

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
4 December 2022

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
2nd Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“Beyond the Womb of Waiting”

Second Sermon in the Advent Series: *Womb & Wonder* (Part III of “Spirit of Curiosity”)

Esther 4:1-17

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

News broke on Friday that the home of 33 year old Iranian rock climber Elnaz Rekabi was demolished and destroyed. In October, Elnaz competed without her head covering in a climbing competition in South Korea. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail – with no hijab, which is explicitly against Iranian mandate. It was an accident, she said. But this “accident” happened at the same time that protests were sweeping across Iran following the death of 22 year old Mahsa Amini. Mahsa died while in the custody of the Guidance Patrol (the religious morality police of Iran’s government) for allegedly not wearing *her* hijab properly.¹

Because of protests surrounding Mahsa’s death, Elnaz not wearing her hijab as she climbed had dire consequences; her home was destroyed and her family threatened. But it also meant she became a symbol of

the national uprising calling for greater freedoms for women.

Elnaz’s story reminded me immediately of Malala Yousafzai, the youngest-ever Nobel Peace laureate and the UN’s messenger of peace. (Seems appropriate to honor her on this Advent Day of Peace.)

After the Taliban took control of Malala’s town in Pakistan in 2008 and banned girls from school, 11 year old Malala began speaking out publicly on behalf of girls and their right to learn. As we all know now, her choice to stand up for her people and not be silent made her a target of the Taliban.

In October 2012, on her way home from school, a masked gunman boarded her school bus and asked, “Who is Malala?” He shot her, the bullet shattering her skull, jawbone, and surrounding nerves before

¹ Hande Atay Alam and Jennifer Deaton, “Iranian athlete’s family home demolished by officials, media outlet says,” *CNN World* (2 Dec. 2022), accessed on

Dec. 3, 2022 at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/02/middleeast/iran-climber-home-intl/index.html>.

lodging in her shoulder near her spinal cord. After months of surgeries and rehabilitation, Malala wrote, *“It was then I knew I had a choice: I could live a quiet life or I could make the most of this new life I had been given. I determined to...[fight everyday]...to ensure all girls receive twelve years of free, safe, quality education. I travel to many countries to meet, [support, and advocate for] girls fighting poverty, wars, child marriage and gender discrimination [just so that they can go to school].”*²

“It was then I knew I had a choice.” Perhaps Malala made a more deliberate choice than Elnaz. But both choices had personal consequences of suffering and oppression for themselves and their families AND public consequences of spreading inspiration and hope to hundreds of thousands of women and girls.

And hope and inspiration are needed because Iran and Pakistan are places where women’s choices about their lives are greatly limited by men in power, AND they are also two of the modern territories

that make up the ancient Persian empire that we read about in today’s biblical text.³

You see, a couple thousand plus years earlier, another woman in this same territory of the world also had a choice to make. Her name was Esther. Esther also had decisions about her physical appearance dictated to her by men in power. And the choice Esther made (*Spoiler alert!*) saved and inspired an entire people.

At the time of decision, Esther’s cousin Mordecai said to her: *“For if you keep silent at this time...you and your father’s family will perish...Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this?”*⁴

We don’t know Esther’s inner dialogue, but I imagine words similar to Malala’s echoed through her soul: *“It was then I knew I had a choice...”*

With resolve, Esther replies, *“...I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.”*⁵

² Malala Yousafzai, “Malala’s Story,” *Malala.org*, accessed on Dec. 1, 2022 at <https://malala.org/malalas-story>.

³ Information accessed on Dec. 3, 2022 at <https://bible-history.com/maps/persian-empire>.

⁴ Esther 4:14, NRSV

⁵ Esther 4:16b, NRSV

Esther's story has resonance today. Not just because of Elnaz and Mahsa and Malala, but because we all face moments of key decision. Maybe your decisions do not have the fate of an entire people in the balance. However, we all have moments in our life where the decision we make defines the course of our lives moving forward. These crossroad moments call for courageous choices:

- Move or stay put.
- Break up or work through it.
- Resign or recommit.
- Keep fighting or stop treatment.
- Say "I do" or "I don't."
- Give it one more push or close up shop.
- Keep holding on or let it go.
- Compromise or hold firm.
- Blend in or stand out.
- Chase your own dreams or cave to someone else's desires.
- Trust your gut or ignore it.
- Take a risk or play it safe.
- Speak up or stay silent.

When we meet Esther in chapter four she is married to the King of Persia, King Ahasuerus. Esther – a Jewish orphan – ended up as the Queen of Persia

because of decisions made *for* her by others. But we remember her today because of her *own* decision to claim her power at the very moment her people needed her.

It should be noted that the Queen before Esther, Queen Vashti, had been dismissed because of "her unwillingness to be paraded in front of a banquet of drunken men at one of [the King's] feasts."⁶ And so after deposing Queen Vashti, when King Ahasuerus was searching for a new Queen, he wanted someone beautiful and who was okay with being on public display for him. If your spidey senses of misogyny, chauvinism, and patriarchy are going off – good; they should be. But wait, there's more.

Mordecai – the cousin Esther trusted and who raised her as his own daughter – handed over Esther to be part of the King's harem and told her not to reveal her Jewish identity. Through a series of pageants, Esther was chosen as Queen by the King; she did not choose this fate for herself. Suppressing her true identity was survival and code-switching was self-preservation.

⁶ Jeanne Porter, *Leading Ladies: Transformative Biblical Images for Women's Leadership* (Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press, Inc., 2000), 121.

Everyone thought she was Persian. And in her role as Queen of Persia, Esther was to be seen and not heard.

Now Esther was navigating this new world quite adeptly without blowing her cover until the King's righthand man, Haman, got really upset with Mordecai because he would not bow down to pay the King homage. Haman is so angry at Mordecai that he decides all the Jews in the land must be killed. It is genocide justified by one man's hatred. A deadly, dehumanizing power dynamic that we know has plagued Jews throughout their history, and tragically many other peoples too.

Esther doesn't even know this edict has been made from the very palace where she is perched, but Mordecai goes public with his grief over this edict to rid Persia of all the Jews. His public display of mourning and lamentation is how Esther finds out that her people are in danger. And this is what leads Esther to make a decision that determines the rest of her life, and her people's fate.

Esther is savvy in her approach as she tells the story of her people to the King and reveals her true Jewish identity in the process. The King reverses the edict; the Jews are not killed.

This story is hard to summarize and it is complex. While it is a celebration⁷ that the Jews, the chosen people of God, are spared because of Esther's courage, the death of their enemies – Haman and 75,000 others – is nothing to rejoice about. Neither is it something to celebrate that the reason Esther was in the royal court in the first place is because her own family member handed her over to be in the King's harem, where a woman's value is solely determined by her physical beauty and performance. Neither should we rejoice that Mordecai felt pressured to hand over Esther to King Ahasuerus because Esther had no parents, and no potential for any kind of life as a girl, let alone as a Jewish orphan. And neither is it cause for rejoicing that Esther was an orphan and in this foreign land because her people had been deported and exiled away from their own homes and

⁷ The story of Esther is celebrated by Jews on Purim, a festival of feasting and rejoicing that honors this day of deliverance for the Jews.

land in Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar.

To tell Esther's story in full is to unearth layers of generational trauma and oppression.

And yet in the midst of so much trauma and sin and through the cascading consequences of choices made generations before them, Esther and Mordecai – in their own present day moment and reality – somehow hang on to enough Wonder that they believe things to do not have to be as they are. They believe the right choice at the right time can change the course of history. They believe their decisions matter.

Before this moment in chapter four, I'm not sure that Esther has ever thought of herself as someone who can effect change or use her power for good. Perhaps like many of us, she is just trying to follow the rules and navigate multiple identities and realities in the best way possible without completely losing herself in the process.

Because of this, I find Esther's moment of decision making relatable. At first, she doesn't want to touch Mordecai's

request with a ten-foot pole – it's far too risky and seems impossible: *"Everyone knows that if anyone goes to talk to the King without being summoned first by him, there is only one law: to be put to death,"*⁸ she exclaims.

But as Mordecai helps her see, speaking up to the king might lead to Esther's death, but failure to speak would certainly lead to her people's death, which includes her and her family. The stakes couldn't be higher; hope couldn't be dimmer.

Like Malala, Esther *knows* in this moment she has a choice. And though it is her choice alone to make, she knows she cannot make the choice alone. She seeks prayer and fasting and emotional support from all of her people out in Persia *and* from her closest maids within the palace. Esther's decision is made through discernment with a trusted person and with communal spiritual support.

Through prayer and discernment Esther realizes that perhaps she is in the position she is in *"for such a time as this."* She realizes that *"the time to*

⁸ paraphrase of Esther 4:11, NRSV

hesitate is through.” (Thank you *The Doors*). Though she has spent her entire life acquiescing to what others have told her to do, on THIS day she claims her own voice and power for the sake of her community.

Lest we romanticize this story, let us not rush away from this moment of decision making and discernment. Esther has no certainty her plan will work. Yet she resolves to action (“*I will go*”), humbly acknowledges her own vulnerability (“*though I might perish*”), and by holding those two realities in tension she realizes she can’t do this alone and needs her community to stand with her and beside her (“*please pray and fast for me and with me*”).⁹ Perhaps this can be a model for our own decision making.

Because like Esther, we too, live in a time of grief, uncertainty, threat, and fear. Whether you are facing a difficult decision in your own life or whether we are gathering courage to speak up as a people of faith to the many injustices of our world – the fact is sometimes we really struggle to make a decision, don’t we? There are no guarantees that

everything will work out when we take a risk.

This is why, without even consciously being aware of it sometimes, we might say “*we’re waiting for the right time*” when really what we’re doing is procrastinating and delaying the action that is needed out of fear for what’s at stake or because of our familiarity and comfort with what is.

Imagining this moment of decision for Esther this week, I kept coming back to Carrie Newcomer’s song, *If Not Now*, as I imagined Esther wondering about what to do and what risk was worth taking:

*... If not now, tell me when.
If not now, tell me when.
We may never see this moment
Or place in time again
If not now, if not now, tell me
when.*

*... I see sorrow and trouble in
this land
... I see sorrow and trouble in
this land
Although there will be struggle,
we’ll make the change we can.*

⁹ Elna K. Solvang, “Commentary on Esther 4:1-17,” *Working Preacher* (4 Dec. 2022), accessed on Dec. 3, 2022 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/esther-2/commentary-on-esther-41-17-3>.

*If not now, if not now, tell me
when.*

*I may never see the promised
land.*

*I may never see the promised
land.*

*And yet we'll take the journey
And we'll walk it hand in hand
If not now, if not now, tell me
when.*

*... It will take a change of heart
for this to mend.*

*... It will take a change of heart
for this to mend.*

*But miracles do happen
every shining now and then*

*If not now, if not now,
Tell me when.¹⁰*

Sometimes the Time is Now.

Waiting, or Discernment, or Processing – all of these words represent deliberation of some kind and they have a key role to play in our lives. And yet, if we're not careful, they can become a kind of womb of protection. A womb that is so safe that sometimes we'd rather stay in the Womb of Waiting than allow God to deliver us to new life.

For people who make “pros and cons” lists, for people who can

see multiple sides of every argument and who value different perspectives, for people who can see benefit in going down Road A or Road B, it is possible to get paralyzed with indecision and to hunker down in the Womb of Waiting beyond the gestation period God has for us, simply because in the womb we are safe, in the womb we know what to expect, in the womb we know our place, in the womb we can still wonder about what might be, and in the womb our fears and anxieties cannot come true.

But when we stay in the womb of waiting too long because it's comfortable and safe, I wonder, if we don't miss the very ways that God is trying to deliver us?

Just as Elnaz and Malala birthed something extraordinary by their decisions, so too did Esther. Deliverance comes through her choosing to claim her power privately and her faith publicly.

Of course, times of preparation and incubation are essential for our faith. The very Messiah of the world grows within Mary's womb after all! But even the Messiah is not meant to stay in

¹⁰ Carrie Newcomer, “If Not Now,” *Before & After* (Rounder Records, Jan. 6, 2015).

the womb. The Gospel Good News is that while the Womb is our necessary beginning, it is not our final destination.

At some point – like Esther – we must get beyond the Womb of Waiting and take action. We must make the choice. And we must trust – that no matter the consequences of that choice – God is with us, *Emmanuel*.

What is beyond the Womb of our Waiting? Perhaps it is “*for such a time as this*” that we are here to claim our power as people of faith who speak up and show up for the sake of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love in the world.

Birth is a courageous act, full of unknowns and pain and suffering. But think of the Christ child. **Beyond the Womb of Waiting is a Wonder to behold:** The Word Made Flesh. The Light of the World. *Emmanuel*. God with us.

No matter the choice, no matter the consequences: God is with us.

In the end, the story of Esther has me wondering this Advent:

Is it that we are waiting on God?
Or, could it be, that God is waiting on *us*?¹¹

Amen.

¹¹ Br. Curtis Almquist, “Wait,” *Society of Saint John the Evangelist* (Dec. 1, 2022), accessed on Dec. 3, 2022 at <https://www.ssje.org/2022/12/01/wait-12/>.