

7th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Esther 4

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 sceptre 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.

A little bit over a year ago, I was protesting at the White House with the Poor People's Campaign and Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II. My wife, a friend of ours, and myself had traveled from Lexington to Washington D.C. to join with a few hundred faith leaders from around the country to publicly call for an end to the violent and oppressive policies of the current presidential administration.

Early in the morning, we gathered at nearby New York Avenue Presbyterian Church which is just a few blocks from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. We gathered to sing, pray, and prepare for our peaceful protest. As we began to move from the sanctuary to the street outside to begin our short journey, an announcement was made for anyone who was willing to risk arrest by participating in civil disobedience to gather at the back of the

sanctuary. My friend and I headed to the designated area to receive a piece of green cloth to be tied around our arms to designate ourselves as those intended to practice civil disobedience.

I was then greeted by an elderly black woman who began tying the green strip of cloth around my arm. I must have looked nervously because she gave me a gentle smile and said, “Is this your first time being arrested for social disobedience?” I replied, “Yes, ma’am.” She patted me softly on the shoulder, smiled at me, and with a twinkle in her eye she said to me something I’ll never forget. She simply said, “Don’t worry, honey. This is *good* trouble.”

Good trouble. Now, I don’t know for sure where that woman first heard that phrase, but I’d be willing to bet she learned that prophetic phrase from a man by the name of John Lewis. John Lewis’ iconic activism in the arena of social justice and racial equality spanned more than six decades. As an integral leader during the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, John Lewis was one of the original “Freedom Riders” that rode across the country in interstate buses to protest segregation. On Sunday, March 7th, 1965, a day that would come to be known as “Bloody Sunday,” John Lewis led over 600 protesters to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge (a bridge named after a Klansman) in Selma, Alabama to protest racial inequality. At the end of the bridge they were met by Alabama State Troopers who ordered them to disperse. John Lewis and the marchers stopped to pray and the State Troopers unleashed tear gas on them and began beating them with night sticks. Lewis survived but not without a scar on his head that he would have for the rest of his life.

For the last 33 years, John Lewis served as the representative from my home state of Georgia’s 5th district in the United States House of Representatives. During his time in Congress, he was the author and sponsor of countless pieces of legislation that promoted social justice and voting rights. He was called by many in Congress, on both sides of the aisle, the “Conscience of Congress.”

I woke up yesterday morning with a heavy heart at the news of the death of John Lewis. He died on Friday after a lengthy battle with pancreatic cancer at the age of 80. 80 years of justice work. 80 years of courage. 80 years of moral leadership. And 80 years of good trouble.

So what is good trouble? Good trouble is when you stand up and do something when you see something you know isn’t right. Good trouble is the opposite of silent complicity. Good trouble is when you make a scene, protest peacefully, and demand that those in power act with justice, compassion, and equity. Good trouble is when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship King Nebuchadnezzar. Good trouble is when the prophets of the Old Testament upset the status quo by telling the people of God to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” Good trouble is when a Samaritan man ignores social mores in order to help someone who has been injured by the side of the road.

Good trouble is all over the Bible and we need look no further than the Book of Esther to find several examples of it. The good trouble in chapter one was, of course, the emphatic “NO” that Queen Vashti gave her jerk of a husband when he demanded that she dance seductively in front of his drunken friends. The good trouble in chapters two and three was Mordecai refusing to bow before Haman. And now the good trouble continues with chapter four of the Book of Esther.

When we left the story last Sunday, Haman and Ahasuerus had made public their intentions to kill, destroy, and annihilate every Jew within the kingdom. Their grotesque and cruel plan for genocide throws the city into confusion but Haman and Ahasuerus won’t be bothered; they’re too busy sharing a celebratory beverage, or two, or 10.

But Mordecai is busy with something very different; he's busy doing the work of public lament. Now the idea of *public* lament can be an odd thing to grasp for those of us who are products of western individualism and, particularly, those of us who grew up in predominately white congregations. Many of us white folks have been taught that lament is something that is done best in private. We have been taught that grief is something that should be done behind closed doors and that it's not appropriate to lament in front of people. If you've ever felt the need to apologize to someone when crying in front of them, then chances are you've been socially conditioned to do so.

However, the Jewish community and many of the cultures in Biblical times practiced public lament (which, for the record, is a much healthier way to deal with grief, but that's the topic for another sermon). Public lament was not only a critical way for a community to grieve together, it also was a vehicle of bringing about change when something was wrong or unjust. Remember the story of Rizpah that we journeyed with almost a year ago? Rizpah publicly lamented for several days in the town square, holding vigil by the mutilated bodies of her sons who had been unjustly murdered. Her public lament drew national attention to the injustice and it brought about societal change.

Public lament is a time-tested method of speaking truth to power and doing, well, good trouble. The millions of folks protesting around the country, crying out that #BlackLivesMatter, are engaging in a prophetic act of public lament.

And Mordecai is doing something very similar. He is engaging in public lament in response to Haman and Ahaseurus' upcoming policy of genocide. And so, he does something that is very typical for persons at that time lamenting publicly: he puts on a sackcloth. And that's fine, unless you're at the entrance of the king's gate. You see, King Ahasuerus had made a law that you couldn't wear sackcloth (which is a way of protesting) in front of the entrance to his palace. Such a law would be similar to a President of the United States banning protesting around the White House.

So Mordecai dons his sackcloth and head's right to the very place that he knows he's not allowed to wear it. Mordecai's act is, simply put, an act of civil disobedience. You know, good trouble. Word of Mordecai's civil disobedience must have reached Esther's ears because she sends him clothes in the hopes that he'll stop breaking the law, probably because she's worried about his safety (after all, he's already pissed off the two most powerful men in this oppressive regime). But he refuses and continues his public lament.

Instead, Mordecai sends a message to Esther, asking her to do something very risky. He asks her to use her new-found place of honor to approach King Ahasuerus and ask him to cease his plans to exterminate her people. Now, this may seem a rather curious move on Mordecai's part because it was just a chapter or two ago when he emphatically instructed Esther to keep her Jewishness a secret. Now, he appears to be doing the exact opposite. The text doesn't explain this discrepancy but perhaps it may have just been because Mordecai saw Esther as their only hope for survival.

Esther is understandably hesitant to enter King Ahaseurus' chamber without being summoned; she knows that to do so would be a crime punishable by death. And before we be too quick to criticize Esther for her hesitancy, remember what happened to her predecessor, Queen Vashti!

And, of course, this is where we find the most famous line in all of the Book of Esther. Mordecai compels Esther to action, and then closes his argument with the following line which many of us know by heart: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Then, with a new-found sense of courage, Esther agrees to Mordecai's suggestion. Any criticism of Esther as a coward dissolves with her response to do as Mordecai asks: "...I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."

And now, Esther is calling the shots, because today's text closes with the following sentence: "Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him." Y'all, some good trouble is around the corner. This chapter sets the stage for the upcoming drama and is the beginning of how Esther will soon manipulate and outmaneuver both Haman and Ahasuerus.

So what does today's portion of the Book of Esther have to say to us, those of us who are Beaumont Presbyterian Church and the wider community of followers who are gathered on Facebook and Youtube?

First of all, good trouble is risky business. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego found themselves in a fiery furnace because of good trouble. Queen Vashti found herself banished because of good trouble. John Lewis bore a scar on his head after being beaten with a club by Alabama State Troopers until the day he died; this happened because of good trouble. Esther's statement of "if I perish, I perish" tells us that she knew full well the possible consequences for her good trouble.

Secondly, good trouble is worth it because it's the right thing to do. Yes, we can "sit this one out." Yes, we can choose to remain silent. But neither of those options is a faithful Christian response to injustice. Furthermore, silent complicity may be the safer option for those of us in privileged positions, but it's deadly to those in the margins, to those who are crying out for justice. Time and time again, Jesus Christ did not remain neutral but consistently took the side of the oppressed and the marginalized. Those of us who have the audacity to claim that we are his followers must hold ourselves to that same standard of Christian response. Good trouble is the only thing that has ever made positive change in our society. The freedoms many (though certainly not all) of us enjoy are realities because of those who have gone before us and courageously participated in good trouble. We stand on their shoulders. We carry on the mantle of justice.

Thirdly and finally, we don't do good trouble just for us, we do good trouble for those who will come after us. To quote the prophetic words of John Lewis: "When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something. To do something. Our children and their children will ask us, 'What did you do? What did you say?'"

So friends, who knows? Perhaps we have come to this place for just such a time as this. The question now is: What will we do and what will we say?

In the name of God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God's children, say: **Amen.**