

I

So often in life, we aren't aware that we're experiencing one of the most significant moments in our lives until after the fact. For example, just a few days before move-in day my first year of college, the residential life staff at the university changed my room assignment. It was no big deal, I thought at the time.

A few days later, a cute blonde named Amy Tillman stopped by to introduce herself, who you would later come to know as Amy Baer. Who knows how my life would have been different if that room assignment hadn't changed at the last minute?

II

Our lives are full of just such events – moments that at the time seem ordinary and routine – oftentimes set in motion by events that seem largely out of our hands. But looking back, we see that those were some of the most significant moments, not just for our lives, but oftentimes for everyone around us, too. And our story for today involves just such a moment.

III

This Fall, we have been doing something of a 30,000-foot overview of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly known as the Old Testament. We haven't gone chapter by chapter or even book by book, but for the last several months we've been tracing the story of God the promise that God made as God promised to this one childless couple

that God would bless them, and make of them a great nation, and that in and through their descendants, all the families of the earth would be blessed.

If you were with us last week, you'll remember that about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, that promise that God had made so long ago to Abraham and Sarah seemed all but forgotten. The promise that God had made to King David, namely that David's descendant would rule over Israel forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end, seemed like nothing more than a cruel joke.

That's because about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem. They tore the Temple that David had conceived and Solomon had constructed, the building believed to be the very dwelling place of God on earth, down to its foundations. And they carted off scores of God's people to live as exiles in Babylon, forcing them into slave labor. The exile, as it's come to be called, is one of the foundational events of the biblical story.

If you've ever looked at a globe or a map, you may have noticed that the region of the world where most of the biblical story takes place lies at roughly the point where the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa come together. Consequently, the region has always been a place of strategic importance to world superpowers, even to this very day.

And about 500 years before the birth of Jesus, about a century after the

Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, the Babylonian Empire gave way to the Persians.

And so the story we're going to hear today is set in the Persian city of Susa, where some of God's people had settled after the fall of Jerusalem so many years before.

The Persian king decided that it would impress all of his officials and nobles if he were to throw a weeklong party. During this weeklong blowout, to quote from the text, the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king...The king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he summoned his queen to the palace, for he wanted to show off her beauty for all of his guests. But there was a problem. The queen refused to come.

This act of insolence enraged the king and mortified his advisors. What would happen, they wondered aloud, if every woman in Persia responded to her husband this way? Thus, they urged the king to get rid of the queen, and so the king did just that. He stripped the queen of her royal title and ordered that she was never again to enter the king's presence.

The king's advisors suggested a new plan. Give orders, they said, and have all of the beautiful young virgins of the kingdom paraded before you. Pick your favorite, and she will be your

queen. The king liked this idea very much, and so he gave orders that every eligible young woman in his entire kingdom was to be brought before him.

One of those young women was a girl named Esther, a descendant of God's people who had been deported out of Jerusalem long ago. She was an orphan, but she was looked after by her older relative, a man named Mordecai.

Esther found favor with the king, and he made her his queen. However, Mordecai warned Esther not to let the king know that she was a. Every day, Mordecai would come to the palace gate to check on her.

One day, Mordecai was at the palace gate, checking on Esther, when the king's top advisor, a man named Haman, passed by. Everyone bowed down in Haman's presence except for Mordecai. This enraged Haman so much that he went to the king and told him about how there was a group of people living in the king's land who did not obey the king's laws or follow the king's customs, and that the king had better do something about it. Haman suggested that the king write a decree that on a certain date at a certain time, all of the Jews living in the king's land should be rounded up and put to death. The king agreed, and he issued the terrible decree. Antisemitism, it turns out, is not a new concept.

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, every Jew living in the king's realm, every man, woman, and child, was to be put to death, and the

king's people were to plunder their goods.

And so now we turn to our story from Esther, the fourth chapter, verses 1-17. I invite you to listen for a word from God.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

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

Esther was not born into royalty dignity. In fact, in the eyes of most of her neighbors, Esther was born with several strikes against her. She was a foreigner, a descendant of exiles, born of a people who had been deported from Jerusalem generations before. She was an orphan, with no one to advocate for her except her cousin Mordecai. And she was a young woman, living in a system where women were viewed more as objects than as people, where women were to obey the instructions of men without question and keep silent if they knew what was best for them.

And yet Mordecai was able to see something about Esther that she was not able to see for herself. Mordecai was able to see that that she and she alone was in a position to save her people. Mordecai was able to see that perhaps she had risen to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

IV

It's a good story. But ultimately, the bible isn't about a people who lived a long time ago in a place far away. Ultimately, the bible is about God, and it's about you and me.

And one thing I keep seeing over and over again is that God keeps calling the most unlikely people to play a key role in what God is up to in the world. We read a few months ago the story of a boy named Joseph who was so obnoxious and clueless that his brothers sold him to a group of traders on their

way to Egypt. In Egypt, he was falsely accused and imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. And yet God lifted him up and made him the most powerful man in Egypt outside of the Pharaoh himself, and when a terrible famine struck the known world, Joseph was the one who was in a position to save his people.

We read about a man named Moses, who was on the run from the law, fleeing from a charge of murder, for which he was guilty. Moses, who stuttered so badly that he couldn't talk his way out of a wet paper bag, and yet God used Moses to confront the king and to lead God's people out of slavery and bondage and to the doorstep of the Land of Promise.

And here is Esther. Just a girl, caught up in the king's games. Esther, a foreigner, an orphan, so very young. And yet she and she alone is in a position to speak to the king and to save her people. Who knows, says Mordecai, but perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?

In a few weeks, we're going to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world. Once again, we're going to tell the old, old story of Joseph and Mary and the trip to Bethlehem and the manger and the shepherds.

Joseph and Mary were not rich. They were not politically connected. They were just two people trying to make their way in a world gone mad.

And yet. In the fulness of time, when God was ready to break into the world, when God was ready to turn all of human history and all of human destiny on its ear, God did not just pop in. The inbreaking of the presence of God on earth required a Joseph and a Mary. Who knows, perhaps they rose to royal dignity for just such a time as this?

IV

And I wonder about you. I wonder if you say, well, it's a nice story, Ryan, but God can't use me. I'm too old. My time has passed. It's time for someone else to take the reigns.

To which I remind you about your great grandmother Sarah, who thought her time had passed long ago, too, and yet she became the matriarch of a great nation.

Or maybe you say, it's a nice story Ryan, but I'm too young. No one cares what I have to say. And if that's you, let me remind you that the prophet Jeremiah said the same thing – he said, I am just a boy. And God said, don't you worry about that, I will be with you and teach you what you are to say. Let me remind you about Mary, who was in all likelihood just a teenager when the angel Gabriel broke the news to her that she would be the mother of Jesus, and she said, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Or maybe you say, but you don't know what I've done. God couldn't possibly use me. If that's you, let me remind you that earlier this fall, we read

the story of David, who, it's said, was a man after God's own heart, but also, as we read, in one incident with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah managed to break commandments six through ten in one afternoon, and for good measure, he broke commandment number nine when he lied about the whole thing.

If God can work in and through Sarah, if God can work in and through Joseph, if God can work in and through Moses, if God can work in and through Mary, if God can work in and through David, if God can work in and through Esther, then maybe, just maybe, God can work in and through you, my friend.

To me, that's one of the most compelling parts of the biblical story. God has this mission of blessing all the families of the earth. That's what God is up to in the world. That's what God is seeking to accomplish.

But instead of just saying "Poof, be blessed!" God uses ordinary, everyday people as the instruments, as the agents, of God's blessing.

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

V

And in God's infinite wisdom, God calls us, pulls us together into this thing called the church. God calls us together - ordinary people, just trying to make it through in a world gone mad.

God call us together around this Table, where we tell the story again of

God's redemption history, of God's salvation, where we break the bread and pour the wine and remember all the times when God has delivered God's people.

God calls us together, reminding us who and whose we are – sinners, yet forgiven. Broken, yet redeemed. Ordinary people, yet called together to be the church, God's chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

And who knows? Perhaps we have been brought to a royal position to speak God's truth to the powers that be. To secure deliverance for people once marked for death. To do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God. Who knows? Perhaps we have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.

Thanks be to God. Amen.