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Proper 24B Offering of Letters Sunday
Peace, Seattle
October 21, 2018
Esther

FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

When the afternoon bell rang at Lincoln-McKinley Elementary School in Havre, Montana, there were several walking routes home I could choose from; but not all of them were safe.

As a second grader, I had learned to avoid certain streets, because if I didn't I might run into Huey and Luey, the neighborhood bullies.

Huey and Luey were brothers, and I'd seen them go to work on other kids, blocking their way, threatening and intimidating them. It was enough to keep me as far from them as possible.

Well one day I took the shortcut through the park, and low and behold, when I reached the other side, there were Huey and Luey. I tried making myself invisible, but it didn't work.

HEY! they shouted. I picked up my pace, pretending not to hear.

HEY YOU! They crossed the street and came toward me. My heart was pounding. I was trapped.

Then I heard someone call my name.
ER-IK! [sing song] **Erik Kindem! Is that you?**

It was Gladys, a family friend and surrogate grandmother whose home I'd visited often.
She was standing on her porch, across the street.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO STOP FOR A VISIT?
What timing! With a sigh of relief, I scurried to Gladys and safety without looking back.

We could probably all share examples of being on the short end of the power stick in one struggle or another, whether as children on the playground or as adults in our professional lives. And perhaps the reverse is also true: we've used our position to advocate or protect or benefit someone else.

Both the story of Esther and the story from Mark speak about what advocacy and protection can look like, and Esther in particular highlights the risks involved. On a day when we lift up letter writing to Congress as an exercise in advocacy, these texts are worth paying attention to.

The story of Esther shows up just once in the three-year lectionary cycle—and even then we only get a snippet of the story, so you might not be very familiar with it.

Esther tells the story of how an evil plot to annihilate the Jewish people is avoided, thanks to the courage of a Jewess named Esther and her uncle and adopted father Mordecai. The plot is melodramatic, but the underlying seriousness of the story is never far from view.

The story unfolds in Persia, where Esther and Mordecai live with other Jewish exiles under the Persian Empire. The Persian King Ahasuerus is a comical caricature of a figure who surrounds himself with YES MEN and has a penchant for pageantry over substance. He dismisses his queen, Vashti, when she shows signs of being too independent, and in a subsequent search for a new queen his eyes fall on the beautiful Esther.

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Of his infatuation, the narrator tells us:

> "The king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."[1]

Esther's uncle Mordecai is careful in negotiating the treacherous terrain that comes with living as an alien in a strange land. But as a man of principle there is one thing he will not abide—he will not bow down and do obeisance to Haman, the power-grasping lieutenant of the king.

Obsessed by Mordecai's slight, Haman has his staff get deep background on Mordecai and upon learning that he's a Jew, Haman hatches a plan to annihilate not only Mordecai but the entire Jewish population within the empire. And this is where the melodramatic features of the story turn deadly serious.

Seizing upon Esther's status as queen, Mordecai asks her to use her position to intervene with the king. But Esther is reluctant. IT'S NOT THAT SIMPLE, she tells him. I CAN'T GO TO THE KING UNLESS SUMMONED, ON PENALTY OF DEATH. To which Mordecai offers Esther this sobering response:

> "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 this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, 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."[2]

The rabbis, who puzzled about the lack of any God language in the book of Esther made much of that phrase, "another place." Relief and deliverance for the Jews will come from "another place" they said, and that other place is from God.[3]

Well, Mordecai's speech becomes a watershed moment, and in the plot twists that follow,

- Esther summons the resolve to rise before the king and preserve the lives of her people,
- Mordecai is honored by the king for his loyalty,
- and wicked Haman ends up hanging from the very gallows he built for Mordecai.

Of course there's lots more to this story. It becomes within Jewish tradition the foundation story of the Festival of Purim. But the link I'd like to focus on is the one voiced by Mordecai to Esther:

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

The Bread for the World letter writing tradition we've joined in for well over a decade has its roots in just this kind of sentiment: that we, as people of faith, have not only the right as citizens of this democracy but also the obligation as citizens of God's kingdom to lift our voices to people in power for the sake of those whose voices would otherwise be stifled, stigmatized, or ignored.

When Jesus tells his apprentices: "Just as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me," he's telling us we will be judged as a nation by the way we treat the most vulnerable among us. [4]

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[1] Esther 2:17, NRSV
[2] 4:13-14. See Kathryn Schifferdecker's commentary on the pericope at Working Preacher: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2631
[3] Ibid.
[4] Matthew 25:40 From this year's Offering of Letters theme. More can be found here: http://bread.org/offering-letters-campaign

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And in our time, those vulnerable ones include the many children, women and men who struggle with the affects of hunger, homeless, and poverty; includes immigrants who are seeking safer, better lives for their families; includes people coming out of prison who are trying to become productive, employed members of society again.

Advocacy is most effective when it becomes targeted and specific, focusing on particular programs like WIC, SNAP and reduced school meals, and tax credits for low-income workers, and international programs like the global food security initiative, which helps millions of hungry people around the world.

Mordecai reminded Esther that she could not remain neutral, that her action was needed, and that she could use her position of influence to change the fate of her people. Today we are being called to awaken to our responsibility "for such a time as this." To join our voices with other people of faith and conviction across the country to support budget priorities that serve the common good of all people—especially those struggling to put food on their tables.[5]

YOU KNOW THE PATTERN OF THE WORLD, Jesus tells his apprentices when he catches them arguing over who's first and best. THE PECKING ORDER OF THE POWERFUL IS OBVIOUS.

> BUT IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU. INSTEAD, WHOEVER WOULD BE GREAT MUST BE THE SERVANT AND WHOEVER WOULD BE FIRST MUST BE SLAVE OF ALL. FOR THE SON OF MAN CAME NOT TO BE SERVED BUT TO SERVE, AND TO GIVE HIS LIFE A RANSOM FOR MANY.

Jesus led by example, and calls us to follow in his footsteps. But in the final analysis, Jesus is more than an example for us to emulate—he himself is the ransom.

The bonds that hold captive the human race will not be loosed by an example. We require deliverance. We need to be ransomed.[6] **Christ is the one who accomplished that demanding task in the cross and empty tomb. And baptism is a sign and seal of this reality.**

This is the "baptism" to which Jesus refers in our gospel text. Not an anointing to a higher office, as James and John supposed, but a way of self emptying that dares to trust in God's ultimate deliverance.

In every age, in every place, the Way of Jesus remains the way which the church is called to live, "for such a time as this."

Bound to him in faith, we walk his Way—the only way that leads to life abundant for ourselves and for our neighbors. Amen.

[5] Find more on this year's Offering of Letters background here: http://bread.org/offering-letters-campaign
[6] Donald Juel, *Augsburg Commentary on Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg)