

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

September 27, 2009
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

¹So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ²On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." ³Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me — that is my petition — and the lives of my people — that is my request. ⁴For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." ⁵Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" ⁶Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁹Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." ¹⁰So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

^{9:20}Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, ²¹enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, ²²as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Romans 1:8-17

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. ⁹ For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, ¹⁰ asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. ¹¹ For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— ¹² or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. ¹³ I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. ¹⁴ I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish ¹⁵ —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to

you also who are in Rome. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Romans 8:5-11

5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

"Stand Tall"

Every time we ordain and install officers in the Presbyterian Church USA we ask those officers a series of questions. One of those questions is: "Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?"

The answer to the question is: "I do and I will." The curious thing about the question is most of the time we cannot really attest to the content of those confessions of the church. In our church there is a book that the confessions of the church are gathered into. It is that word confession that is almost a bit confusing.

When we hear that word confession so often it has a connotation of admitting wrong doing. In the church it has a more positive nuance. We talk about confessions of the church and when we say that we mean to

openly affirm, to declare, and to take a stand. What is the stand of the church? What does the church say?

In our [Book of Confessions](#) those theological stands that are part of our heritage through the generations are gathered together. All of those documents have a particular place in history and can be seen as historical documents with enduring applicability to how we live out the faith. There is this one confession that stands out in the book. The Theological Declaration of Barman by the German Evangelical Reformed Churches in 1933 was written to challenge the assertions of the Nazi party in Germany.

The Nazi party had asserted that their teachings were in accord with Scripture and with the church. The Theological Declaration of Barmen was standing up and a standing tall at a time when such was costly. Those Churches were living fully the gospel as they stood tall for truth and the essentials of what it means to be people of God.

It is that stand—to stand tall which is really how I read this wonderful old story in the book of Esther. This is a great book. It is one of the lesser known Old Testament books for us Christians and interestingly enough, it is the only book in the Bible where the name “God” is not mentioned.

The story is one of plot, intrigue, and movement. The exiled Jewish people are in ancient Persian territory and there they risk being whipped out. King Ahasuerus has lost his Queen and searches for the most beautiful woman that can be found. It is Esther. The king does not realize that she is a Jewish woman. Her Uncle Mordecai tells her to keep it to herself that she is among the Jews who are living in their land. Haman, the king’s advisor, works a secret plan to rid the land of Mordecai and his people. The genocide he has planned is only foiled because of Esther’s

bravery at the right time to stand tall before the king and make it clear who she really is.

Of this little book it is the verse in Chapter 4 that is not part of today's reading that emerges as pivotal. It says in 4:14 and Uncle Mordecai is speaking to Esther—"Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." One can hear in those words a claim that this is a significant moment that Esther is to be aware of and step into as she stands tall.

Stand tall! This is not ancient Persia and we are not in exile and in danger of complete and total genocide. This is not Nazi German and we are not in danger of complete and total accommodation. Not in the literal sense.

Yet—there is a real way one can read these times as laden with not only possibilities but also threats. There was a time when we talked about living in a Christian nation. Today we can say that at most 12% of Harford County will be in a church or worship center of any variety. 83% of our county will not worship at a church today. Barely 1 in 10 has any church affiliation. I bet more than 1 of every 10 will observe the Ravens game today. People do not like me to say it—but that is how our culture worships.

The real issue is that we who are here face an Esther moment.

Stand Tall! Remember who you are! Claim your identity.

They were far from temple worship. They were fully immersed in the lives of those who lived in ancient Persia. All the things that set them

apart—in particular the way they worshiped—those things had been set aside. They had accommodated to the culture.

Their values and their sense of identity grew out of the culture. Their understandings of who they were and what was important and worth seeking were no longer part of their religious heritage but belonged to the people of the land they inhabited. There is in the book of Esther no mention of Torah, particular dress, or food rituals that were so much a part God’s people. The indicative of God’s people, worship, is not cited in the book. Instead, they resemble the native people of that land.

Such is the setting in the story of Esther, but such is also the setting in our story. Our highest sense of who we are is often located in our economy and our obsession with celebrities and our regard for secular institutions. We have been nursed into a world order where our understanding of who we are is located by definition in the occupation we hold.

It is not how you earn your paycheck or how you earned your paycheck that makes you who you are. It is also not your social status. It does not matter what clubs or societies you belong to even aspire to belong to. It is not who you are!

Who you are is found in your status as baptized! We are the children of God! That is our identity and that is the identity we need to stand tall in. You do not have to wear your Christianity on your shirtsleeve, but you also do not need to hide in the depths of your deepest pocket either.

I know a person—he’s a tall guy, but he walks around with his shoulder pulled together and hunched over. I want to say to him, “Stand up; stand tall.”

In our baptism that is what God is saying to us: “Stand up; stand tall.” We are invited into this status as part of God’s family. And that is a

holy place. We tend not to see ourselves as holy. But the holiness of God abides in us and through us. Yes—we need to assume the prayer position where our minds and our hearts are drawn together, and then we also need to stand tall. It is in our standing tall that others can see that there is something going on in us – as the 12% that the 83% could well stand to be a part of.

Remember who you are—you are a child of God—and what sets you apart but the distinctiveness of worship and choosing to love and give rather than save and invest. As you give your life away and your possessions away—that is where you come to know who you are. That is how you come to your identity—in giving away not in gathering in.

It is just the opposite of what we are taught in our culture. Stand tall and remember who you are! Claim your identity!

Stand tall! When a door opens—stand tall and step bold! Yes, stand tall and step bold!

Esther had much to lose. She could have said nothing and for sure she would have been spared. Everyone who knew her real identity would have been lost and she would have been safe. But instead, when the moment came at that feast when she could really have some impact she stood tall and she stepped up.

We live in a world where people are waiting for someone else to step up. Society wants the government to fix it. In our neighborhoods when we have problems with the neighbors we would rather turn it over to a homeowner's association than deal with it.

We spend our lives being clear on the boundaries and quickly say, even if only to ourselves, “Hey, it isn't my problem.”

We walk away when we see trouble at hand. We side step. We don't risk. We don't rock the boat. And when the boat is rocked we want safe shore rather than helping to see this through and trusting. We are not the first disciples to struggle with that!

It is about our standing tall and stepping up and being bold. That key verse of Ester 4:14 where good ole Uncle Mordy says, "Perhaps, ...for such a time as this."

We need to hear that—in our lives and in our encounters. Perhaps God has placed you here for such a time as this. Perhaps God has placed you in this particular position for such a time as this. Perhaps God has placed you in this particular situation for such a time as this.

Perhaps—and do you want to miss that chance to do what God has chosen you to do. Oh you have so been chosen. When that door open. Get up. Go. Step. Be bold, be strong for the Lord your God is with you.

You are not alone. Esther was not alone. Do not hide out—stand tall!

In your standing tall—Real Life Happens.

Have you ever heard that life happens? It is a fatalistic perspective that says, in essence, things are as they are and they will just be that and there is not a whole lot you can do about it.

Wrong! Ester stood tall. By doing that there was this great reversal that happened. The ones who otherwise would have been destroyed were saved and the ones who would have destroyed the humble were themselves destroyed.

It is in our standing tall—it is in our words, and our actions, and our choosing to love when others will be self-righteous that we transform the world.

Real life is not just accepting that things are as they are. No, things are not as they appear to be. Not at all. We are moving to a place and a time when all things will be in the fullness of God. That is Paul's perspective in the book of Romans when he talks about body and spirit. Spirit is that which pulls us forward so that we can see in God what is God's will, what is God's direction, what it is God is pulling us into.

Spirit is that which enables us to see the life that God is giving us and how the world was created to be. Not how it is now, but that which is to come. And our bodies are to live out that forward pull of the Spirit. We are to exercise that new reality that is both out there and almost here too.

We are to exercise that new reality in our living. So love matters. Giving of ourselves is not risky business, but the way of life. We can stand tall. Paul puts it this way in the beginning of his letter to the Romans: "16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Stand tall! It is the power of God—and that power is in you and of you. It was in Esther. It was in the church in Nazi German. It is in us 12%. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." Stand tall! Amen.