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So You've Been Crowned, So Now What?¹

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Text: Esther 4:10–17

We are here to celebrate one of the milestones of your life. You are graduating, or someone you love is graduating. What has God to do with your graduating? What has God to do with your celebration of someone else's graduation?

As you ponder these questions, I invite you to lay your own life alongside the life of Esther.

Esther had been in school for a long while. Women in those days were not used to going to school at all, so 12 months must have seemed like an eternity. She was an orphan adopted by her uncle. He had encouraged her to reach beyond the life he had lived. "Make something of yourself," he had said to her. "You have the chance to get out of this area, to see the world, to have it better than I do. Don't tell people about your lowly background." And while she sometimes was homesick in being separated from him during these 12 months, she was also attracted to the excitement of her new surroundings. She learned many things, and while she was often under pressure to the point of exhaustion, she was pleased that she was able to keep up with the work. She realized that she had the capacity for an easier life than her uncle. "Think big," he had said. And Esther thought big. Along with other women, she was being trained to be the future queen of the King of Persia. Esther learned quickly, but the competition was fierce. After close scrutiny, she and seven others were chosen for the last round of examination for the position. Despite the competition she had made many friends among those with whom she had studied. Now only one of them could receive the coveted position.

Esther could hardly breathe as the crown was placed upon her head. She had made it! There was much feasting and dancing and happiness. It was an ecstatic moment for her, as ecstatic perhaps, as the moment will be for you, when at graduation the special hood will be placed over your head to signify your arrival at a coveted achievement. It is a time of celebration. Enjoy this time. Relax into it and soak up the ecstasy. For in going on to the next stage of your life, you cannot stay at the crowning ceremony.

Not even a queen can stay at a crowning ceremony. Esther's new position immersed her in a Persian culture. She was Jewish, but she walked among Persians in the palace. She was breaking new ground for a person of her status and culture, but she told no one about her Jewish heritage. When she moved to the palace, she left behind her newly made friends and she knew that she would not return to her uncle's home again.

At first, loneliness whispered in her ear. Still, there was the exciting challenge of her new position. In the palace, she had to prove herself. Her duties engaged her energies, and she felt her spirit soar as she met the challenges. She worked hard to earn respect among these people, and she won favour in the sight of all. She was no longer an unknown small-town Jewish girl whom the foreign occupants despised. Life could not have been more wonderful. But blue skies have a way of clouding over.

One day, she learned that some top Persian officials had pushed through the royal channels a decree which would eliminate all Jewish people, because they were Jews. The cries of the Jewish people reached her ears. Her new found happiness turned to ashes like the ashes her people put upon themselves to show their despair. Her inner confidence threatened to crumble.

Many of you, like Esther, will find yourselves in places of leadership. Like Esther, you will work to earn the respect of those with whom you work. But what will you do when you hear the cries of your people? The threat of genocide which hung over the heads of the Jewish people in Esther's time has additional forms today.

For example, you may find yourself in leadership positions on school boards which hear cries of psychological genocide,

called racism. Then there is the genocide of separating people out into categories because of gender: remember the 14 women students in Montreal who were separated from their male classmates and murdered because they were women. You may find yourself in positions where devaluing of certain persons takes place. What will you do? Our world is becoming our backyard. "The people" is no longer just our immediate family or our classmates or our city or our country. "The people" includes the global community. You may find yourself working in a financial institution which is pushing a country like Ethiopia more and more into financial debt and therefore starvation. You may find yourself working in a company which employs new Canadians and pays them poorly and exploits them with few if any employee benefits because these people so desperately need a job. What do you do?

Indeed the cries come to us today not only from the people but from the very environment upon which we depend. You will hear their cries for justice as whales continue to die and whooping cranes become extinct because of contaminated water and terrain. An old order Mennonite man now owns the farm on which I grew up and he was telling me that one Sunday as he walked toward the bridge over the creek which runs through the farm, he saw flocks of ravens diving toward the water. He leaned over the bridge and saw hundreds of dead fish floating on the water. If you listen carefully, you can hear their cries. Think not that you are separate from these cries. We are as connected as the many communities of cells and systems within our bodies are interconnected. The depletion of the ozone layer is causing an increase in skin cancer. To deny our interconnectedness with the environment is a death worse than the end of the body, that is, the death of being in touch with our essence; it is the death of being in touch with our root source, the stuff of which our flesh is made. We straddle the real tensions of a world of wealth, prestige, and an easier life which glitters before our eyes, and a world which weeps and laments in our ears.

Esther, too, seemed to be pulled in different directions. She straddled two worlds: a safe, secure, world with the Persians and the weeping and lamenting of the Jewish people outside the palace.

Oh, she wanted to turn her back and forget that she was part of them. Hadn't she thought big and won? Hadn't she

proved herself worthy of respect and a better life? At first she resorted to denial, "Maybe things are not as bad as they seem," and then blame, "What is being asked of me?" To reveal her identity as a Jewess was to risk being humiliated and despised by the Persians she had come to love. We can imagine that she consoled herself by saying that she had not made the decree. Her hands were clean. The only way the decree could be stopped was for the king to reverse it. Should she ask the king to reverse the decree? But no one dared initiate an audience with the king without his requesting their presence. To do so was to be put to death, unless the king held out the golden scepter in the direction of the uninvited person. It would be madness for her to try to approach him uninvited.

Surely she could help them in some other way. Perhaps through patience. She could speak to the king when next he sent for her. Or perhaps she could speak to someone else, one of the king's chief officials and ask him to take on this task.

And yet, a small voice began to bubble up from within her: "Who knows whether you have not come to this place for such a time as this?" She wrestled with the options.

We, too, often deny that things are as bad as they are. We say, "Our politicians would not support policies which would harm our natural resources like the Temagami area in northern Ontario." Or we can blame the victims. For example, we can judge as overly sensitive a woman who is upset when told by a co-worker that her disagreement with him must mean that it's that time of the month. Or we can reassure ourselves that it is someone else's responsibility to do something. And so we console ourselves that the problems of the logging in the Temagami area have nothing to do with us as we continue to use reams of paper and we console ourselves that the dying fish and birds have nothing to do with us as we continue to drive our cars for the smallest errand and pollute the air with gas and oil emissions. And we close our eyes to the directive from head office that a way be found to let go a newly hired worker because it is just discovered that the worker has a bad back and can begin to make claims on the company if the worker is kept. We can deny and blame and ignore for a while. But the thought will always be nagging, "Who knows whether you have not come to this place for such a time as this?" To be sure, to decide to act for the environment in the face of inconvenience,

to decide to act in the face of opposition from head office, to decide to act for a colleague in the face of labels of "wimp" or worse, the stakes will be high.

These were high stakes for Esther. She realized that to come to the aid of her people demanded that she call into question the policies of those who had placed the crown on her head. It meant that she might lose their respect. It meant that she could lose her position. It meant that she might lose her life. Besides, the king had not invited her into his presence for these past 30 days! In spite of all of her defenses, the thought kept pulsating within her: "Who knows whether you have not come to this place for such a time as this?" She could ignore it no longer.

Esther prepared herself meticulously, both physically and spiritually. She knew that she could not act in isolation. She needed her people as much as they needed her. She told her servants to tell her uncle, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in the city and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will do the same. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." For three days, Esther and her people turned to God in prayer. Then she was ready. She washed herself and ate. She put on her best robes and entered the king's hall where he sat on his throne. As she stood there, he turned to see who had dared to enter the hall uninvited. When he saw Queen Esther, he smiled; he held out to her the golden scepter that was in his hand. The story does not end there, but Esther's courageous act was the beginning of the road to justice and salvation for the Jewish people.

You, too, are on a road, and today is a time and a place of joy in your journey. A time of celebration. Savour the crowning ceremony. The remembrance of it and of this community of support (friends, family, classmates, and professors) who are gathered together with you—this memory—will be needed even more during the days and years ahead when you find yourselves, like Esther, in places of leadership. When you come down from today's crowning ceremony, find an ongoing community of support which will sustain you so that when you find ringing in your ears the cries for justice and pulsating through your body the question Esther heard, "Who knows

whether you have not come to this place for such a time as this?" , then, then, you will be ready.

Notes

- ¹ Baccalaureate sermon, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, 28 October 1990.