

October 1, 2017

“Made For a Time Like This”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 10:25-29

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Hello. Hello.... Is anybody out there? You're not supposed to be. You see, according to self-proclaimed “researcher” David Meade, the world was supposed to have ended last Saturday the 23rd, when a mysterious planet named "X" was to collide with Earth. Obviously that didn't happen. So Meade is backing off on his claims and now saying the end will occur sometime in October. He bases his predictions on verses and numerical codes found in the Bible, specifically the Book of Revelation. He claims that recent events such as the total solar eclipse and Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria are all omens of the approaching apocalypse. Well, you know what, I'm ready. I'm ready! With all that's going on in the country and the world, all the divisiveness and name calling and anger and hatred, I'd rather be in heaven than deal with this craziness here on earth. Think about it. Heaven or here? Yes, I'm ready Planet X... Okay, not really. And since Jesus said that no one, except God, knows the day when this world will end and the new heaven and earth begin, then I'll just go on trying to follow the commands and teachings of my Lord and Savior, rather than get caught up in what I read in the news or see on television.

Speaking of his commands, we heard one today that we should all try to follow. And that is to love one another. Love our neighbors. To illustrate his point, Jesus tells the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan. I don't need to preach on that story today because you already know it. A white guy is walking down a road when three black guys mug and rob him and throw him into a ditch to die. Then a Latino, probably illegal, happens to come by, but hearing the cries of the dying man, decides to ignore him for fear he'll be deported. Then a Middle Eastern man comes down the road but, knowing if he touches the man he'll likely be accused of being a terrorist, decides instead to go around him. Then a priest, gay by the way, passes through and sees the man, but given the current climate.... Okay, maybe it doesn't go exactly like that. But you can see the point I'm making. But let's listen once more to the critical part of today's Scripture. "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks, "What is written in the law?" He answered, "That you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." Did you hear that - you must love your neighbor as yourself in order to inherit eternal life!

You know, as I watched all the controversy around football players taking a knee during the national anthem, it brought to mind a Super Bowl commercial a few years ago for Coca Cola entitled *America the Beautiful*. It caused an uproar because of the "neighbors" it depicted. But Coke went ahead and aired it again in a pre-game ad in this past year's Super Bowl. So let's watch the commercial, along with some commentary.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGC2E7GP52U>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-IasK_R2SI

Personally, I think this commercial beautifully celebrates our country's diversity and the way we should treat one another. Regretfully, diversity has a bad name these days, in great part because our leaders have politicized it and used it to turn us against each other. So today, my primary purpose is to get us to look at all people, nationalities, cultures, the way God sees them. Because the truth is, that respect and love for those different from ourselves – our neighbors, should be embedded in our hearts as Jesus commands. Unfortunately many people have a problem with that. In fact, when this commercial first aired, Twitter exploded with racially charged and prejudiced comments ranging from boycotting Coca-Cola products, to profanities, to calls for these "foreigners" to leave our country because they don't fit in with "real" Americans. You know, Jesus would be turning in his grave...if he was there. Because all we need do is to look at Jesus himself, a devout Jew. And yet, in his genealogy are four non-Jewish, foreign women, one a prostitute and one an adulteress. Talk about diversity! As a baby, Jesus' first visitors were foreigners, wise men from what is now Iraq, bringing him gifts. Then, he and his family had to flee to Egypt, becoming illegal aliens themselves, in a land not theirs, among people of a different language. At one point, Jesus told his followers that he has sheep who "do not belong to this fold," meaning Israel – foreigners in other words. One of the longest conversations of Jesus recorded in the gospels is of him speaking with a foreigner – a woman, no less, from Samaria. Another story has him healing the daughter of a woman from Syria. And another has him healing the servant of a soldier from Rome. On the day of his crucifixion, a man named Simon, from Africa, Libya in fact, helps him carry his cross. And one of his last commands to his disciples was, "Go to all the nations." "Go to all the nations." Yes, God is the God of all peoples, the Creator of all our neighbors.

And there's a good story in the Bible that speaks to our prejudices and what can happen when things get out of hand. It comes from the Book of Esther in the Old Testament, which is probably a book and a story that many of you have never heard of before. So I thought I would tell you this story for two reasons. One, so that we can all learn a little bit more about the Bible. But secondly, because it tells a

story of outsiders, foreigners, living in a different land. Just like those people we saw in the Coca-Cola commercial. People that have had to assimilate into a different culture, with all the difficulties and prejudices they encounter. In this case, it's a story of Jewish people living in pagan culture.

The book of Esther consists of primarily four characters. The beautiful Esther, Mordecai her older cousin, both Jews, King Xerxes, who ruled the length of the world from India to Ethiopia, and his counselor, the evil Haman. These events took place in the fifth century BC. Jerusalem had fallen, and the Jewish people were displaced, many of them taken as slaves into foreign lands. The setting for the story is the capital city of Susa, located in today's Iran. Nearly 600 miles from Israel, which back then, was like being on the other side of the world. And this is the place where Mordecai's ancestors were brought, the place where Mordecai is raising his orphaned cousin, Esther. It just so happens that King Xerxes is looking for a few more concubines, so his aides go throughout the land searching for the most beautiful of women. And Esther is one of the women they find and they bring her back to the palace. It doesn't take long for Esther's beauty to take hold of King Xerxes, and he falls in love with her and makes her queen. Now Mordecai is pleased for Esther, but he has great concern for her. He is proud of his Jewish heritage, but he suggests it might be better if she doesn't make her heritage too well known, given the prejudices and feelings of native people. And Esther agrees.

Now the evil Haman is so full of himself that he commands everybody that comes in his presence to bow down and kneel before him. But Mordecai, who bows only before the One God, refuses, and he and Haman become arch enemies. As a result, Haman vows revenge, not just on Mordecai, but on all the Jews living throughout Xerxes entire kingdom. And his plan is simple... to exterminate them all. And that's not so far fetched a plan, given what happened not so long ago in Germany. Haman calls the Jews, "an odd set of people who just don't fit in. Their customs and ways are different from those of everybody else. They are an affront. We shouldn't put up with them." That's a familiar tweet, isn't it? As for Mordecai, Haman has a special punishment. He builds a seventy-five foot high gallows so that he can hang Mordecai from it, and the entire city can see him swinging there.

But as it happens, Mordecai hears about Haman's plan to murder all of them, and he tells Esther. She doesn't want to say anything or get involved. But Mordecai warns her, "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're going to be the one Jew who will get out of this alive. All of us will be wiped out." But then he gives her this charge: "Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just

such a time as this." Maybe you were made for just such a time as this! So Esther goes before the king with a new courage, a new sense of what is right and wrong, and says, "If I have found favor in your eyes, O king, give me my life, and give my people their lives." The king doesn't quite understand. She goes on, "I and my people are to be destroyed - massacred, murdered. If we had been just sold off into slavery I wouldn't even have brought it up to you, but we are all to be killed." King Xerxes explodes, "Who is he, where is this monster that would do such a thing?" Esther tells him, "That person, is Haman." And then the king, even he knowing this is so wrong, has Haman executed on the very same gallows that Haman had built for Mordecai. I think there's a lot of symbolism in that for us today.

Now, that's certainly a good story, but here's the point to it. You see, there is hardly a nation or a culture that doesn't have a Haman in their midst. A Haman, and his like, that are determined to rid the world of people who are different. And sometimes, it takes an Esther, or, today, it takes Christians like you and me, to speak the final and definitive word on what is right in the eyes of God. And that is, that all of us, all over the world are God's children, made in his image. And God loves every single one of us the same, regardless of our color, nationality, religion, lifestyle, language. And, we are to do the same.

So as you leave here today, consider this. Maybe, just maybe, you and I were made for such a time as this – to share and spread the love of God that knows no boundaries, no differences, no divisions. To show the world what it really does mean to love your neighbor as yourself. So that we can be assured of inheriting that eternal life that Jesus Christ promised. Amen.