

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
September 30, 2018 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Esther 4:10-17

Sermon: Living courageously

There was a time, my parents tell me, there was a time when you could build any kind of building in a new development or subdivision in Canada and stick a sign on it saying it was a church, and you would have people breaking down the door to bring their children to Sunday School or join the choir. And there were actual elections to be on the Board.

There was a time, almost every worship committee I have ever known has told me, there was a time when nothing happened in their town on Sunday mornings EXCEPT church services. And arenas and stores were closed, until church was over at 12 noon.

There was a time, I tell my children, there was a time when I was in youth group and we had to divide it into junior and senior because there were too many young people in the church. There was a time, I tell them, when young people didn't want to graduate from youth group, and they just kept coming and coming...

There was a time, my children tell me, there was a time when all of that may have been true, MUM, but we can tell you that times have changed.

Just think about the tornado in our area last week. Within a few minutes of touchdown, there were photos of the destruction on my Facebook account. That is a sign of the times that we are in.

I was living in Saskatchewan almost thirty years ago, when a tornado ripped through Cut Knife. And it took days before the television and newspaper brought me the images of destruction and the community effort to clear trees and patch houses and fix powerlines. And I just lived a few miles down the highway. But they didn't have wifi and the world wide web, they didn't have digital cameras or mobile phones, they didn't have Facebook or twitter.

It's the sign of those times.

Last week I attended part of a course being offered by Bernard Brandon Scott, a New Testament scholar who specializes in study of the parables and metaphors used by Jesus. And he knew SO MUCH about the times that Jesus lived – so much more than we do. The way women were treated, the difference between a widow and a matron, first century Jewish mindsets and attitudes. You can't just take the social values of our time and juxtapose them on the ancient world, he said. You have to understand the signs and the symbols of those times.

I think the same is true for growing and shaping and leading a church – you have to understand the signs and the symbols, the challenges and the possibilities, the technologies and the culture of the time you are living in. If you don't take into account

the world you are living in right now, then it is impossible to know what God is calling you to be in that world.

Take the story of Esther, from the Hebrew scriptures. Esther was a young woman who found herself living in interesting times. She was a member of the exiled Jewish community, but she had been scooped up in a weird biblical beauty contest by the Persian king. The king had divorced his previous wife, Vashti, because she was disobedient (but in a good way!)

So then Esther was chosen Queen, but she had no real power. Her status at the palace was always in jeopardy. At any moment the king Ahasuerus might replace her with a younger, prettier member of the harem. At any moment someone might spill the beans that she was Jewish. At any moment he might ask something of her she was not willing to give, like Vashti did before her.

The story seems ridiculous to us, because we are living in a different time. How could there be a law where a wife would be executed for speaking to her husband, unless he gave permission? How could one manipulative advisor have the influence to wipe out a whole people? But those were the times when such things were taken for granted.

Biblical commentators, who have studied the language and context of this story, who know a lot about the times the story portrays, those scholars tell us that this book is unique and unusual in the Bible.

For one thing, God is absolutely silent. All the actions are human actions, all the words are human words. We only meet God in and through the courage of its characters.

For another thing, the book is written as a satire. You might not get all my references here, but think of something like Saturday Night Live in biblical costumes. King Ahasuerus is played by Alex Baldwin who is actually playing Donald Trump, or Doug Ford. The author was poking fun at the leader and his advisors. The king comes out almost like Forrest Gump – an accidental hero, in spite of his immature and oblivious attitudes.

And if you don't know Saturday night Live, or Alex Baldwin or Forrest Gump – these are the signs of our times.

The book of Esther was written as an antidote to an ancient "Make Judea great again" campaign. Restored to Jerusalem after their time in exile, many Jewish leaders wanted the people of God to claim that they had exclusive access to God's love, and exclusive access to God's mercy through the temple on the holy mountain.

In Esther, however, the storyteller offered an alternative vision - reminding the people of God that salvation could be found even beyond the walls of Jerusalem. That God's love was universal – that they needed to serve God and care for **all of** God's children wherever they might find themselves.

Esther reminds us that even a bumbling foreign king like Ahasuerus could be led to do the **right thing** if the people of God were faithful to God's word, and if they lived God's love courageously.

And that is why we stand with Esther today, when she was challenged by her uncle with these words: “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” Esther chose bravely to take the risk and stand up for her people. She and the storyteller who wrote her into history read the signs of the times and knew they needed to act.

For just such a time as this...

As Christians we carry in our hearts ancient stories of a God who was **always** reaching out, calling on the most unlikely people and befriending the ones who were outside the usual circle of the faithful. And God never stopped. Throughout Israel’s history, throughout early Christianity, throughout time, God has continued to reach out to the fringes teach **us**, the insiders, a lesson of hope.

We live in a world that is rapidly changing. We are more global, more wealthy, more debt-ridden, more educated, more medicated and more isolated than any generation before us. It will take the courage of Esther, to figure out where we go from here.

This week we have spent a lot of time looking back, remembering some good times. This week I have heard more stories about Youth Council and CGIT, about bell-ringing trips and former ministers than I probably ever heard in my whole time at Rideau Park.

But all of those stories were built on the courage of those who recognized the signs of the time, and they stepped up to speak to those signs. Their courage meant that resources were found or redirected to take the church in a new direction, to look at church and ministry and mission in a way that met the unique challenges of **those times**.

I know that that takes courage. Letting go of old priorities, and listening to a new generation. Really getting to know the people outside the church and responding to their spiritual challenges.

As you may know the United Church of Canada is going through a time of change – it was brought on by shrinking resources. But at the same time, as soon as we started talking about changing the structures– new people came forward. New energy was found. Tough choices, but apparently knowing the times, and making the most of them is actually life-giving.

May we take time, to know the times, and to find God’s courage – for just such a time as this