

Project Connect-Hearing God's Call

I first would like to say that I always feel honored to preach anywhere, anytime, but I am especially honored to be given the opportunity to preach at this retreat. It has been a blessing to meet new faces, and have new experiences with some old faces. Not old of course in years, but familiarity.

I must admit I first felt a bit challenged when the suggested text for today's sermon was from the book of Esther as that is a book I do not think I have ever preached from in my 11 years of ministry. But I must say that it was good doing some research and coming to some new understanding about this book of the Bible.

The book of Esther to me reads like an episode of Law and Order, one of my favorite television shows. There is deceit, power struggles, the worship of beauty, death and revenge. A typical script for a television drama. For some of the episodes of Law and Order, they give you a quick synopsis of the story so you will know what is going on, so that is what I will do with the book of Esther.

There is a Queen, Queen Vashti who defies her husband the King, King Ahasuerus. Because of her defiance, Queen Vashti is banned from ever becoming before the King. Well, if that happens, of course they need a new Queen and Esther is chosen as the new Queen. Esther's cousin, Mordecai becomes a big government official, but he refuses to bow to Haman, who is Prime Minister and second in command. There is a plot to kill the King, there is a plot to kill Mordecai, and there is a plan to kill the Jews of the Persian Empire but through the intelligent moves of Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai, Mordecai is spared, the Jews of the Persian Empire are spared, but poor Haman is killed.

But the part of the story I want to concentrate on is from Esther 2:1-8. Queen Vashti has defied the King and has been banned from being in the King's presence and now a new Queen must be chosen. Esther 2:1-8 offers us an overview on how Esther became part of the harem that was used to select who would be the next Queen, and as we know, Esther was eventually chosen to take the place of Queen Vashti.

Now what does all of this have to do with our theme for this retreat about hearing God's call? Esther's cousin Mordecai was the one who seems to have had the idea to put Esther in the running for Queen. He perhaps saw the many gifts that Esther had aside from her beauty. He realized that she was the right person for what God wanted to accomplish in the Persian Empire.

And Esther took on the role of Queen, perhaps reluctantly because she probably heard how Queen Vashti lost her position through her assertiveness and wondered if she could really be the subservient Queen that the King was expecting, but she took the call and she used her intelligence to get things done in a way that honored the king, but also honored her own self respect. Her shrewd ways kept her cousin alive and her people, the Jews of the Persian Empire alive.

Can you relate to Esther? Has someone else seen their story connected to the story of Esther? I would imagine that most of you, if not all have had a Mordecai in your life who saw gifts and talents in you that you perhaps have not seen in yourself. Having Mordecai's in our lives is a good thing because they teach us to brag a little bit.

They show us that we perhaps are too humble and that we have qualities that need to be shared out in the world. To our participants for this retreat, maybe there is a Mordecai in your life that is encouraging you to go into ministry, to use your gifts as a pastor, or diaconal minister, an AIM or some other ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Maybe you have found a Mordecai among the leaders of this retreat who have encouraged you in new ways to explore the possibility of ordained ministry. Maybe from this retreat we leaders have found some Mordecai's who are encouraging us to take our gifts and share in a different ministry.

There is the internal call where we feel God calling us to become a pastor and then there is the eternal call where others see our gifts and talents and encourage us to pursue the call. Listen to those who encourage you. Most times we cannot be objective about ourselves. We are too critical of ourselves and we have very high expectations of ourselves. But others can objectively tell us what our gifts and talents are. Mordecai knew his cousin Esther had the beauty needed to become Queen, but he also knew that she had the

gifts and talents, the internal beauty that would make her a true asset as Queen. Listen to the Mordecai's in your life.

How else does the Esther story relate to hearing God's call? Well Esther was not the only woman who was part of the harem that the King had that was used to decide who would be Queen. Esther had competition. She was beautiful, but there were other women who were beautiful too. But there was something unique about Esther, just as there is something unique about you. Maybe it is the depth of your faith. Perhaps your winning personality. Is it your wonderful sense of humor? There is something about you that separates you from the crowd; some God given gift or talent that makes you special. Do not ever put yourself down and think that you cannot answer God's call because there is nothing special about you. You are special and unique in God's eyes. In God's eyes you are as beautiful as Esther and as handsome as Don Johnson. Carry your uniqueness into whatever God has called you to do.

And finally, how does the Esther story relate to hearing God's call? Esther became Queen and sorry for the language, but all hell broke loose. Life did not become perfect for Esther as she became

Queen, in fact, it was more complicated than she probably ever imagined. If you answer God's call will life be perfect? Of course not. Will there be many, many challenges to face? You bet? Will people question your motives, your intelligence and your level of commitment to God? You can count on it. But no matter what the future brings, no matter how difficult it gets, you know that God's hand will be there to comfort you, strengthen you and guide you as you answer the call.

I have been a pastor for 11 years now and there have been great times and some not so great times. But it seems like just when things are at there worse, when I am contemplating going back into nursing, my previous profession, a member will call and say something as simple as; "Pastor, your sermon really hit home today." Or I will receive a card from a member saying thank you for something I cannot even remember doing for them. For me, those actions from my members are from God telling me to hang in there, don't give up, I am there for you. And what do I do? I hang in there, I don't give up, I ask God to continue to guide me and my ministry.

Haman, the Prime Minister convinces the King to decree that the Jews of the Persian Empire would be King. Mordecai, the cousin of Queen Esther asks her to help so that the Jews will not be killed. Queen Esther explains that according to the protocol of the time, she was not to go to the king for 30 days. But Mordecai explains to her that perhaps she was brought to live in the king's palace in this time in history so that she could do something about the possibility of her people being killed. Mordecai says to Queen Esther; "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to be a part of Project Connect for just such a time as this. To share your gifts and talents. To find a Mordecai. To open your heart, your mind and your ears to what God is calling you to do. I ask that you continue to pray and ask God to continue to let you know what your call is to be. Pray that you will have the strength to fulfill the call and pray that there will be others who will be there to continue to help you discern the call. I thank God that all of our lives have touched these couple of

days for such a time as this. May the Lord continue to guide each of us as we listen to God's call on our lives. Amen.