

Who? Me?!

Esther 4:1-17

4When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; 2he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

5Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. 6Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people. 9Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. 10Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, 11“All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.” 12When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, 13Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. 14For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” 15Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, 16“Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.” 17Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

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Good morning, church. In an effort to create some room in our bodies we have been engaging in somatic practices or body practices – humming, stretching, visualizing. Not everyone is comfortable engaging in this way and I apologize for not making it clear, every Sunday, that nothing I invite you to do is a demand nor is it required. So please engage the practice if you like and if it is simply not for you, that is 100% fine. No

judgement in the house of God. As an alternative feel free to close your eyes and sit in meditation with perhaps a focus on your breath and we will be right back with you. For those who are willing and able you have the choice of doing this morning's practice seated or standing. It works either way. Let's begin reaching overhead for a full body stretch. If it helps to rise up on your toes there in your seat or as you are standing, please do. Beautiful. Next we will reach one of our hands in the direction of our knee or ankle, opening up the opposite side of our body. Then the other side. Now alternate at your own pace. This stretches the rib cage, which provides a protective shield for the heart. So, it's good to create some room in the heart space. Finally, we will take a gentle twist. Swing your arms around so that you are looking over the shoulder. Repeat on the other side and then move at your own pace waking up your

spine, stretching your neck and perhaps even engaging your hips, which hold a surprising amount of tension and grief. When you feel ready, take your seat or come back to center and let's pray this gorgeous prayer of illumination from Rev. Andy James.

Speak to us, Lord.

Speak to us in the waiting, the watching,

the hoping, the longing,

the sorrow, the sighing, the rejoicing.

Speak to us by your Word in these Advent days,

and walk with us until the day of your coming. Amen.

On this second Sunday of the new church year, we walk with Esther. We walk with Esther while holding this week's advent theme of turning that Esther embodies. What does it

mean, church, and what *can* it mean to make a different turn?

To see ourselves as leaders, organizers, activists for our people?

How do we understand ourselves when we strike out in one

direction only to discover that a radical reorienting turn is

required of us? Are we willing to live lives that invite us to turn?

Esther, a young woman, a Jew, the queen, having heard from her cousin, Mordechai, the plan afoot to kill their people, initially distances herself from her people. When Mordechai implores her to advocate on behalf of her people she replies, “You know, Mordechai, that anyone who approaches the king without being called is to be put to death.” To which he replies, “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” But... the phrase that captures my imagination this second Sunday of Advent is not that verse which is typically quoted. I did not land on, “Perhaps you have come to royal

dignity for just such a time as this.” No. On this second Sunday of Advent with the 2024 presidential election already underway. With the lesser talked about war in Ethiopia that has seen more casualties than the war in Ukraine. With what I imagine will be another decadent Christmas as usual in these United States while asylum seekers seek shelter, food, and decent employment, while the planet shrieks and suffers at our lack of care and tending... the verse that invites our turning this new year is verse 11 where Esther replies thusly to her cousin, Mordechai. “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces **know** that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but **one** law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days.”

Ah...and that, church, is the verse for our reflection...I myself have not been called...in other words Mordechai...who me?

I get it church. There is so much, too much happening in the world right now – humanitarian crises, natural disasters, the diminishment and marginalization of more groups of people than we can list. We commemorate World AIDS day this Sunday to **remind** ourselves that AIDS is **still** a global epidemic across ages, genders, and populations groups. The equity gaps include adolescent girls, young women, and children. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote, “Our work is not done. HIV remains a **serious** threat to global health security and economic development. Our progress can be **easily** derailed if we lose our focus or conviction, or fail to address the inequities, many fueled by stigma and discrimination and punitive laws, that stand in our way.” Stories like the AIDS epidemic

overwhelm us. They make us, like Esther; want to say, “I myself have not been called.” We simply want to gift-wrap ourselves and sit under our Christmas trees. We want to put on those holiday tunes we love, bake some cookies, and chug a few glasses of eggnog. But, we in fact, like Esther, **are** called. Called to turn toward the suffering. Called to turn toward the potential utter destruction of our people. Called to turn away from the notion that someone else will do it. Who me?! Yes, you! So, who are our people and what is it that we are called to do?

I have had some wonderful conversations with Rev. Nyle Fort, Riverside’s Minister of Justice, Advocacy, and Change, and there is excitement in the air for the fresh wind blowing through the Riverside Church. There is this invitation to focus. This desire to be impactful. This longing, church, to make a

tangible difference, a long lasting, life-altering difference...a turn... in our communities of connection. We are **called** to alter life so that life may flourish for all God's people. And Rev. Fort made it clear that we are called to do that here, there, and everywhere. We intend to cultivate activists at the Riverside Church who are activists not just for the moment but for the movement. Activists across issues. Activists for life.

Now Esther and Mordechai were not organizers or activists in the way we think of those roles today, but they organized and activated themselves and their people. A people who had dropped their daily activity to turn...to turn toward God with fasting and weeping and lament. The community **together** was in sackcloth and ashes. When Esther joins them, when she mentally and spiritually makes the turn to join with her people, to come into community, she starts organizing

them. “Gather all the Jews to be found,” she tells Mordechai, “and hold a fast on my behalf. Do not eat or drink for 3 nights and 3 days. I and my maids will do the same.” When Esther turns, she turns hard and by that, I mean she is focused. She is committed. She is clear...fasting, praying, willing to go where she may not be welcomed, where she may be put to death... but she goes anyway because she goes with her people. Who me? Yes, you...and yes, also your people. We don’t make this turn, church, we don’t organize, we don’t serve on the people’s behalf alone. Who, me? Yes, all of y’all.

One of the principles that I learned in my one organizing workshop, I am not Rev. Fort, was that people will **only** act when they have an invested interest. In other words, I will act on the issue of housing if housing is an issue for me. I will come out in support of LGBTQ+ equity if I am in fact a member of that

community. I will stand against recent anti-Semitic attacks, if I in fact am Jewish. I will visit the imprisoned if the prison industrial complex has touched me. This next one might hurt a little, but... I will give my money to the places in the church that I believe in, but not to the church. C'mon somebody. I will only act in the spaces and give my money to the places where I have an invested interest. But you know that's not organizing, right? You know that's not justice? You know that is **not** following the God we claim to love.

But this IS what organizers taught me... that we advocate and organize and give money in our own self-interest. Here's the thing... my teachers didn't know the church. They did not know that church folk...that we follow a God who calls us to love our neighbors **LIKE** we love ourselves...regardless of self interest. Therefore, if it is true that I love my neighbor, then I

will show up in love when it is in my *neighbor's* interest. I will give my money in love, not just for the ministries I think are hot but to support the entire church that made those ministries possible. Not just my interests, but my neighbor's interests as well. Straight Christians will come out to the Pride march. European descended Christians who have benefitted from the transatlantic slave trade will support just reparations for Indigenous and African descended people. Male Christians will advocate for female pay equity. Adults will make space for the voices and wisdom and leadership of children because the God we follow centers neighbors. We are called, church, to turn, like Esther, from self-interest, to neighborly interest...with an understanding, like Esther, that our neighbor's interest, our neighbor's wellbeing, our neighbor's success, our people's

safety and survival is tied to our own. Who me? Yes, you and all the people.

Being Esther is scary, church. She literally says, “If I perish, I perish.” Following the God we love *can* be a scary experience. There are high hopes, huge expectations, and *so* much riding on what we do and on what we leave undone. Now, before you check out because the call to turn seems too lofty, and the demand too costly, remember that none of us do the work we are called to do alone. Esther had an entire nation of people keeping her prayed up. None of us makes the turn to be an Esther by ourselves -- from the way we were to the new way we are going to be. That...that turn takes community. Who me? Yes, you and all your people. I myself have not been called, Esther said...and she was right. This young woman, this Jew, this queen, Esther in all her glorious identities...she and her

people were called...and that was the plan all along. To God be
the glory. Amen.