“The Willingness to Perish”

Esther 4:1-17

Rev. Rebecca Weaver Longino

First Presbyterian Church, Luling, TX

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I stood, staring at my car. Willing the door to open and my key to be inside.

It started to snow and the temperature was dropping as the sun had set.

Skiers and snowboarders were packing up for the day, heading down the mountains to their warm houses where they would drink hot chocolate and recount the day on the slopes.

The ski resort was starting to close down for the evening, workers heading home.

But I stood there, skies leaned up against the trunk.

I searched all of my pockets for that key to the car.

In the ski coat I normally wore, I always put my car key in the same pocket.

Creature of habit, I always wanted to know exactly where it was.

But as a ski instructor that season, I was given a fancy new coat with about 20 pockets in it.

I searched each one by turn, shivering in the brisk breeze.

The key was nowhere to be found.

I thought perhaps I left it in the locker room. Not there.

Checked lost and found. Not there.

Thought maybe one of my students played a trick and stole the key. Started to lose hope.

Being two hours away from home, I couldn’t just take a cab there and grab my spare key.

I’d searched for nearly two hours and the key was nowhere to be found.

So I called a locksmith. The only one in Winter Park, Colorado had just had eye surgery that day and would not be able to help me. He suggested I call someone from Denver and have them come up, which would cost a pretty penny but at least I would be able to get in my car and drive home that night. Cheaper than a stay at the ski lodge.

I did what any self-respecting person would do. I called my dad.

I needed another person to think the situation through with me.

Should I stay up in the mountains and hope the key would turn up in the lost and found? Or call the Denver locksmith and get home that night.

My dad offered a third option I had not even considered. He would drive up to the ski resort and deliver my spare key.

I refused that offer, knowing the inconvenience it would cause him.

It was 7pm on a weeknight. It would take him 2 hours to get there, in the dark and in the snow, and then 2 hours to drive back home. I was certain that such a late night was not acceptable since he had to work early the next morning.

But of course, he refused to listen to my protest, an act of love I am beginning to understand only now that I am an expecting mother.

So he found the spare key and headed up the mountains.

I greeted him with a huge hug, but quickly got in my car so we could head home without delay.

Not 50 feet out of the parking lot, he called my cell phone from his car behind me.

“You have no rear lights” he said. “Pull over so I can check the fuse.”

I was annoyed at the delay in getting home and further inconvenience to my dad.

We pulled over, and sure enough there was a fuse out and my lights were not working. He knew exactly what to do, changed the fuse and we were on our way, heading down the slick roads of Berthoud Pass, snow falling on our windshields.

As I focused on keeping my car on the road, thoughts began to race through my mind.

What if I’d driven home without rear lights?

No taillights to indicate my presence to drivers behind me.

No brake lights to let them know when I was slowing.

The road I had to travel to get home is one that is scary to the faint of heart on a sunny day without snow.

But at night with ice building on the lanes, it can be downright treacherous.

To make that drive without rear lights on my car could have been deadly.

To this day my mind still races with questions about that night.

What if my dad had driven in front of my and not seen that the lights were out?

What if I had been able to get a locksmith to make a new key and I’d driven home unaware of the danger?

What if I hadn’t lost my key in the first place?

Driving home without a clue that the fuse was out.

I have no doubt in my mind that God was there with me that night.

That God put that series of events into place. Making each step happen as it did.

Opening my eyes to the preciousness of life, to my dad’s love and to the protection of God.

I do recall saying a prayer as I searched for my car key.

It wasn’t a specific prayer like “show me where the key is.”

I just remember asking for help.

God responded.

Not in an obvious way.

Not in a way that most would understand.

I think some might say, well why didn’t God just fix the fuse, preventing that night of frustration?

I don’t know for sure, but I think the answer is that I had to experience God’s movement through alternate means.

Not direct action from God, but I had to see God working through my dad.

I saw it in his sacrificial love, driving up to the mountains that night when I’m sure he was looking forward to an early bedtime.

I saw God act and move through this compassionate gesture of a father’s love for his daughter.

God has this way of working through other people.

Putting us in just the right place at just the right time.

For me, it was my dad rescuing me from danger in the mountains that night.

For the Jewish people living in Susa, it was Esther, delivering them from extinction.

Who would have guessed that an orphan, a poor Jew with no semblance of power would be the one to save her people?

She is the epitome of an unlikely heroine.

She is a woman. She has no authority.

She’s basically just a trophy wife, there for show, to fill a role.

When she won the beauty pageant and became queen, of Persia, no one would have guessed that she would be the one to save her people.

But somebody had to do it.

In the book of Esther, God appears silent.

Never once is the name of the Lord mentioned, there are no indicators that the people exiled in Susa were in close contact with God.

Even when the Jewish people were facing genocide.

Mass destruction of a people who thought they were free.

God seemed to have moved these people to the back burner. Out of sight, out of mind.

When Esther was called to act on behalf of her people, we can see how God was working through her. Not in obvious ways, but subtly speaking and working through her to deliver the people.

For such a time as this. God used Esther, an unlikely heroine.

God placed a concern for her people on heart.

She realized she can’t not act. She had to do whatever it took to save the Jews.

She declared that she would approach her husband the king, in his inner court.

An act punishable by immediate death.

No one was allowed to enter the court without being summoned.

But Esther was willing to perish if it meant acting on behalf of God to save the Jewish people.

She acted out of sacrificial love, recognizing the call God has placed on her life.

She called on her cousin Mordecai and all of the Jewish people in Susa to fast on her behalf.

Invite God’s presence into the situation to provide protection and deliverance.

God responded.

God kept Esther safe even though she faced certain death.

God used Esther’s act of courage to save the Jewish people from extinction.

God worked through Esther for a time such as this, a time of crisis, to make a miracle happen.

God has a habit of working through those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for others.

Christ on the cross is the ultimate example.

A servant willing to perish so that others might thrive.

What can we the church learn from the examples set by Esther and Jesus?

How can we embody that sacrificial love, that willingness to show up for God and perish if necessary?

The truth is, there are larger churches than ours who are discussing closing their doors, unable to sustain their ministries any longer.

We are facing the threat of extinction just like the Jewish people in Susa.

When I interviewed with the pastor nominating committee a year and a half ago, I heard members of this church talk about their discouragement with shrinking numbers and emptying pews.

But I heard it said that you all would rather close this church while putting up a fight, than to walk away in defeat.

Does this still hold true?

Is this church still putting up a fight to stay open?

To continue to minister to the community of Luling?

As we discern God’s plan for this congregation, we ought to take on the character of Esther.

We ought to take risks, face the unknown, be willing to perish if it means moving for God in big ways.

The first step is prayer.

Esther invited her people to fast and pray with and for her before she made a move.

I encourage each one of us to spend this Advent season in prayer, seeking how we can move for God in a way.

Those who participated in the Sailboat Church discussion are spending 40 days in prayer, praying for the church, praying for Luling, praying for God to move in big ways.

This does not mean praying that God will make more people show up at our church door.

That prayer would be as futile as me praying for the key to show up in my hand on that cold night at the ski resort.

Instead, we need to pray that God will show us how we can serve here in Luling, embodying sacrificial love just like Esther.

There is a whiteboard in the Fellowship Hall where we are brainstorming ideas for how God wants to use this church in 2015.

Join us in this season of prayer.

Get creative and think outside the box.

Discern how this congregation might serve the community of Luling in a way that no other church or organization is doing.

Be willing to take such a huge risk, that it might mean this church will perish and close.

But trust that God will use our courage and tenacity.

Trust that God will keep this church open, using this congregation for the Gospel.

Remember that God uses particular people for particular reasons, just like Esther.

God tends to move in big ways when we’re willing to take big risks.

God calls us to show sacrificial love during times such as this.