

For Such a Time as This

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, September 30, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: The Book of Esther

(focus scriptures: [Esther 4:9-17](#) and [Esther 7:1-6](#))

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I love the story of Esther. And I hate it.

I tend to love an underdog story to begin with, especially when the underdog wins. And in the Esther story we have a woman who has no power and who, due to circumstances beyond her control, ends up in a position to save an entire people from annihilation. But those circumstances that are beyond her control are so patriarchal, and the story is so disturbingly quiet about that. That silence drives me crazy.

Here's what I mean by patriarchal circumstances. To start off with, Queen Vashti gets banished because she says, "No," to the king's desire to display her as a sexual object. Then, the selection process to find a new queen is essentially a stripped-down beauty pageant with only the bathing suit competition. (And, yes, I meant that double entendre.) To add insult to patriarchy, it seems that the women have no choice about entering the contest. And then there's the whole thing about Esther not being able to talk to her husband without being summoned by him. Who cares if the woman has something on her mind? She only gets to talk to her husband the king if *he* has something on *his* mind.

I would really love it if the book made it clear that this sort of patriarchal supremacy was wrong. The book sort of hints at this. The main character is a woman – that's helpful. This woman's cultural location dictates she have no power, and she finds power anyway. This woman's cultural location places no value on her intellect, ability to understand, and her ability to plan – all of which the story does because they are vital to her successfully rescuing her people. Yes, it's scary. Yes, it could cost even her her life. She has all kinds of reasons to take no risks, but she takes the risks anyway. As her cousin and adoptive parent points out, "Perhaps you have come to regal dignity for just such a time as this."

There is a theological challenge in that line (probably the most famous line from the book). It implies that there is some grand plan that is known only to the mind of God. It implies that, while we may think we have free will, God is actually calling the shots, moving people around some humongous chess board, playing both the black and white pieces, so the great plot of this grand plan will unfold as scripted. And if that's what's going on, God, why not do away with the Hamans of the world to start with.

No, I do not believe there is a grand plan that God is making unfold. And I don't even believe God has seven and a half billion little plans – one for each of us on the planet. I do believe in callings – that God has desires for goodness and love and that God sees ways (plural) for each of us to help move the world toward that goodness and love. But God hasn't scripted how we will get there. So that means that there will be plenty of suffering along the way. God does not will for us this pain and suffering. Rather, I believe that God suffers with us and collaborates with us to bring healing and life and love, even out of our sufferings, to the world. So, if I were writing this story, I would have Mordecai say, "Look

where you are, Esther. You can take advantage of this unique position to bring the world closer to God's goodness and love in such a time as this."

I understand the urge to say it's all part of some divine plan. Who but God could have known that the US news cycle would be caught up with the allegations of sexual assault against a Supreme Court Justice nominee this week when I decided two months ago to preach on the story of Esther? Who but God could have known that on Thursday well over ten million people would turn in to TV, cable, and radio stations to hear the testimony offered before the Senate Judiciary Committee? Who but God could have known how timely the quotes that ran on our church's Facebook page all last week would be when I scheduled them ten days ago?

It's easy to look back and see God's hand at work guiding all this. And maybe it was. I think it more likely, though, that it is coincidence. For if God is guiding this, making it unfold this way, I would rather God guide sexual and physical abusers away from their abuse to begin with. No, I think it is coincidence that I am preaching on Esther today and the Senate Judiciary Committee scheduled Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony for Thursday. And that coincidence preaches.

Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony is a reminder that the Esther story is very much alive today. I could not bring myself to listen to all of Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony nor to all of Judge Kavanaugh's testimony on Thursday. I told myself I had too much work to do, and I did have work to do. But that may have been a protective reaction. I didn't want to subject myself to the pain that I knew both of them would express. And taking care of ourselves is important. If my reflecting on this testimony is or becomes too uncomfortable for you, I will not be offended if you choose to step outside for a while. Take someone with you if that will make you feel safer. I hope you'll come back for communion. I know I need that shared meal today, and you might, too.

I could not bring myself to listen to all of their testimony, but I did listen to some of it. And I was right: it was difficult to listen to. Part of what made it so difficult for me to listen to Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony was the fear I heard in her voice. She didn't want to be there. She didn't want to relive this horrific experience in vivid detail and then have it dissected by powerful people who were used to being in the spotlight, who enjoy being in the spotlight, who were literally sitting above her in physical positions of power.

But no one else could have shared her truth. No one else could speak up in this way in such a time as this.

Another part of what made listening to Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony so hard is that I knew and I know there are people of all genders (and especially women) for whom this testimony and this news reporting has and will continue to bring up memories of abuse they have suffered – that *you* have suffered. For you I have a message, a message that may be easier to hear coming from women.

[Please watch [this video.](https://www.facebook.com/SojournersMagazine/videos/395029011030893/)] (<https://www.facebook.com/SojournersMagazine/videos/395029011030893/>)

I think it is important for me, a white man, to listen, especially to women. Late yesterday morning I put a post on Facebook inviting women in our church to post their

reactions to the news, comments that I could quote in today's sermon.¹ I really didn't leave people much time to respond, so only a few did. Here's what they had to say.

Tarrah Henrie said, "We need to raise our daughters to be brave and wise like Esther. We need to raise our sons to care for and respect others like Jesus taught. Each generation is moving in the right direction. Also, I think Matthew 5:29 is clear in stating that it is not the woman's fault if a man feels lust. It is really up to him to control himself. And seriously, the majority of men are good people. There is a small percent of men that are making women unsafe."

Without further comment, Joane Luesse pointed me to the video of two women, sexual assault survivors, who confronted Senator Flake after he announced his intention to vote to confirm Judge Kavanaugh.² It was the first words on the video that were hardest for me. "Don't look away from me! Look at me!" The raw pain in her voice and those words summed up the larger issues that the accusations against Kavanaugh represent – that the people who are victimized by sexualize assaults are not being seen, and in not being seen, their humanity is being denied.

In one of her posts about this news (a post she referred me to), Cindy Sojourner pointed out how important it is to be prepared to hear and believe when a loved one, people in our own families, discloses their victimization.

Delya Stoltz connected up Christine Blasey Ford's testimony about having her mouth covered by Brett Kavanaugh and fearing that he might inadvertently kill her to the work she (Delya) is doing on strangulation prevention, particularly in intimate partner assaults. The people who are studying and training first responders in this field (like Delya) include any form of restricting a person's access to oxygen or blood – smothering, strangulation, suffocation, positional asphyxia, etc. – in this family of assault. Delya pointed out to me, "People without a willingness to restrict another's breath in a violent and controlling setting don't suddenly become willing to do so when intoxicated. It's a distinct personality profile and it's deeply concerning."³

The longest response came from Lauren D'Ambrosio who offered specific advice of what we can do. "Men: call out your friends, sons, nephews, coworkers, and even bosses when they show sexist or misogynistic behavior (words, actions, storytelling, etc). Yes, it's uncomfortable. Yes, it may make you cringe. Yes, it may affect the relationship – but is that the kind of relationship you want to keep? If you see women being ignored, interrupted, or undermined ... call it out. Something like, 'I didn't hear what Kristine was saying because she was interrupted. What was that?' It is important to call out the cause that is unacceptable (i.e. the interrupting), not just the effect (that you didn't hear her). ... Use your position of power/privilege to give [women] their voice back.

¹ See <https://www.facebook.com/RevJSS/posts/10214366059719919> for my post and the exact responses.

² Niraj Chokshi and Stead W. Herndon, "Jeff Flake Is Confronted on Video by Sexual Assault Survivors," *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/28/us/politics/jeff-flake-protesters-kavanaugh.html> (posted 28 September 2018; accessed 29 September 2018).

³ From a conversation via text message with Delya on 29 September 2018; Delya granted me permission to quote her.

“Everyone: Don’t force your children to hug/kiss their relatives hello if they don’t want to; a wave is fine. Grandpa’s disappointment is less important than your child’s autonomy. Don’t [shrug] off poor behavior on your/your friend’s part with ‘oh, it’s no big deal,’ ‘you’re being too sensitive,’ or ‘jeez, everything is bothering you.’ Be reflective, and ask the individual if something is truly bothering them. Discuss a boundary, then respect it. This goes for grown adults and children/teens. You will not be seen as weak for asking them for more information about how to not make someone uncomfortable, but you will be seen as rude if you ignore it because it makes you uncomfortable.”

I am grateful for the women who chose to share a response with me and for allowing me to include it in this sermon. It makes me think about how, really, every day is a “for such a time as this” moment. Until God’s kingdom is established, there will be injustices that need to be confronted, truths that need to be told.

Each and every one of us has come to some station in life that makes us a perfect person to speak out. “Whoever said anybody has a right to give up?” the contemporary prophet Marian Wright Edelman asks us. The answer, of course, is, “No one.”

Yes, speaking up, confronting power, standing up for those who cannot stand on their own, for those who have not come to their own version of royal dignity, will be scary. Speaking truth to power is scary. It is dangerous. Power sometimes rolls over and crushes you. But nobody ever said we have the right to give up.

So, hear some advice from some of other prophets of the past several decades.⁴

“All serious daring starts from within.” - Harriet Beecher Stowe

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do.” - Eleanor Roosevelt

“Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.” - Nora Ephron

“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.” - Anaïs Nin

“The greatest honor God can bestow upon a soul is not to give it great things but to ask of it great things.” - Thérèse of Lisieux

“When I dare to be powerful, to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” - Audre Lorde

Usually, after the sermon we have some time for contemplation. Today, instead, I invite you to recite this statement written by Professor Sharon Fennema.⁵ She calls it “A Creed for Days Like This.” I think of it as “A Creed for Such a Time as This.”

The word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which is translated, “I believe.” We’ve come to think of creeds as dogmatic statements. Please don’t read this one dogmatically. Read it as an invitation.

⁴ These quotes are from Kathryn Matthews, “Sermon Seeds September 30, 2018,” *United Church of Christ*, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_september_30_2018 (accessed 19 September 2018).

⁵ Sharon Fennema, “A Creed for Days Like This,” *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/sharon.fennema/posts/10156022719207449> (posted and accessed 28 September 2018). Use by permission of the author.

I believe that God weeps for the ways we shatter each other.
I believe that my body is not an apology or an invitation.
I believe that Jesus, revolutionary love incarnate, trusted the wisdom of women.
I believe that we have the right to say what happens to our bodies.
I believe that the Spirit moves in acts of resistance to patriarchy, misogyny, white supremacy and colonialism.
I believe that both those of us who report and those of us who can't or don't report are courageous and praiseworthy.
I believe in a church that listens to and learns from the resilience of women.
I believe that our vulnerability is our strength.
I believe that the communion of saints lives in the flesh and bones of survivors.
I believe that no means no.
I believe that the forgiveness of sins must center the sinned-against
I believe that the time's up.
I believe that bodies are resurrected when we bear witness to and believe the stories, when we name femicide for what it is, and when we refuse to acquiesce to rape culture.
I believe that when we dedicate ourselves to movements that build the world we are seeking as we fight to make it real, the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.
I believe women.
Amen.