

"Commitment"

Esther 4:15-5:8 and Matthew 6:25-34

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TIME magazine has been around for quite a while; since 1923 in fact. It was the first weekly newsmagazine published in America, and it was among the first to publish online. The online edition of *TIME* allows you to search back through all the archives, all the articles from the past. But it's one of the articles from the present I want to talk about this morning, or maybe I should say almost the present.

You see this story actually appeared just about two weeks ago, on April 28th, and if you want to, you can still find it. All you need to do is to search for this headline: "*Nun Stuck in Elevator Survives Four Nights on Celery Sticks!*" Sounds like an interesting story, doesn't it? That's why I read it! But in case you don't want to do the search, let me try and summarize the story for you this morning.

It starts off like this. "An 85-year-old nun recently got trapped inside a broken elevator for four nights and three days. It happened while the rest of her sisters were out of town at a convention and she was alone in the convent."

The story goes on to say that at first she tried prying the elevator doors apart. But they wouldn't open. Then she thought of her cell phone. She had it with her, but there was no signal in the elevator. She considered what she had with her; a bottle of water, a few celery sticks, a couple of cough drops and she said to herself, "This just can't be happening!"

But then, her anxiety began to diminish, and she decided to turn her elevator into a personal prayer retreat. "It was either panic or pray," she later told reporters. The hours went by and she prayed and fasted, "I felt God's presence," she said. "I felt like He was providing me with an opportunity to listen more completely to Him than I usually do."

So she spent four nights and three days that way, stuck in an elevator, listening to God. And when she was finally rescued she said, "God's presence with me in that elevator was my strength - really!"

And I think Esther would have understood, don't you? Because this morning, as we resume our study of the life and legacy of Esther, we find her fasting too. Not because she

was stuck inside an elevator, but because she was stuck inside a situation she couldn't see her way through.

As we saw last week, the situation was this. Esther's had been blissfully ignorant of what was happening around her until she heard a report of Mordecai standing at the gate to the palace clothed in sackcloth and ashes. So she sent her servant Hathak to find out what was going on. He came back to her with a report from Mordecai about a new decree, just put in place by Esther's husband King Xerxes, and a copy of the actual law.

And as she listened to the words of Hathak, as we found out last week, Esther first felt a sense of panic and powerlessness. So she tried to tell Mordecai, she didn't know what to do, wasn't sure she could do anything. But Mordecai told her doing nothing wouldn't change the reality. The reality was the law was in place and it would affect not only the Jews. It would affect Esther too.

Then gently but firmly Mordecai reminded Esther of her Jewish history. With one sentence her of one of the great recurring themes of the Old Testament. He reminded her that God is the Deliverer of His people. And Mordecai challenged Esther to believe that. And to believe that maybe, just maybe God had put her in her royal position to be the person to help him deliver Israel on this occasion.

And that's where we left Esther's story last week. But this week as we pick up her story, it's interesting to me to notice what's happened. Because Esther's not in the same place as she was when we left her. In fact, if you compare the first fourteen verses of Esther chapter 4 with the fifteenth verse, you'll notice the difference right away. It's dramatic. The difference is this. Esther is no longer feeling a sense of panic. Instead she's feeling a call to prayer.

Listen again to the way the Scripture says it. "Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do.'"

And I don't know whether you know it or not, but every time the Bible talks about fasting, the point really isn't about the food. The point is this. In any crisis in your life a million voices will often start crowding into your mind. But there's really only one voice you need to hear. And that voice is the voice of God.

You see, the truth is God often speaks most effectively to us when we take extra time to listen. And the truth about fasting is that it's all about taking extra time to listen.

It's about giving up something, to get something. It's about giving up a meal, to get a clearer sense of a message God wants you to hear, a message that will often give you the strength you need and the wisdom you need to navigate through a crisis. In Esther's case the crisis was a new law that affected her and her people.

And in our case, right now, the crisis is similar; not identical certainly, but similar. For just this past week a new law was put into effect in our denomination. And that law affects each of us individually, and all of us together. It's not a new law that affects us our physical lives. But it is a law that affects our spiritual lives. And in the end that may be more important.

For as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, the decisions we make about our spiritual lives; decisions like what words we'll listen to as we seek God's kingdom and His righteousness in our lives, those decisions matter. They matter much more than decisions about what we'll eat or what we'll wear.

They matter deeply to a God who wants us to listen to Him. To listen to Him tell us what righteousness is. To listen to Him tell us what sin is. To listen to Him tell us that the way back from sin to righteousness is through a process that includes repentance, confession, forgiveness and restoration. It's a process that God says He offers to every sinner. And it's a process that all of us need because all of us are sinners.

Esther was too. But Mordecai's words helped her see the sin she was about to commit, the sin of doing nothing when God was calling her to do something. And through Mordecai's words, God spoke to Esther and Esther started to listen. And as she listened, as the book of Esther shows us, her panic turned into prayer.

She decided she needed to hear more. She decided she wanted to hear everything God wanted to say to her. So she gave up something to get something. She gave a few meals to hear more of God's message to her. She needed to find God's path for her future. So she took extra time to find it.

And right now, in the midst of the crisis that many of us are experiencing because of the change that's been made to the ordination standards in part of the Presbyterian family to which we belong, my sense is, my strong sense is, you and I need to do the same thing. We need to let our lives be guided by Esther's legacy. We need to take some extra time to pray.

So that's what I'm going to do this next week. And that's what I'm going to encourage you to do too. And if you feel led, as Esther did, maybe you'll even want to take some extra

time to pray. Maybe you'll want to skip a meal or two to linger for a while and listen for God's voice to speak to you. Maybe you'll want to skip a couple of TV shows to show God you're really serious. Maybe you'll let go of a couple of conversations with your friends to have more time to have a couple of conversations with God. I hope you will.

And when your conversations are finished, when you sense it's time to do something more than just pray, then learn another lesson from the book of Esther this morning. Be patient. Go slow. Have a plan. That's what Esther did, isn't it?

"On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter."

"And the king asked, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What's your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.' 'If it pleases the king,' replied Esther," Grant me my life. That's my request. For I'm about to be destroyed together with my people.

That was what Esther knew she wanted to say, what she would have to say, what she did say eventually. But those are not the words of Esther here in chapter five. Those are the words of Esther in chapter seven. That's not the first request she makes of the King. It's actually the third.

You see, because of her prayers, Esther had a plan. She had heard God counsel her to have patience. She had heard God whisper to her as He had whispered to Solomon when he wrote that "it's wise to be patient." That "there's a time for everything and a season for every purpose under heaven."

So by the time Esther stood in front of Xerxes she knew. There would be a right time to tell him her real request. But that time wasn't right away. She knew she could act slowly with a sense of purpose and a plan. She knew she didn't need to be impatient. Because impatience seldom serves anyone well.

In 2003, a golfer named Scott Hoch demonstrated that. Maybe you golfers out there will know this story. But even if you don't, and even if you're not a golfer this is a story worth knowing. Listen. In 2003 Scott Hoch was playing in the Doral Open, a PGA golf tournament held for years on the "Blue Monster" course at the Doral Country Club near Miami, Florida. Each year the tournament involved some of the best players in world, players like Jack Nicklaus, Lee Trevino, Greg Norman and Ben Crenshaw.

But in 2003, none of those golfers were on top after eighteen holes. Scott Hoch was. But he wasn't there alone. He was tied for the lead. And so a playoff began. It was still tied by the time Scott got to the green on that hole. But it was getting dark. And as Scott looked at a nine foot putt he had to make to keep him tied for the lead, he made a decision. He decided to request a delay in play because of darkness.

The fans who were there weren't pleased. And they voiced their displeasure pretty loudly. But Scott knew this putt was too important to rush. So he waited through the night, and in the morning, he came back. He made the putt, then birdied the third playoff hole and won the tournament.

And the interesting part of the story that many people don't know is this. You see, at the time he won the Doral Open, Hoch was 47. His eyes were already weakening. In fact, he had already had surgery on both of them. And when he first walked up to the green the previous evening, he felt ready to putt. He felt sure the putt would move left and he felt sure he could make it. His caddie though saw things differently. He read the break the other way. He thought it would break right and he said so. He said to Hoch, "Why not come back in the morning and take another look."

And the point is this. When you've got a big decision to make, patience usually pays off. And even though Esther wasn't a golfer, she knew that, didn't she? That's why she took time to pray. That's why she fasted. And after three days of listening, she patiently put into action the plan God had put in her mind.

And next week we'll find out what the consequences were for Esther and her whole community. But for this week, I think we've probably gotten from God exactly the two words we most need to hear. And the words are prayer and patience. For as you and I start to think about how we'll respond to the new reality in the PCUSA, the temptation will be to think we need to do something right away.

But if the book of Esther teaches us anything folks, it teaches us this. Right away isn't nearly as important as getting things right. And getting things right means doing not only the right things. It means doing the right things the right way. It means taking time to pray and listen to God until we hear His plan for each of us personally and all of us together. And it means being aware that His plan for us may demand our patience as well as our passion.

Let's pray

