

For Such a Time as This

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“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 house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”(Esther 4:14)

“For such a time as this...”

The first time I preached on this famous line from the Book of Esther, I was a brand new pastor serving my first congregation, and the wind was ruffling through my hair. It was a heady season of social ferment and change. Richard Nixon was still in the White House presiding over the devastation in Vietnam, but opposition to the war was taking firm hold in popular opinion. Students had shut down Columbia University, yet again. The *New York Times* was publishing the Pentagon Papers. The secret taping system, eventual instrument of the president’s downfall, was already whirring away in the Oval Office. Hundreds of veterans had marched on the Capitol, dramatically throwing away their medals and battle decorations in disgust over the futile and divisive conflict. The most often-played songs on the radio featured a razor-blade-voiced Janis Joplin moaning, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose” and an equally raspy Rod Stewart shouting, “Wake up Maggie, I think I got somethin’ to say to you.” A prairie populist and peace activist by the name of George McGovern was well on the way to winning the Democratic nomination for president, a nomination he would accept by proclaiming, “We reject the view of those who say, ‘America, love it or leave it.’ We reply, ‘Let us change it so we can love it more.’”

One could feel the nation rising up to transform itself. Five years earlier, it had been hippies and Yippies and dreamy eyed revolutionaries marching in the streets, attempting to conjure up the moral suasion of the Civil Rights movement. But now, regular citizens—moms and grandparents, grocery store clerks, and scout leaders—were making a difference, changing the landscape of American life, turning the 60s misty vision of flower power into a mainstream groundswell for peace. Hugh Sidey, writing in his column for *Life* magazine, said, “It is almost as if there is some mammoth force that has risen up and is sweeping toward an end to this particular episode of pain and cross-purpose.”¹

Riding on the crest of this “mammoth force,” I entered the pulpit one Sunday to face my little flock—schoolteachers and tradesmen, retired folk and widows, mechanics and shop clerks. With the Bible open to Esther 4, I told them that these were no ordinary times and that they were no ordinary people. They were God’s people, and this was God’s *kairos*. God was turning the wheel of history right before our very eyes. Who knew, perhaps they, like Queen Esther, had been raised up by God for this very moment, summoned to this fulcrum in time to take decisive action, to join with God in the unraveling of the powers and principalities. “Perhaps you,” I told them, my voice rising, “yes *you*, have come into the kingdom for just such a time as this!”

It was a homiletical version of “Wake up Maggie, I think I got somethin’ to say to you.” Looking back now on this sermonic fanfare for brass, I am surprised I didn’t think to have the choir hum the theme from *The Man of La Mancha* in the background as I preached.

After the sermon, my congregation climbed into their Ford Falcons and drove home. As for the *kairos*, the record will bear witness. The war in Vietnam eventually whimpered out, of course, only to be replaced by equally ambiguous conflicts—the Persian Gulf War, Desert Storm, and the interventions in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Richard Nixon would resign in disgrace, and his successor Gerald Ford would be defeated by Jimmy Carter, who would eventually go on television to speak about an “invisible threat” to America. “The threat,” he said, “is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.”²

Not too many months after I preached my “for such a time as this” sermon, I left the parish to go to graduate school and to enter a life of teaching. The congregation moved on to new pastoral leadership, but it eventually declined in membership to the point that, exhausted and discouraged, they decided to close the church. The flock wandered away, some to other congregations, some to nothing. The building was sold and became an acting school. George McGovern, who died last fall, was demolished in his bid for the presidency, losing the electoral college tally by an astonishing 520 to 17. “You know,” he said later, “sometimes, when they say you’re ahead of your time, it’s just a polite way of saying you have a real bad sense of timing.”

The Peril of Ordinary Days

The point of this reminiscence is not to spread gloom, or, as was alleged of President Carter, *malaise*, but simply to say that it is easier to preach “who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” when the “such a time” in question is perceived as ripe and full of promise, when the moral crisis is clear, when the call for decisive action comes with the sound of a trumpet.

Recently, a young Christian activist, a practitioner and advocate of what has come to be called the “new Christian monasticism,” spoke at the seminary where I teach. The speaker, a pitch perfect blend of equal parts of a “Youth for Christ” evangelist, a Sojourners radical, and a John-Howard-Yoder-style proponent of the ethics of Jesus, spoke winsomely and persuasively for over an hour to a standing-room-only crowd in a large church on the campus. He touched on all the right issues – advocacy for the poor, health care for those on the margins, the need to resist “empire” in the name of Jesus.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, someone asked, “How do you feel about speaking the truth while standing next to an American flag?” When the question was uttered, suddenly the attention of the audience was fastened on what had probably gone unnoticed by most up to that point: a furled and somewhat faded American flag tucked discretely into a corner of the sanctuary. The speaker hesitated a half beat and then said that he thought the flag shouldn’t be there, either that or the flags of every nation should be displayed in the church. Good answer. But abruptly someone in the middle of the darkened nave shouted, “Take it out! Take it out!” A ripple passed through the big crowd, and for a brief moment I wondered if we were

about to be treated to the sight of a wave of seminarians, active and retired pastors, and curious laity suddenly flinging aside cashmere sweaters and sport coats and bum-rushing the chancel, dragging the flag to the front door, and tossing it unceremoniously into the street.

We are eager for *this* moment to be the decisive moment, eager to be standing on the wild and windy mountain with the urgent challenge before us, so eager that, for a few seconds, some in the polite church crowd allowed themselves to see a dusty and neglected flag stashed in a sanctuary decades earlier as a moral challenge equivalent to the march from Selma to Montgomery. “This is the moment,” something deep inside whispered to our souls, “and who knows whether we have not come to the kingdom for such a moment as this?”

Last October, *The New York Review of Books*, usually doggedly secular in outlook, published a long and admiring essay about two Christian martyrs, murdered for their faithful actions in the face of Hitler’s takeover of Germany: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi. The authors of the essay, Elisabeth Sifton (daughter of Reinhold Niebuhr) and Fritz Stern (a historian and emeritus professor at Columbia University), wrote, “To oppose such a regime [Nazism] was rare, and to do so in order to protect the sanctity of law and faith was rarer still. We are concerned here with two exceptional men who from the start of the Third Reich opposed the Nazi outrages.”³ They quoted Bonhoeffer in 1939, explaining to Reinhold Niebuhr why he must leave America to return to the dangers in Germany. The language is reminiscent of the Book of Esther:

I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany...Christians in Germany are going to face the terrible alternatives of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive, or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying our civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose.⁴

Sifton and Stern ended their essay with these stirring words:

One truth we can affirm: Hitler had no greater, no more courageous, and more admirable enemies than Hans von Dohnanyi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both men and those closest to them deserve to be remembered and honored. Dohnanyi summed up their work and spirit with apt simplicity when he said that they were “on the path that a decent person inevitably takes.” So few traveled that path – anywhere.⁵

One can understand why the editors of *The New York Review of Books* found this essay timely and worthy of publication. In a season of national political paralysis, when the once throaty and hopeful cry “Change We Can Believe In!” seemed to be just one more slogan shipwrecked in the Sargasso Sea of futile causes, a time when Thomas L. Friedman and Michael Mandelbaum could write a book about places on the globe where the future is glowing with promise and call that book *That Used to Be Us*, a time when public integrity is in short supply and it is hard for our nation to see any promising way forward, small wonder the editors would find appealing

the story of people of real courage, people of conviction who acted decisively and bravely at a critical moment in history, people who chose for the good in a time when at least some people knew what the good was and were convinced that it was worth dying for. Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

What this is, at least in part, is a yearning for ecstasy, the excitement of being swept up out of the commonplace of our everyday lives and carried to a brave new mountain where our lives take on a drama and a significance they normally lack. In his poem “The Volunteer,” Herbert Asquith describes a simple clerk “who half his life had spent toiling at ledgers in a city grey, thinking that so his days would drift away with no lance broken in life’s tournament,” who loses his life fighting in World War I, and thus is gathered into one moment of English glory and “goes to join the men of Agincourt.”⁶

Civil War historian and President of Harvard, Drew Gilpin Faust, underscores the capacity of war to generate this sought-for ecstasy:

For all its ubiquity and its universality, war offers the attraction of the extraordinary—the escape from the gray everyday, from the humdrum into higher things. It is indeed striking how often the language of altitude is used by those describing the allure of war: it will lift, elevate, raise us toward the transcendent, and link us to the “sublime,” a word often repeated in nineteenth-century paeans to war. In the Civil War, civilians rushed to the battlefields when the fighting ceased—many to search for wounded kin, but others to experience a direct connection to what they described as a force beyond themselves and their accustomed lives.⁷

Writing in the early 1970s, psychologist Rollo May described this hunger for ecstasy as it was found among World War II veterans. These young men, he said, had held routine jobs, such as “pouring gasoline into Buicks, Fords, and Chevrolets,” when swiftly the call to war had come, transforming their lives. May says,

In France, they became heroes, the pride of the women; flowers were strewn in their paths, every honor thrust upon them. They were *significant*, possibly for the first time in their lives. Returning to this country, some could find only the same jobs pouring gasoline into Buicks, Chevrolets, and Fords, and those who found better jobs may have experienced a similar despair in the empty life of peacetime.⁸

May quotes a French woman, a resistance worker during the war, who after the war lived a comfortable bourgeois life with her husband and son:

My life is so unutterably boring nowadays....Anything is better than to have nothing at all happen day after day. You know that I do not love war or want it to return. But at least it made me feel alive, as I have not felt alive before or since.⁹

May went on to argue that this post-war ennui and boredom led many in our soci-

ety to seek out near experiences to war, such as the saber-rattling of the old American Legion or the “search and destroy” tactics of the Commie-hunting of the early 1950s. He concludes:

Everyone has a need for some sense of significance; and if we can’t make that possible, or even probable, in our society, then it will be obtained in destructive ways. The challenge before us is to find ways that people can achieve significance and recognition so that destructive violence will not be necessary.

Much about May’s confidence that a sense of significance and recognition could sweep away tendencies toward destructive violence now seems hopelessly naïve, but this much remains: when life enters the doldrums, there springs up in the human heart a desire for ecstasy, a longing to be “outside of ourselves,” outside of the normal routine, a desire to hear the trumpet blow, to be summoned to something great, to know that this is the decisive moment and, who knows whether we have come into the kingdom for just such a time as this.

But what if we are not in such a time? The wonderful Lutheran preacher of a previous generation, Edmund Steimle, once preached a fine sermon called “The Peril of Ordinary Days,” in which he claimed that faith’s deepest challenges are sometimes experienced not in life’s decisive turning points when the stakes are high and the call to courage is clear, but instead in the humdrum days when life seems to be in the doldrums and the path ahead seems to be an uneventful trek through a desert.

My Soul Waits for the Lord...

There is a growing recognition among the old mainline churches that something is badly broken. In the 1960s, critics like Pierre Berton and Gibson Winter could complain that congregations had become captive to a bourgeois suburban mentality. Berton spoke of “the comfortable pew” and Winter of “the suburban captivity of the churches.”¹⁰ Christian churches were seen as rich, fat, and complacent institutions of the establishment. Today, though, many Protestant congregations don’t seem smug; they seem mainly tired and dispirited. In many churches, the pews are emptier, the people grayer, the gospel muddled, the mission unclear. As the Book of Hebrews puts it, many of our churches have “drooping hands and weak knees.” We soldier on, but it is clear that the glory has departed, that God is breaking us down in order to build up something new.

But what? The future is not clear. And because the future is not clear, the peril of these ordinary days is that we will attempt to force God’s hand, to transform a time when disciples are called to prayer, to repentance, and to patient obedience into a romantic time when we must ourselves heroically seize the wheel of history. After all, we tell ourselves, who knows if we have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Particularly silly, it seems to me, is the current temptation to view with alarm that 20% of the American population now claims no religious affiliation – the so-called “nones” – and to go chasing after them with radically re-vamped approaches to worship and church life. If these “nones” desire an intense spirituality, as the polls seem to indicate, if they hunger for what Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly call the

experience of “whooshing up,”¹¹ the ecstatic thrill that accompanies all transcendent moments, whether they be encountering the holy or watching Roger Federer play tennis, then why don’t we gerrymander worship to create such “whooshing up” experiences? To paraphrase the woman from the French resistance, “Our life is so unutterably boring nowadays. ...Anything is better than to have nothing at all happen day after day. At least it makes us feel alive, So why not?” Because the Christian faith, with its radical view of the incarnation, is betting its life on a different understanding of how we experience the holy than “whooshing up;” that’s why.

Equally overreaching is the claim that if we knew how to look, we could see that what seems like a time of breaking down is actually a new Great Awakening, a massive and exciting shift in spirituality happening all around us, a new wave of alternative religiosity that summons us to flee from the prison house of “conventional Christianity.” It will take courage to leave our prayers and sermons and sacraments behind, we are told, but, hey, who knows whether we have not come into the kingdom for just such a time as this. As one advocate of the new awakening puts it,

And the awakening? What will it look like? It entails waking up and seeing the world as it is, not as it was. Conventional, comforting Christianity has failed. It does not work. For the churches that insist on preaching it, the jig is up. We cannot go back, and we should not want to. Lot’s wife turned to a pillar of salt when she looked back to catch one last glimpse of the past as her family fled to an unknown future (Gen. 19: 26). Centuries later, Jesus reminded his followers, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9: 62).¹²

I believe, to the contrary, that we are instead in a season when we are called to say with the psalmist, “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope.” We don’t like to find ourselves in such a time. We prefer to be in the fourth quarter with the score tied, the seconds ticking away, the game on the line, and we are taking the snap to throw the touchdown pass. How disappointing it must have been for the disciples to hear this word from the risen and ascending Christ: “Wait in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Waiting on God is, perhaps, the hardest test of faith.

As H. Richard Niebuhr once said, “It may be that the greatest moral problems of the individual or of a society arise when there is nothing to be done.” By “nothing to be done,” Niebuhr did not mean resignation, but hopeful waiting on God. Some people do nothing because they are defeatist or fatalistic, but, said Niebuhr, “There is yet another way of doing nothing. It appears to be highly impracticable because it rests on the well-nigh-obsolete faith that there is a God—a real God.” He went on to say,

The inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good: it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness. It is not the inactivity of a resigned patience, but of a patience that is full of hope and is based on faith. It is not the inactivity of the non-combatant, for it knows that there are no non-combatants, that everyone is involved,

that China is being crucified (though the term is very inaccurate) by our sins and those of the whole world. It is not the inactivity of the merciless, for works of mercy must be performed though they are only palliatives to ease present pain while the process of healing depends on deeper, more actual and urgent forces. But if there is no God, or if God is up in heaven and not in time itself, it is a very foolish inactivity.¹³

For many American Christian congregations, ours is a time, like that of the boy Samuel, when “the word of God is rare and visions are not widespread.” But we serve a God of promise who will for us, as he did for the faithful in Samuel’s day, raise up a new prophetic word. There will come a time when the Lord will again appear at Shiloh and the word of God will flow in abundance. Until that time comes, we should “stay in the city until we are clothed with power.” It is not an easy wait, but this is time we have been given, and who knows whether we have not come into the kingdom for just such a time as this?

Notes

- 1 Hugh Sidey, “The Presidency: Something Different This Spring,” *Life* (April 21, 1971), 28.
- 2 President Jimmy Carter, “Crisis of Confidence,” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis/>.
- 3 Elisabeth Sifton and Fritz Stern, “The Tragedy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 25, 2012), 69.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 70. See “The Death of a Martyr,” *Christianity and Crisis* (June 25, 1945).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 6 Herbert Asquith, *The Volunteer and Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1916), 7.
- 7 Drew Gilpin Faust, “Telling War Stories,” *New Republic* 242/9 (June 30, 2011), 22.
- 8 Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1972), 178.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 10 See Pierre Berton, *The Comfortable Pew: A Critical Look at Christianity and the Religious Establishment in the New Age* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1965); Gibson Winter, *The Suburban Captivity of the Churches: An Analysis of Protestant Responsibility in the Expanding Metropolis* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
- 11 Herbert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 200 *et passim*.
- 12 Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).
- 13 H. Richard Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” *The Christian Century* (March 23, 1932).