

A Priest, a preacher and a Rabbi all served as chaplains. They would get together two or three times a week for coffee and to talk shop. One day, someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear.

One thing led to another, and they decided to do a seven-day experiment. They would each go into the woods, find a bear, and preach to it.

A week later, they're all together to discuss the experience. Father O'Flannery, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, and has various bandages, goes first. "Well," he says, in a fine Irish brogue, "Ey wint oot into th' woods to find me a bear. Oond when Eyfund him Ey began to read to him from the Baltimorre Catechism. Well, that bear wanted naught to do with me and begun to slap me about. So I quick grabbed me holy water and, THE SAINTS BE PRAISED, he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is cooming oot next wik to give him fierst communion und confierrmation."

Reverend Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he proclaimed, "WELL, brothers, you KNOW that we don't sprinkle...WE DUNK! I went out and I FOUND me a bear. And then I began to read to him from God's HOOOOLY WORD! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. I SAY NO! He wanted NOTHING to do with me. So I took HOOOLD of him and we began to rassle. We rassled down one hill, UP another and DOWN another until we come to a crick. So I quick DUNK him and BAPTIZE his hairy soul. An' jus like you sez, he wuz gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the week in fellowship, feasting on God's HOOOOLY word."

They both look down at the rabbi, who is lying in a hospital bed. He's in a body cast and traction, with IV's and monitors running in and out of him. The rabbi looks up and says, "Oy! Preaching to the bear was easy, but he got a bit touchy about the circumcison."

Those three religious leaders knew how to get after a challenge, even if it wasn't a great idea.

Over the last month and a half, we have been preaching a series called, *At the Crossroads, Allowing Our Faith To Guide Us Through Confusing Issues*. This has really been an attempt, an invitation for each one of us, to face the challenge of living in our world, leading up to this election season.

We have talked about Family Values, Terrorism, The War in the Middle East, Capital Punishment, The Marriage Amendment and the challenges of stress. My hope is that with each of these issues and more, we will face the challenges by turning to God and ask the question, "God, what would you like me to do?" in response to the challenges they bring to our world.

As people of faith in a mainline United Methodist Church, we have often been more content to let others deal with these issues. We have been afraid to talk about them in our churches, because of the backlash that might come our way. But our silence as people of Jesus Christ has allowed voices to enter these debates that really don't reflect the grace and love and hope that we have experienced.

We have been too content, to let others define the issue. But we don't have to make that choice.

In our scripture for today, Esther is a Jewish woman, who has risen to the rank of queen in Persia. It is a great story to learn how this happened and I highly recommend that you find time to read the whole story of this little book from the Old Testament. No one in the government knew Esther was Jewish.

The challenge is that a man arrives in power who hates the Jews and Esther's uncle, Mordecai. He talks the King of Persia into offering an edict that would have all the Jewish people of the Kingdom killed.

There is great mourning in the land among the Jewish people. Mordecai takes action and calls on Esther to do something. At first, she is reluctant. After all, no one really knows she is Jewish. The edict won't affect her.

Mordecai finally challenges her to act when he says, "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the only Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive from the Jews from someplace else, but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for such a time as this."

I love that phrase. It is a great reminder that God DID call Esther to act. It is a great reminder that God calls us to act, right where we are.

If you are looking out at the world and wondering, "how on earth can we deal with the messes of our world?" Please understand that I believe you are a part of the answer. We are the ones we have been waiting for. It comes from falling back into our faith, and living out of the values that we have been given, offering the hope, love, and grace we have received from God to this world we live in. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

This was really brought home to me in over ten years ago. I was serving at Cargill United Methodist Church in Janesville, WI. I had just been ordained an elder in the church. The weekend after I was ordained, the church had me preach and threw a big celebration for me. It was great.

During the sermon though, I was talking about the challenges of being in ministry today, in the world we live in. I paused to talk about how I wish I had been able to serve and be in ministry during the time in which everything revolved around the church. Back in the days when people were more supportive of the church. In the days before scandals had ripped apart churches, in the days when people sought out the church more than happens now.

Two days later, I received a card from a retired pastor, a wonderful man named Herb Ziebarth. Herb's card said, "Scott, congratulations on your Ordination. What a wonderful time this is for you. I was deeply touched by your sermon on Sunday. Thank you for your words. Meta and I served in the church you described. It was a wonderful time when people and communities supported the church and the ministry of the church. Your sermon has brought back so many memories of people and places and events and God doing wonderful things because of that support. God called me to serve during that time. It was terrific.

But God has called you to serve in this time. God has called you to serve in the challenges of these days. I know you won't find people, or communities, or even churches as receptive as I did. But I know God has called you to serve. Take the authority of that call and of the ministry of the church, and serve well in these days. May ministry be as joyful and fulfilling for you, as it was for me." Love Herb and Meta Ziebarth.

Herb was reminding me, that God has called me and equipped me for ministry today. I want to remind you what Mordecai reminded Esther so long ago, that God has called you and equipped you for ministry today. We are the one's we have been waiting for to make a difference in this world. May God help us do so as people of faith, hope and love.

Amen