibilities abounding here as well as the sheer evidence of personal opportunities. And of course, the perennial advice, solicited or not, is to make the most of it, redeem the time, demand as much of this institution as we do of you.

We are indeed glad you're here and hope you are too.

But amidst all of the celebration, deliberation and consideration, I want to pose a question as it was written of Esther:

"Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

What more is there to be said about finding our purpose, heeding a call, for you are a generation with unprecedented opportunities to make significant impact as not

only members of this particular community, but the greater good of society and the global community?

I know, you've probably heard this before too, and like I believe it was for Esther and those followers of Jesus, it is indeed a struggle in this massive plethora of personal opportunity and the security of the moment versus the risks of the future. The drama of inner passionate conflict for them, as it is for us, was and is flanked and often paralyzed by what I will call the triple threat: fear, (it or I will fail) lack of experience, (remember Esther thought someone else was better for the task) procrastination (I'll do it tomorrow or next quarter).

I wouldn't be doing my job as your preacher this morning and as one of your deans for religious life if I failed to

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

help you, not to mention all of us, to consider thoughtfully and carefully from a reflective and spiritual viewpoint a deeper understanding of what it means to redeem the time. Or to consider in the wisdom of Solomon: "whatever your hands find to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge in the grave where you are going." In other words, tomorrow is not always promised.

The example of Esther and the teachings of Jesus to his followers are to remind us today, in the 21st century, not the 18th or 19th or 1st or 2nd, that we have at our disposal the opportunity to indeed redeem the time and effect God's greater purposes. We are here because, like women and men of those centuries, we have both a place and a purpose. How will you use your education, your time, and your community at Stanford, not to mention your idealism, your faith and spirituality to not only inform that purpose, but also transform it? How will each and every one of us, regardless of our station in life, do the same?

Consider this as one preacher put it quite eloquently: "God can and does speak to us of our opportunities for redemption and hope. Idealism has always been out of fashion, especially in a place where cynicism is a cheap substitute for wisdom, but it is the energy of the ideal, which in seeking its redemptive opportunity has made and can make the people of God more than passive spectators of passing time."

Elie Wiesel, prolific author, human rights advocate and survivor of an Auschwitz concentration camp, commented on a meeting of "righteous Gentiles" in New York, and spoke of those who had defended Jews in the European holocaust: "Most who cared were simple people who didn't even know what they were doing was courageous. They did it because it was the thing to do. And I felt then, woe to our society if to be human becomes a heroic act."

It is my hope that whether a student here or otherwise, that we find this community known as Stanford a place in which our full humanity can flourish *for such a time as this*.

The Rev. «GreetingLine»
Stanford Memorial Church
October 1, 2006

God of hope and redemption, draw us in and hold us close. You take upon yourself our only human limits and reveal their power: the power of connection, of community, the power of vision, and the power of love. Through ordinary fingers, plain words, simple faith, you work your justice and mercy. May your Spirit of faithfulness live in us so we can move through the days, weeks and months to come in peace and trust. Amen.