

Sunday, May 19, 2002

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



For Such a Time as This

Esther 4:1-17

Will You Pray With Me? **Gracious God, on this Pentecost Sunday may these words truly be your living Word to us. Pour through me the gift of preaching that everyone might hear your voice. We pray in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.**

Maybe, just maybe, you were brought to the kingdom for such a time as this. A black limousine pulled up in front of Buckingham Palace in London, England. As the chauffeur went to open the door a man of short stature got out. He was short of stature but tall of character. He had that crusty look on his face that characterized him. He started to walk up the steps of Buckingham Palace and, as he did, he realized he was walking up the steps of the Palace in one of the most chaotic times in the history of humankind. Neville Chamberlain had resigned as Prime Minister. Hitler and the Third Reich were in power in Germany and Austria. Stalin was looking for help from President Roosevelt in the United States.

It was a time in human history when the world was on the brink of war. War had even started in many parts of the world, and this man, as he walked up the steps to Buckingham Palace, knew that King George VI was going to ask him to be the Prime Minister of a new coalition government. Sir Winston Churchill said that at that moment it was as if time stopped and in that moment, as time stopped, it was as if every book he had ever read, every person he had ever talked with, every class he had ever taken, every essay he had ever written in school had all been preparing him for this decisive hour. He wrote in his memoirs, "It seemed like I had come to this moment in history for such a time as this." Be very sure. When God wants to do something great, listen, God puts the right person in the right place at the right time.

There are two words in the Greek language for time. One is the word **kronos** and the other is the word **kairos**. **Kronos** is ordered, measured, structured time, from

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which we get the words chronology and chronological. But **kairos** is something very different. **Kairos** is not just humanly ordered time. **Kairos** is God's time – time that stands still as if everything you've ever done in your life has been preparing you for this decisive moment. And the door opens and you're now ready to walk through it. Have you ever felt such a time in your life – a moment when you were ready to walk through a door in your life and say **goodbye** to something old and **hello** to something new? That's a **kairos** moment. A moment when God gets everything ready and you're now prepared to take a new step.

I believe with all my heart that **TODAY** is a **kairos** moment in human history. It is a time not unlike the time when Sir Winston Churchill climbed those steps at Buckingham Palace to become the Prime Minister. We are living in a time in history when our world needs leadership. Our nation, our society and our world are starving. We are desperate and starving for leadership. This is a time in human history when I think God is looking in congregations like this one, and all over the world, for those He can put in positions of leadership.

Do you know the **New York Times** reports that there are over 40 wars, not just little party skirmishes, 40 major wars going on in our world now? We need leaders for such a time as this. Do you know there are 800,000 homeless people in the United States of America? Do you know that 20-25% of them are families and of those families, the majority are children under the age of six? We need leaders for such a time as this. In a post-September 11 world, in a post-Enron and Arthur Anderson world, in a post-scandal in the Roman Catholic Church kind of world, all leaders – government, political, ecclesiastical – are being scrutinized.

People want to know, "Are you trustworthy?" I won-

der if God didn't bring all of us here today for such a time as this. You might have thought you were coming because a loved one is graduating from medical school or law school or architectural school or business school or college or high school. This weekend there are graduations all over the area. Maybe you thought you were coming as a family member or a friend and you came to church as a courtesy. But I think God brought you here for such a time as this. Maybe you're the one graduating and moving on to another stage of your life. But God has a message for you today for such a time as this. Maybe you're older and think, "Well my time of service is up, I've done my thing." But I think God brought you to this church this morning for such a time as this. The message God wants to give us is simply this: whenever God wants to do something – listen carefully – God puts the right person in the right place at the right time.

So it was with Queen Esther of Persia. Esther was a Jewish woman and she was as surprised as anyone when the King of Persia selected her after a beauty contest to be the Queen. She was shocked, stunned and surprised to find herself as the Queen, but there she was Queen of Persia. Imagine also the surprise of Mordecai, her cousin, actually her foster father – the man who had raised her. He had taken care of her, had nurtured her and loved her. But Mordecai, who was a devout Jew, refused to bow down to King Ahasuerus and to the King's right hand man, Haman. So Haman went to the King and demanded that not only Mordecai be executed but that all Jews should be killed. The King sent out an edict that all Jews would be killed. Mordecai, unable to communicate with Esther in person, sends a note to her, urging that she go to the King and intervene on his behalf and on behalf of all the Jewish people. But Esther, fearing what the King might do, sends a note back to Mordecai explaining that, "If you make an appointment to see the King when the King has not summoned you, the King can execute you."

Mordecai responds, "Esther, if you keep silent at such a time as this, who are we going to count on? Who are the Jewish people going to look to if you're silent?" Then he added this line: "Maybe, Esther, maybe you were brought to the kingdom for such a time as this." God puts the right person in the right place at the right time. Queen Esther was a woman of courage and she went to the King. Miraculously the King agreed with her. Mordecai was saved and Haman, the man who had made the gallows for Mordecai, was hung on those very gallows. All the Jewish people were free. Do you know what's so interesting about the Book of Esther? (I'd love you to read it.) It's a fabulous story, but the name of God does not appear in the Book of Esther. So you might say, "Where was God?" Ah, God is throughout all the pages. God's thoughts, God's actions, and God's fingerprints are throughout the story. It's just that the name of God

doesn't appear.

Today is Pentecost Sunday. Sometimes on Pentecost Sunday people want to see the incarnation of God. We know that in Jesus Christ. But God's ways are often hidden. Sometimes people think about what happened at the World Trade Center on September 11 and say, "Where was God then?" Or they think about those statistics about the 800,000 homeless, many of whom are children under six. Where is God? Be very sure. God is working. Though we may not always understand God's ways, open your eyes and see where God might want to put you in a position of leadership for such a time as this.

One of the people I most respect in all the world is Millard Fuller, the President of Habitat for Humanity. Do you know that in 1974 when Millard Fuller started Habitat for Humanity, they made a goal that they would build 100,000 homes for the poor? They would build affordable housing for people who had no housing or live in shacks. It took them 26 years to reach that goal – and they did it. In 2000, Habitat for Humanity dedicated house #100,000 right here in Harlem and many of us were there for that dedication. They did it in 26 years. Then Millard Fuller said, "OK, now we want to set our next goal. We want to build the next 100,000 homes in five years and to do it, it's going to take one-half billion dollars, \$500 million dollars, and I'm looking for a fundraiser to raise it." Well, Millard Fuller's Board laughed at him and thought, "Who in the world is going to raise \$500 million? We can't build 100,000 homes in five years. It can't be done."

But Millard Fuller called Jack Kemp and said, "Kemp, this is Millard Fuller. Kemp, do you believe in free speech?" Jack Kemp said, "Absolutely Millard, I believe in free speech. It's protected by the Amendments to the Constitution." "Good," said Fuller, "I'm going to give you an opportunity to give one!" And Jack Kemp was asked by Millard Fuller if he would give a free speech asking people to invest in Habitat for Humanity. Jack Kemp did it and he gave another speech – and another one. Then Millard Fuller said to Jack Kemp, "You know, we've got to raise a half a billion dollars and actually, Jack, I wonder how you're going to do that?" Jack Kemp said, "I don't know," but he started doing it. Do you know that Jack Kemp was a former professional football player? He went to the Buffalo Bills and Washington Redskins. He said, "When I was playing pro-ball I made \$75,000; some of you are making 7.5 million dollars, some of you have got 30 and 40, 50 million-dollar contracts. You ought to be able to give a million. You ought to be able to give 5 or 10 million." It's true that Jack Kemp has raised already over \$300 million. It's a tribute to God putting the right person in the right place at the right time.

Margaret Shafer is on our staff and is a wonderful

woman of faith. She's gotten all of us in the church involved in getting to know the homeless people who sleep not only around our building, but who sleep and live in our shelter. We know their names, we have a ministry to them, we teach them the Bible, we talk to them about our faith and their faith – we are getting to know them. It's a wonderful program. One of the men who has lived in our shelter is named Ronald. Ronald was so touched by Margaret Shafer, by the young adults of this church, and by the people in our ministry, that Ronald once said from this pulpit, "When I met the good people of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, I knew it was time for me to stop wandering and come home again to God, to my Lord and Savior."

Now Ronald Watt is one of our ushers, and do you know when I've asked for volunteers to build Habitat for Humanity's homes, Ronald Watt is among the first to sign up? Do you know what happened this past week? Ronald Watt got a key to his own apartment. He is now living in his own place; and I have to tell you, this guy has dignity. He stands up straight and tall. If you see him today he's got a smile as wide as could be, and he'll tell you for 10 minutes about his new apartment. He is so proud. Maybe Margaret Shafer came to this church for Ronald Watt. Maybe she came for such a time as this.

I can hear some of you saying, "I've served the church, I've been the Clerk of the Session, I've been the President of the Trustees, I've been Moderator of the Deacons, I've taught Sunday School, I've done all that." Let me remind you the reward for work well done is not rest, but more work. It's in the Bible! Michelangelo was 80 when he painted in the Sistine Chapel. Thomas Edison was 83 when he made pioneering discoveries in rubber. Benjamin Franklin developed the glasses when he was 78 years old and helped to write the Constitution when he was 80. Oliver Wendell Holmes was serving effectively as a Supreme Court Justice when he was 91 years old. I think of the man on the Johnny Carson show who got to the age of 100. Johnny Carson said, "How do you do it? What's your secret? You look great for 100." He said, "Anybody can live to be a 100. I can teach you how to do it in three words. Just keep breathing." Just keep breathing in the Holy Spirit of God, and you will be empowered for service wherever you are.

So to all the Confirmation youth, I say maybe God has called you to be a leader in your school for such a time as this. Our schools need leadership. Maybe God confirmed you today to be a leader in your family for such a time as this. Maybe there is someone in this Confirmation Class who is going to be an author, a member of Congress. Maybe one of you will be the Senior Pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church of New York – but not before I finish this sermon at 3:30

today! Maybe God has called these Officers to be leaders for such a time as this. I tell you, you never know what God has in store for you when you're elected as a Trustee, an Elder or a Deacon. You never know.

John Egglan had no idea what was in store for him. Have you heard of him? He was elected a Deacon in 1850 in Coldchester, England. On a cold, snowy winter morning, as a new Deacon, he arrived at church but not exactly sure what to do. The snow was piled high. The Pastor was snowed in and couldn't get to church. Only 12 members of the church came. John Egglan lit the stove and got everything going; and as church was about to start, he wondered should they even have church. The Pastor wasn't there and he was the only officer, but John Egglan said, "We've got to have church because although there are only 12 members, there is one visitor. He's a 13 year-old boy. We've got to have church today because this young boy has come. We've never seen him before but we can't close the doors." They said, "Well John, who's going to preach?" And he said, "Well, I'm a Deacon, I guess I'll preach." **(I hope the new Deacons are listening to this sermon.)**

John Egglan opened the Bible, read the scripture and they prayed. He gave a rambling 10-minute sermon. Nobody was exactly sure what the point of the sermon was, but they said it was pretty effective because at the very end, he seemed inspired by the Spirit. He talked to the 12 members and told them to follow Christ. Then he looked at this young 13 year-old boy whom he had never seen before and said, "When you're in trouble, look to Jesus. When you're facing the darkest time of your life, look to Jesus. When you can't go any further young man, look to Jesus. Look, look, look."

Later when that young boy became an adult, he never forgot that snowy Sunday in Coldchester, England. He said it was a moment as if time stood still. All of a sudden it was as if he was being prepared for the next thing in his life. That young boy went into the ministry. He became a preacher of the Gospel of Jesus Christ because a Deacon, John Egglan, said, "Look, look, look to Jesus." By the way, that young man's name was Charles Hadden Spurgeon. Charles Hadden Spurgeon was to the 19th century what Billy Graham has been to the 20th and the 21st centuries. I wonder, I just wonder, if there hadn't been a John Egglan, would there have been a Charles Hadden Spurgeon? Maybe John Egglan was a Deacon for that decisive moment. Maybe you came to Fifth Avenue Church today because God has something in store for you that would not happen in the world if you weren't called to do it. Maybe you are being called to leadership for such a time as this. Claim it and believe it. Amen!

Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on cassette tape.

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