

A SERMON by Rev. Joann H. Lee: June 28, 2026



Surreptitious Dialogue, mosaic by Lillian Broca

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

TODAY, WE CELEBRATE PRIDE. And in this time of hostility and diminishing rights for the LGBTQIA+ community, it feels especially important to mark this day.

So, as we prepare our hearts for worship, I wanted to share a beautiful poem by Asher O'Callahan about the beauty of the in-between and non-binary.

In the beginning, God created day and night. But have you ever seen a sunset?!? Well trans and non-binary people are kind of like that. Gorgeous. Full of a hundred shades of color you can't see in plain daylight or during the night.

In the beginning God created land and sea. But have you ever seen a beach?!?! Well trans and non-binary people are kind of like that. Beautiful. A balanced oasis that's not quite like the ocean, nor quite like the land.

In the beginning God created birds of the air and fish of the

sea. But have you ever seen a flying fish, or a duck or a puffin that swims and flies, spending lots of time in the water and on the land?!?! Well trans and non-binary people are kind of like that. Full of life.

A creative combination of characteristics that blows people's minds. In the beginning God also created male and female, in God's own image, God created them.

So, in the same way that God created realities in between, outside of, and beyond night and day, land and sea, or fish and birds, so God also created people with genders beyond male and female. Trans and non-binary and agender and intersex, God created us. All different sorts of people for all different sorts of relationships. Created from love to love and to be loved. In God's image we live.

God is still creating you. You are no less beautiful and wild than a sunset or a beach or a puffin. You are loved. You have a place here.

Scripture: Esther 4:1-17

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them.

Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.

Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death.

Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live.

I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days."

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "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 just such a time as this." Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day.

I and my maids will also fast as you do.

After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

For Such A Time As This

Victor reminded me the other day, that I preached a sermon called "For Such a Time as This" way back in 2015. Same church, same preacher, and even the same pulpit. But we aren't the same, are we? For starters, we were all younger back then. I was in my 30s, an actual young adult! And instead of three kids, I had one kid and two dogs.

In 2015, none of us had lived through a pandemic; the President of the United States was Barak Obama; the Supreme Court had just passed Marriage Equality; and all cellphones, iPhone and Android, had a headphone jack where you could plug in your headphones. Remember those? I miss those. It was a different time.

Last week, Marci shared in sermon the vision that session and your leadership are dreaming for the church, and it is for this particular time, for this particular church, in this particular place. It is with gratitude, that I can say, with confidence, that the church that heard a sermon of this same title back in 2015, is not the same church today.

Calvary has gone through changes, transformation, and growth since then. And as part of the reformed heritage of the Presbyterian church, we are always seeking to ask, "how can we best serve God and God's people, for such a time as this?"

Now, the story of Esther, interestingly enough, never utters the word "God." In all of its ten chapters, God is not once directly mentioned. And because of this, some scholars have argued that it's not theological enough to be included in the Bible or in the lectionary readings.

In Esther, God doesn't show up in a burning bush, or speak directly to Mordecai or Esther. That's not the way God works in this story. But I'm grateful for that. Because the way God shows up in the story of Esther, looks much more like the way God has shown up in my life:

Through a mentor like Mordecai. Through some resistance and some questioning, and ultimately through the courage to try and do what I *think* is the right thing.

My husband Mike has noted throughout the years, that one of the words I say the most when I preach is "perhaps."

Perhaps God is calling us to do this or that. *Perhaps*.

Perhaps is an adverb that means possibly or maybe.

And I know that for some faith communities, when a pastor is caught not knowing something with certainty, it looks like weakness. But for me, and for this community of faith that invites questions, we know that not knowing something for certain isn't a sign of weakness, but a sign that we are honestly living and practicing our faith. Who needs faith when you have certainty?

So I don't know about you, but I can relate a lot more to the uncertainty and ambiguity found in Esther than I can with many other stories we might find in scripture. For those who might not be familiar with the story, or even if you are but haven't heard it in a long time, I encourage you to read it this week.

Victor is finishing up the book of Esther in his sermon next Sunday, but a quick summary to bring you up to speed:

The Israelites are under the rule of the Persian Empire. King Ahasuerus, the Persian King, chooses young Esther to be his queen after dismissing his first queen, Vashti, for her disobedience. That is a story for another time, but a good one, too. I love a woman who can say no. But this is a time when women were essentially property in the eyes of the law and of the people. They had no say in who they married and very little say in how their lives may turn out.

Esther is a Jewish orphan who was raised by her cousin Mordecai, but the King does not know of her Jewish identity. He knows nearly nothing about her but wants to marry her anyway. Now around the same time, Haman is promoted within the kingdom and essentially becomes the king's second in command. And Haman is the big villain of this story. Haman now expects people to bow down to him. But Mordecai, Esther's cousin, refuses to do so. And when Haman learns that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman begins to plot the destruction of all the Jewish people living within the Persian Empire. Genocide is imminent. Mordecai learns of Haman's plans, and is able to convince Esther to advocate for her people by approaching the king. Esther is risking her own life by choosing to do this, but *if* she succeeds, this young girl, who happens to have access to the king, who happens to be in the right place at the right time, will save an entire people.

And you know what gets said a lot in chapter 4 of Esther, where she decides to act on behalf of her people? "Perhaps" and "who knows." The conversation between Esther and Mordecai is ridden with doubt and uncertainties. And at first, Esther refuses. This is, after all, above her pay grade. It's about politics and kings and policies. Things she doesn't really know about; things she's not supposed to meddle in. And that's not why the king married her; he doesn't want her advice or advocacy.

One commentator even states that, "the actions of Esther in chapter 4 present us with an all-too-human portrait of a person's response when faced with a demand for action in a situation that she neither created nor asked for ..."

Esther is being asked to act in a situation that she neither created nor asked for. And she is, understandably, reluctant at first. And Mordecai isn't necessarily all that convincing either. He hems and haws about what might be possible. But they choose to act any way, for such a time as this.

Sidnie White Crawford, in a reflection about the story of Esther says this:

"God, though unseen and unacknowledged, works through human instruments... Human action is the key to achieving God's purpose in the world."

The Rev. Glenda Hope celebrated her 90th birthday recently. The party was held here at Calvary and was hosted by Safe House. And I remember, one of the things she told our young adults is that we can't always wait to have all the answers before acting. Sometimes, we just have to do something, try something, and trust that God will work through that imperfect, human action. That's how her ministry in the Tenderloin and her ministry with women who are unhoused and have been prostituted came to be. Not because she had a foolproof plan or a clearcut blueprint of the future. But because she was willing to act, to do, to try something. That's how God worked in the story of Esther, through human action, and it is often how God works in our lives today.

This weekend, we celebrate Pride, and many from this congregation will march in the parade this afternoon. The church has not always been on the forefront of justice and inclusion when it comes to gender and sexuality.

And part of the reason we march today, is to say we're sorry, and we were wrong. It doesn't fix the harm we've caused, but hopefully it helps us to live into a ministry of reconciliation, repentance, and inclusion for such a time as this, today.

Our "Protect Trans kids" shirts and our Drag Queen Bible Story hours from past years celebrating Pride were not just to be provocative. But in direct response to our country's policies and rhetoric actively taking away access to health care for transgender people and the dehumanizing and scapegoating of the drag community. Spoiler alert, no drag queens are named in the Epstein files, so I don't consider the drag community to be the greatest threat to my children.

Friends, to be a church for such a time as this means that we are actively engaged in the world, and aware of what is happening. Sometimes we all need a break from the news. I've tried to stop getting my news from social media because I have to be in the right head space before I can go into, what feels like, the depths of *Sheol*. But I can't just bury my head in the sand and pretend everything is fine. Because everything is not fine.

And if I am able to do that, it's because of my privilege, and I have to acknowledge that. But being a church for such a time as this, means we must hold on to radical hope, even when it seems hard to imagine.

We find hope by sharing the stories of goodness, along with the horrors. We find hope by being in community, Esther had Mordecai and all the Jewish people praying for her and fasting for her. She was the one who went before the king, but she was not alone. And finally, being a church for such a time as this

means we must act. Much like Esther, our lives today are filled with unjust circumstances and oppressive situations that we have neither asked for nor directly created. But we must respond in some way, even if it's not perfect.

I'm not sure if handing out snacks to people waiting outside the ICE building is the perfect response or action to our nation's horrifying immigration policies. But I do know that the speakers from last week, the judges who were fired from their immigration court seats with no cause, found strength and courage by the presence of those keeping vigil. And those who wait in line do sometimes take a snack, perhaps staying off their hunger for just a little while longer. It's not a perfect action, but it is something. We cannot do it all. And we cannot do it all perfectly. But we can do something. And something must be done for such a time as this.

When I'm in the weeds and feeling a bit lost, I often return to this Prayer of Oscar Romero, which he did not write but was spoken at his funeral. Perhaps it will strengthen you today to live and act and follow Christ for such a time as this:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own. Amen.

