

Maundy Thursday

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

With the sun's setting this evening will come the close of the Jewish feast day of Purim. Purim is the day when from sunset to sunset the people of God celebrate the book and story of Esther and the deliverance of God's people. Though it sits square inside our Bibles, the story of Esther is not a tale with which many of us are intimately familiar. So as a reminder Esther is a story about the young woman Esther, a Jew, who through a series of events is picked to be the queen of the great Kingdom of Persia. While she serves as Queen of Persia the King, Ahasuerus, decides through the encouragement of his trusted advisor, Haman that all the Jews throughout the kingdom are to be put to death. But he doesn't know that his queen is a Jew. This leaves Esther the queen, in a rather precarious position. A Catch-22, shall we say. Esther is very much aware that this is one of those kings you never cross. You never disobey. The last queen found that out the hard way. In fact you're not even allowed to approach the king unless summoned – even if you are the queen. So what is Esther to do? She is a Jew ... but she is also the queen ... in a position of great privilege. Should she risk her life in not only approaching the king

without summons ... but also confronting the king over this order to exterminate her own race? Or should she remain silent? What's a queen to do? Moreover, Esther has a cousin named Mordecai who serves as her voice of conscience and Mordecai sends her a message. Says Mordecai: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For 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 such a time as this."

Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this.

Who knows?

For the truth is good queen Esther never bargained to be in this spot. It was not her idea to become the Queen of Persia. She had not campaigned for it. She had not angled her way into the good graces of the King. She just happened to be beautiful and she just happened to catch the eye of the king and before she knew it she was queen of the land. Circumstances, one could say, beyond her control. But now the fate of her people was in her hands.

Have you ever experienced circumstances beyond your control? Have you ever been put in a position quite beyond your permission or desire? Have events conspired

against you? Have you ended up in a place very different than what you set out for? Are you in a season of life you'd prefer not to be in?

To everything, writes the author of Ecclesiastes, to everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. Seasons are something quite beyond our control. Most of us have moved to Florida to get away from one season or another. But seasons happen even in Florida. Just look at the pollen covering your car. Or the love bugs in May. Seasons happen. But to everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.

The season of genocide had come to Queen Esther and what was she going to do about it?

and left to eke out his survival. The seasons had changed. He had gone from a graduate student with his dissertation nearly complete to being a prisoner. Everything stripped from him. His Magnus opus ripped from his hands. And the Frankl recalls that when his coat, in which he had woven into its lining his dissertation, was stripped from him he was given in its place a coat which had been ripped from one of those taken to the gas chambers – and as he put it on he reached into the pocket and pulled out a page ripped from a Jewish prayer book and on it was the Shema Israel – the Lord your God is one God and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength. To everything there is a season. A time for every matter under heaven.

“To everything, writes the author of Ecclesiastes, to everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven.”

Victor Frankl – whom you've heard me mention before – found himself in the 20th century version of the story of Esther. He had been dragged away from his wife and family, delivered to the concentration camps,

When he came out of the camps Frankl returned to his study and wrote a new and different Magnus Opus *Man's Search for Meaning* – in which he said “Each man is

questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.”

And that’s what the seasons do to us, don’t they? They question us. They ask us who we are and whose we are. They demand from us a response – and we must respond by being responsible.

And so on this Thursday of Holy Week the seasons have changed for the rabbi Jesus. The popularity of the Palm Sunday primary season has hit the skids. The tide is going against him. The Sanhedrin is meeting. Plots are afoot. And the rabbi is being questioned by circumstances beyond his control.

Tempting to find a place of quiet escape. Why not head back up to Galilee and say it was all a big misunderstanding? But who knows? Perhaps you have to have come to this very circumstance for just such a time as this. John tells us that the Father had put all things into his hands. The fate of his people was in his hands. He was being questioned by life. Because to everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. So what’s it going to be Jesus? It’s a hard world, Jesus. Life ain’t fair, Jesus. So the rabbi does what a rabbi does on Passover. He celebrates. He celebrates with those he loves. “Having loved his own,” writes John the Gospel writer, “he loved them till the end.” And because it’s not about what you expect from life, but what life expects from

you – Jesus after supper takes bread and breaks it and says, “This is the sign of my body soon to be broken for you.” And he takes the cup of wine and says, “This is the cup of the new covenant, my blood soon to be shed for you.” And then, according to John, he wraps a towel around his waist and washes the disciples’ feet. Questioned by the hard cruel world, this is Jesus’ answer.

Simone Weil, the great French mystic, put it this way: “Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love.”

No matter what the season.

Let us love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.

So it makes all the sense in the world that at about this time as our Jewish friends complete their feast of Purim they are charged by the rabbi to go and give gifts to the poor. Go and give some of yourself away to someone who needs it. No matter the cost. No matter the reception. To love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.

And so does the rabbi of our following – he offers his gifts to the poor in spirit. And tells us on this night that there is a new commandment, a new mandate, mandatum –that you love one another. No matter the

season. No matter the circumstance. No matter the questions the times are asking you. To love the country of here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love.

Who knows? Perhaps you have to have come to this very season for just such a time as this.



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Service of the Lord’s Supper

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Church of the Palms

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