

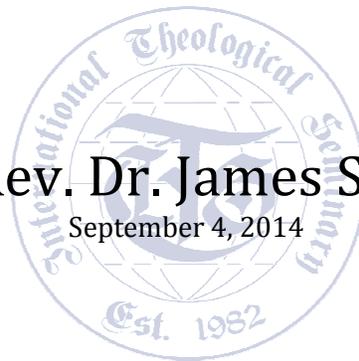
Dispensable Yet Chosen

ITS Convocation Message 2014

Esther 4:9-17

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Welcome to those who are new to ITS, and welcome back to those who are returning to ITS. It is good to see many familiar and unfamiliar faces this morning. We are gathered today to remember, recognize, and worship the One in whom we find the meaning and purpose of all our endeavors.

As you know, International Theological Seminary stands in the Reformed tradition and teaches the Reformed Theology. One of the better-known, yet controversial tenets of Reformed beliefs is predestination. Free will vs. predestination is a perennial debate I don't want to delve into here. I will leave the discussion to our respected theology professors and systematic theology classes some of you will take. Rather, I want to anchor my message in a biblical text from a book that actually never mentions the name of God – the Book of Esther.

Esther is an interesting book in many ways. Along with Ruth, it is one of two books in the Bible that is named after a female heroine. It contains some ethically problematic passages, such as a drunken king who wants to show off his wife to his subjects; Esther, who, encouraged by Mordecai, jeopardizes her purity and future by becoming a candidate in the selection of a new queen; and Jews who are ready to defend themselves by attacking and killing anyone who rises against their race.

While these are all interesting topics that deserve further exploration, I want to focus on today's text and want you to think about this issue: election. What does election mean, and what does it mean to believe in it?

I don't have to tell you how it feels to be chosen. Some of you are here because you are chosen. You are chosen and sent by your church, denomination, or school to study abroad. You are chosen and granted admission by the admission committee of ITS. You are chosen and granted a visa by the US embassy to enter the United States. In this context, being chosen connotes being special, being shown favor. The book of Esther asks the question of what it really means to be chosen and addresses the topic very subversively by contrasting two opposite ideas: election and lottery. By election we mean that all events in our lives and history are carefully orchestrated by God, and therefore, they have meaning and purpose. By confessing that we believe in divine election, we acknowledge God's absolute sovereignty over nature and our lives. No hair from our head, no bird in the sky will fall without God's permission or knowledge. Lottery or coincidence connotes the opposite: it is

all about probability and random chance. Speaking in terms like that, I can say that some of you are the result of luck. According to the statistics, approximately 50 percent of all the applicants get admission from ITS. Half of those who are admitted get an entry visa to the US. So you are fortunate enough to be here by some random chance.

The latter explanation does not really make us feel so good and special, because, if not me, it could have been someone else who might have filled the space I am taking now. It makes us feel dispensable. If not me, someone else. We are just one of many who happen to get lucky.

Interestingly, unlike other books in the Bible that often talk about a revelation from God or hand of God working in history, the author of Esther does not claim any knowledge or understanding of divine sovereignty. The author does not want to presume or assume what God's will may be and completely omits the proper noun "God" from the book.

And the book portrays those who are esteemed with respect and prestige as completely dispensable. The book portrays even the Queen of the Mighty Persian Empire as dispensable. Queen Vashti does not give in to the embarrassing demand of King Ahasuerus to show herself to be a beauty object. The insecure King and his male subjects decide to do away with her to warn all women who are possibly plotting to usurp the authority of a husband at home. Thus, the queen becomes the victim of random chance and the whim of men who are in power.

Esther, then, by the draw of luck, becomes the Queen of Persia. But the question she must have had on her mind is, "How long would I last? If the king was willing to replace his former queen for not showing up at his party, surely he can dispense with me, if he finds some flaw in me." I don't think Queen Esther necessarily felt special and loved when she became queen. She may have felt more insecure by this drastic turn of events in her life. She was promoted to queen from being an orphan girl in a foreign land. When would she be thrown out of this position? She would have wanted to cling to this newly found luck dearly so that she wouldn't be disposed of like her predecessor Queen Vashti. And she could have used every means in her power to do so when Mordecai asked her to jeopardize her life to save her fellow Jews.

Random chance falls on her fellow Jews as well, but in this case, not good luck like the one Esther experiences, but very bad luck. They become the victims of random lots Haman threw out of his hatred for Jews. Purim means “lots.” And the lots seem to run the course of events for the Jews very negatively instead of God. The day of the massacre of the Jewish race is chosen randomly, by casting lots.

It is a very ironic point the author wants to make. The people who claim to be chosen by God have become subject to random violence. I have heard and seen plenty of cases of people, especially children, victimized by the violence of random chance. When I visited Africa this past summer, one of the villages where I stopped on the way to Jos suffered a massive attack by Muslim extremists. A pastor who ran a ministry for orphans showed me numerous pictures of children who were killed and charred to ashes from burning. I looked through pictures with much numbness because here I was, alive – and all these children were killed and burned. How could I dare to say that it was a divine sovereign plan for the children to tragically die like that and for me to live and enjoy a comfortable life?

If the doctrine of divine election gives us this kind of false sense of security and justification of our comfort against the tragedies and suffering of others, it is a damning belief. It is better for us to say, I am lucky to be alive; it is bad luck that they encountered such a violent death. Bringing God’s name into the picture does more harm than good, and it causes more dishonor to God’s name than honor.

To Esther, who feels lucky to be protected from the massacre that is about to fall upon her own people and who wants to cling to her newly found luck, Mordecai brings in the doctrine of election in a very indirect way: “Who knows if for such time as this you have come to royal power?”

In other words, Mordecai challenges Esther by saying it is not for your own comfort that you have been chosen to be queen. Could it be that, for such a critical time as this for our people, you have been chosen? Don’t say it is God’s sovereign plan that I should be successful, rich, powerful, and respected and honored by others. If that’s what you would like to claim, don’t even mention God’s name. Don’t pretend to know God’s plan and will because obviously you don’t even begin to fathom what God’s plan is. But rather, be cautious in expressing God’s will even when God’s divine election of you is for the sake of

others, to bring the good news of salvation to others. Why? Because even that election is not based on your merit. You have not earned it. Election by merit tells us that we are indispensable, absolutely necessary in God's plan and work of salvation. Election by grace will say what Mordecai tells Esther: "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter."

We are chosen, but we are dispensable. This realization might hurt our ego because we want to believe that our church depends on us, our country depends on us, the world depends on us. But the fact of the matter is, we are not as crucial and important as we would like to believe. The question is, if we truly believe that God has chosen us, are we willing to offer ourselves for the service of others and of God freely, as a vessel that can be readily dispensed with?

Only when Esther truly embraces the fact that she is dispensable is she able to risk her life to save her people. Ironically, her courage to dispense with her life results in saving not only her own life but also the life of other fellow Jews. It is so true just as Jesus said, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

"Such a time as this" is now. Nations are in turmoil. Nature is going through so many unnatural disruptive changes. People have lost their way to God, turning to their own separate ways, doing things that seem right in their own eyes. Our fellow brothers and sisters around the world are being persecuted and are suffering.

What would be your response today? Do you feel lucky to be here? That's good. Do you sense divine guidance and election in your life? Then lead a life that is worthy of the election. If we truly believe God's sovereign plan is at work in our lives, we will not hold onto ours so dearly. We will surrender and offer to others freely. Only then we will witness God's salvation being perfected in us according to His sovereign plan.

Amen.