

I. Advanced Organizer

- A. When I came to the church conference that day, I didn't anticipate how the day would end. I **didn't foresee spending the last session sobbing by myself in the church lobby**, overcome with awe and beauty. But that is where I found myself before the day was over.
1. The moment was a **culmination of a series of experiences** I'd been having over recent years. The prayer times when many people had prayed over me and told me I was a **"trailblazer" or a "pioneer"**. The wrestling I'd engaged in as a young Christian coming to faith as theatre student, and struggling knowing the church was not a safe place for my gay friends and mentors. I had sensed at the time God acknowledging the problem but telling me there was not yet an answer, that I should **"put it on the shelf"** for a season.
 2. I did so, but lived in discomfort and dissonance, especially when I started to sense a pull away from a vocation in theater and music toward **spiritual leadership**, specifically dreaming about becoming a pastor that would start a spiritual community myself. That dreaming brought me to a female pastor named Adey who was starting to invest in me, inviting me to model a journey on her own. I had followed her to this conference in Boston, to hear her speak and to meet other folks who felt compelled to create spiritual spaces like the kind I felt stirred by. I'd even sensed earlier at this conference that perhaps **Berkeley, California** might be the place all of that might come to pass and felt equal parts excited and terrified at the idea.
 3. And then the evening session came, and Pastor **Charles Park**, the pastor of a young church in Manhattan got up to speak. He began to share how he was starting to think differently about **including gay people in the church** and something happened in me. I felt shivers all throughout my body. My breathing quickened. And before too long I knew that if I didn't exit the room, I'd be loudly bawling in front of the whole group.
 4. So I got out as quickly and quietly as possible, and when I made it to the lobby, **the dam broke**. The sobs came from a deep deep place, and I let them role through my body. And as I did, I had a picture that was so vivid in my mind's eye. In this picture **I was in front of an alter, and I was there with Jesus**. And as the scene played out, I was bringing all of my LGBTQ friends and mentors and loved ones - each and every one of them I'd known and cared about through the years - I brought to this alter, and Jesus threw his arms around them, and he hugged them, and he blessed them, and he **spoke to them words of belonging and love**.
 5. And in that moment, as I took in that scene a set of words rung through my head and heart that felt like the Divine speaking right to me. **"Leah, it's time. It's time to take this question you've been wrestling with off the shelf**. And I know you've heard you're a trailblazer and you think being a female church starter is what that's about, but I need you to know that this right here - creating this space for all these folks I want to include - **this is gonna be even bigger."**
 6. And as I sobbed in the church lobby that night, I absorbed those words. I knew they were true. I cursed under my breath as I thought about all the possible implications. But I also knew whatever this hope was that was taking hold of me, **I had to follow it all the way forward**.
- B. I start with that personal story as I begin this **third and final teaching on the series I've been calling "Liberating Return"**. Through this series of three teachings, I've been sharing some insights from the sabbatical I was gifted with this summer, in the hopes that they may be instructive to you as well. Each of these looks at a different element of "return"; returns

that I was practicing over the sabbatical season and that I'm now trying to continue practicing in this season in which I've returned to this work of cultivating spiritual community that we are up to at Haven.

1. The first was the **return to self** - reconnecting with the deepest parts of my self.
 2. The second was the **return to relationships** - making space to draw my attention in a more intentional way to the significant relationships in my life, like those in my family.
 3. And today I want to focus on what was for me the third kind of return, a return that ultimately has compelled my coming back into this space and the return I hope we as a community might engage in a real way in this season - the **return to purpose**.
- C. That moment in the Boston church lobby was a significant one, but it took place about 15 years ago. **A lot has come to pass since then.** I went from having one kid to having three. I went to seminary. I moved from Chicago to Iowa, and then eight years ago, I came here. I did apply my energy toward pioneering an alternative spiritual community, and eight years later, it's still standing.
- D. But all of this pioneering has **come with its share of costs along the way, as pioneering usually does.** There have been the losses of relationships - from folks in churches I used to call home but couldn't remain a part of to live into Haven's journey, to folks who've come and gone in this Haven project. There's been the moments it felt like things came together, and the moments they've seemed to fall apart. There's been a global pandemic and all that that disrupted. There've been changes in terms of my own family's participation, most notably my husband Jason's journey away from engagement in spiritual community.
- E. And so given the gift of some time this summer, 12 weeks away from the work of Haven, it seemed like **this was an important opportunity to pause and take stock and consider what this work is about.** If church planting was the call, in some ways, I accomplished the initial goal - a community has been founded and it existed even with my absence this summer. Maybe my work here is done. Why still do it?
- II. As I've been thinking about this theme of **connecting with and returning to purpose**, there's a story from the Hebrew Bible that came to mind for me this week. It's a story that comes late in the Hebrew Bible's narrative arc, during the season in which many of the Jewish people no longer live in Israel. The Babylonian exile that took place has ended after the Persians conquered Babylon. But not everyone returned to Israel. Many Jewish people stayed in Babylon or what eventually became Persia, and it's from this setting that we receive this story, a story centering around a Hebrew woman named Esther.
- A. Esther is a young woman who has been **elevated from commoner to Queen of Persia**, after winning an epic beauty contest. Her predecessor, Queen Vashti lost the title after refusing to parade around potentially naked for her husband's drunken party. In the wake of Vashti's move, the King starts the ultimate beauty quest, adding young women to his harem from across the empire, and elevating the favorite to wear the royal turban. Esther is chosen as the lucky girl.
- B. Now of course, as the story goes, neither the King nor his advisors realize that Esther is Jewish. She had followed her uncle Mordecai's advice and kept her lineage a secret. But a few years in to her reign as queen, a situation arose that put her secret to the test.
- C. The King's right hand man, an official named Haman, hated the Jewish people and he had **persuaded the Emperor to endorse his plot to have them destroyed.** Letters were sent throughout the empire that on a certain day people throughout Persia are ordered to attack their Jewish neighbors, to massacre them and to take their belongings for themselves. It's a truly atrocious order, but the emperor shows no resistance in endorsing Haman's evil plan.

- D. Which is where **Esther comes into play**. As the edict is announced, the Jewish communities are understandably terrified. Uncle Mordecai sends word to Esther and begs her to approach the King and compel him to call off the genocide.
- E. But Esther has a problem; She knows that **though she is the Queen, her power is limited**. (Thank you, patriarchy.) In this palace, the King has the right to execute anyone who comes to him unbidden. He can choose to waive that right, and extend his scepter to them, but he doesn't have to. The King hasn't called for Esther for over a month, and she saw what happened to her predecessor. She knows that this man doesn't always take well to women he sees challenging him in some way. Esther sends word to Mordecai that she's sorry, but there's nothing she can do.
- F. And here is where we get to the heart of the story. Reading the final verses of the 4th chapter of the book of Esther:
1. **12 When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" 15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 "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. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." 17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions.**
 2. If you know the story, Esther follows through. She takes the risk and approaches the King, who extends his scepter to her, and eventually because of her courage her people are spared.
 3. But none of that positive ending would likely have taken place, if it wasn't for what we just read. At the center of this passage is a bold question. It's not a statement, it's not a declaration, but it's a question that's provocative enough to pivot the whole story.
 - a) **"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"**
 - b) With that question, Mordecai is beckoning his niece to consider whether her life might be about more than simply the circumstances that she has found herself in. Yes, there have been factors beyond her control that, thus far, have worked in her favor. But perhaps there's something more meaningful to her life beyond the luxuries of the palace or the challenges of staying on the good side of an unpredictable husband. With this question Esther, and all of us, are invited to consider whether the circumstances in our lives might be a part of a larger purpose? **Might our little lives be a part of something with a bigger impact? Might they even be a part of what God may be doing in the world?**
- G. The story of Esther holds a special place in the life of Jewish communities still today. The feast of Purim, which the book establishes in the end, is still observed in Jewish congregations today, and in the festival celebration, the community often delights in retelling the Esther story in dramatic fashion.
1. But interestingly, centuries ago there was debate amongst Jewish scholars and rabbis, as well as Christian ones, as to whether this book should actually be included in the Hebrew Bible. It was questioned in both circles as to whether it should be considered "canon", and the primary reason many argued against including Esther in the Bible was because throughout the whole book **there is no direct mention of God or Yahweh**.

God is not an active player in the story, some would say. God does not appear to Esther in a burning bush like we see in the Moses story. Esther does not hear a voice calling her name like young Samuel in the temple. There are no affirming words booming from heaven or doves flying down and alighting on her as we see with Jesus.

2. **But does that mean that the Divine is not present in Esther's story?** Or might Esther be an example of the way I think God is actually often most present to us: inviting us **into the possibility that there are purposes worth living into beyond our own needs or sense of security.**
 3. In the story, Mordecai's question shifts things. **Mordecai's question moves Esther from self-preservation to selfless courage.** Mordecai's question rings of the sacred, and that sacred ring has power. Empowered with the hope that the Divine is with her, **Esther moves out into places of risk and gets to play a significant role in saving not just herself, but saving her people.**
 4. Perhaps this is why, despite some peoples' skepticism, this story remains in the Jewish and Christian Bibles. Because Esther's story reminds us that God is in the discovery that we can be a part of something bigger. God is in the hope that we can make different choices, ones that have implications beyond us, and as we do, **we might have the opportunity to participate with the Divine in something truly restorative and healing. God is in the possibility that we might be where we are for such a time as this.**
- III. In my own life, I've now been on a **multi-decade journey of following the breadcrumbs of possible sacred invitations**, and trying to live into this work of cultivating an inclusive, progressive, Jesus-centered spiritual community. A lot of the journey has felt meandering, or stalled out, or perhaps in that frustrating rhythm of two steps forward and one step back. But there have also been these moments of timeliness that have resonated in deep ways, inviting me or us as a community in an Esther-like way to ask, might we be here for such a time as this?
- A. Our long journey of preparing to come to Berkeley finally culminated in us arriving in the summer of 2014, without any legit connections of folks we would start with, but as fortune would have it, **a handful of other households relocated to the East Bay** that same summer from churches I was connected to, churches who were also wanting to explore new frontiers in how we gather and who we include. Two couples were referred by that same Manhattan pastor who'd been speaking when I fled the room almost a decade before. And so through strange synchronicity, within a few months of landing in Berkeley, there was a team - nine adults, a handful of kids, and a desire to build a spiritual community that could be a safe home for all kinds of people, including our LGBTQ family and friends. Later that year the Supreme Court made same-sex marriage legal nationwide, and our fledgling little inclusive community, still meeting in my living room, celebrated fully, feeling a moment of resonance between what we were doing and what was happening in our nation. **Might we be here for such a time as this?**
 - B. Nearly a year later, our community was outgrowing the house and we determined it was time to try taking things to the next level. We launched **public services on Easter 2016. Several months later, the world turned upside down with Trump's election.** In shock, many of us gathered the night after for a time of lament, not just for what had taken place the night before, but because we were already starting to awaken to what it meant. We felt the toxic tangle with white evangelicalism that had just played a major role in elevating Trump, knowing that many of us had emerged from church systems that supported him as well as the idols of patriarchy, white supremacy, heteronormativity, Christian nationalism, capitalism and more that he was so emblematic of. We started that night a process of coming to

understand that to live into this dream of cultivating inclusive community also meant confronting our own baggage, smashing the idols, that we might be a part of letting the sacred beauty that has been constrained by them flow freely? **In the dawning era of Trump, might we be here for such a time as this?**

C. I don't have time to chronicle all the other synchronous moments that have taken place through the years, but I do want to end with what was stirring in me this summer, as I stepped away from the work of Haven and had time to pause, reflect and discern where I find purpose here today. Once again, I couldn't help but notice my own responses to the headlines in the news. There were a number of events that stirred my thoughts and heart this summer from the horrific school shooting in Uvalde, Texas to the January 6th hearings, to the slew of conservative rulings by the Supreme Court setting back gun control and climate legislation. **But perhaps no other moment felt so momentous as the announcement that the federal right to legal abortion was being repealed, with the overturning by the Supreme Court of Roe vs. Wade.**

1. Now before I go further, I need to say that what I want to share here, is very personal. I am not making a pronouncement about Haven's ethic on any issue; I am simply sharing a bit of my own personal response this summer; and the process I am in in understanding what it means, at least for me.
2. When the news first came out about the overturning of Roe v. Wade I found myself particularly at a loss for how to engage with the Divine. I felt acutely that I had an **underdeveloped theology around abortion and choice**. In a world where the right to abortion seemed secure, it wasn't something I felt the need to explore. I knew that the issue was more complex than many anti-abortion Christians were willing to admit, I knew that I disagreed with weaponizing a Christian ethic and imposing it on others, but as a person of faith, I also couldn't look at the issue as purely medical without any ethical or spiritual components to it.
3. And then I had a moment of **connecting with my Divine mother**. As I was wrestling and praying, I felt the Mother's presence ring in my heart with words that felt so true. "Women's bodies are sacred. Women's choices are sacred."
4. And in that moment, I felt again a sacred sense of purpose. In this conversation, those who are against abortion often speak of the sacredness of life. I don't dispute the truth that life is sacred, including life that has yet to be born. But that is not the only space of sacredness in this conversation.
5. It was in seminary, in a class on ministry in the area of illness and disability that I was first introduced to the term "**the ministry of presence**", but the language describes what I have experienced through the years as some of the most beautiful sacred moments in my life. The ministry of presence recognizes that sometimes, particularly in life circumstances that are unexpected and challenging, what we need more than words, more than theology, more than Bible verses or prescriptive spiritual practices, is simply the **presence of a caring human being who is willing to sit in the uncomfortable, in the pain**, in the questions in the uncertainty with us; to be truly present with us in uncertainty, pain, and the discernment about what comes next. And in those places of courageous presence with one another, I believe the presence of the Divine is also embodied and enacted.
6. Through the years, I've had the privilege and the awesome responsibility of **sitting in those places of presence with folks**, and those moments are some of the most holy I've ever experienced. Moments when the fresh heart-breaking diagnosis is being absorbed. Moments after the intimate relationship has been forever altered. Moments

where the dream seems to have dissolved. I've had the privilege of loving folks and holding space with others, inviting the Divine to show up in the mess with connection, with comfort, and with sometimes surprising insight that makes new paths forward we wouldn't have imagined before.

7. Friends, as a woman who has grown three human beings in her body, I am filled with immense gratitude for the gift of motherhood I've received, and the **miracle I felt come to pass through my body each time one of my children was nurtured and birthed.** But I also am aware of how fortunate I am that all of my pregnancies have been uncomplicated, physically and emotionally. I know that my story, like the story of so many people with uteruses, could easily be very different.
 8. **The truth of our fragile humanity means that things happen we don't plan for or intend.** Our plans fail. Violence has its way with us. Life doesn't develop in health. And if there is a loving force at the center of the universe, a Divine heart that cares about our flourishing, then I have to believe that when we are faced with the impossible choices we never planned for, **that heart is with us and longs for us to feel freedom to choose wisely and well.**
 9. I do not believe that heart is constraining our choices but is inviting us to be present to all the complexity of what is before us, and in faith discern our best way forward. I believe that that is the most kind of sacred space there is - **that safe place where the creature can connect with their loving Creator and feel that caring heart's support as they co-create a future, however that looks.** I feel compelled to vocally protect that space, and all who need it. I feel compelled to do so with a voice of faith stemming from the Christian tradition. As a spiritual leader with a uterus herself, who is called to the ministry of presence, I feel compelled to defend the sacredness of choice, and to do all that I can to support those doing the deep heart work of discernment, including discerning whether or not to end a pregnancy. I feel compelled to protect the decisions that those moments of discernment yield, and when called upon to provide the ministry of presence, as well as any practical support required to see those sacred decisions accomplished as safely as possible. **Might I be here in this post Roe moment for such a time as this?**
- D. **And might communities like Haven that cultivate this kind of space I'm naming now need to exist for such a time as this?** Communities that can offer an alternative view of what it means to live into the life-giving connection with the Divine, especially when the world seems to be falling apart? Friends, I'm back here, I've returned to this work both scared and excited for what's to come, because of this renewed sense of purpose. Because those questions draw me forward as much as they ever have. Might the work of creating places that are committed to creating safety, honoring diversity, centered in the Jesus tradition be more needed today and in whatever is coming next, more than ever before? Might the work not be accomplished but actually just beginning? Might our little community persist because we and others like us are meant for such a time as this?
- E. As we end, I want to invite you to ponder **where that question might resonate for you.** Where do you sense a pull to ponder if your own gifts and talents, your own circumstances, your own heart stirrings, your own winding journey, might also be an invitation into greater purpose? Maybe it's the purpose of Haven. Maybe it's something else. Maybe it's both. Look at your life- your work, your family, your community engagement. And I invite you to allow God to highlight for you where their presence might encourage you to ponder a greater purpose. What's the life giving, restorative work you can participate in? Might you be here for such a time as this? May we all discover and return to places of purpose and may we see the signs of restoration and healing in the world around us as we do. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How does the Esther story speak to you?
2. Have you had times of feeling connected to bigger purposes in your life? What did that look like? How did it impact your choices?
3. Where might you sense the Divine inviting you now to connect with a bigger purpose? What might it look like to live into that more?