

**Sermon: “Where is God in this?”**

Hi, I am delighted to take part in this sermon series as we work our way through the story of Esther—the Bible story that is famous for not mentioning God. I am here because Pastor Leigh went back to North Carolina to honor her mother with a surprise birthday party, and she **asked me to consider whether I might be called to such a time as this** to preach a sermon on Esther. **I have a confession to make: my first thought was “I’m too busy!”** I started running through my mental checklist of all the things I had to get done at work and home, and also to prepare for a trip—I’m leaving for Chicago early tomorrow morning, to present a paper that I had not even written yet when she asked.

And as these thoughts were bouncing through my mind I heard another thought: it was a question: “So, Bruce, what makes all those other things more important than wrestling with the scripture and preaching a message? Isn’t that what you’re called for?”

How ironic! I caught myself doing exactly the same thing Esther did—her cousin Mordecai asked her to do something (carry a message to the king), and she immediately made excuses about why she could not do it. Only her excuses were much better than mine. There’s no comparison really. The stakes could not be higher in her case—life and death. Not just for her, but for thousands—the whole population of the Jews. But she declined Mordecai’s command and sent word back to him, saying:

“All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, ...” [4:11]

But I’m getting ahead of myself, jumping into the middle of the story. Let’s back up and see what led up to this moment...

In the first three chapters, we have seen how Esther was chosen above all the other young women of the kingdom to become the new Queen, after the previous Queen Vashti refuses to submit to the commands of the king. Then we see Mordecai refuse to submit to the commands of Haman, archenemy of the Jewish people, to bow before him and pay homage. This of course would have been sacrilege for Mordecai if he had done it. It would go against everything he believed about his identity as one of God’s chosen people as a faithful Jew. Then we see how Haman takes power into his own hands and convinces the king to order the annihilation of the Jews, and the king gives Haman the power to command it to be done.

This brings us up to the events of chapter 4 which Diana just read for us.

When Mordecai learns what the enemy Haman has done he tears his clothes, puts on sackcloth and ashes and parades about in the middle of the city, wailing and crying.

Esther's young women and eunuchs came and told her about her cousin Mordecai's strange behavior. I wonder how Esther reacted to all this commotion. It seems all hell is breaking loose! Why is cousin Mordecai wailing at the palace gate? And why has he dressed himself in sackcloth and covered himself with ashes, and is parading around like a fool? What's going on?

She is so remote, tucked away and protected, like a precious jewel hidden away in the ornamented rooms of the palace, that perhaps she is oblivious to the outside world. Maybe she's just too wrapped up in palace life to know what's really going on outside the gates that enclose her. We don't know. Apparently, she doesn't know that the command has gone out to every province throughout the whole known world, to announce devastation and destruction of the Jews.

It seems like Esther does not have a clue as to what's going on.

What we do know is that her servants—the young women and the eunuchs who attend to her every need—they see what's going on, and they tell her.

“Why, this is outrageous!” she says. “My cousin should not be making a spectacle of himself. Tell him to pull himself together, put on clean clothes, look sharp, and play the role I need him to! I am a queen after all, and I can't have this embarrassment of my cousin Mordecai playing the fool. This is most undignified. He has never acted like this before. Quick, take these royal garments and tell him to straighten up and fly right!”

Was this an act of courage on Esther's part? Like those Londoners in WWII who adopted the motto: “Keep calm and carry on.” I don't think so. This does not look like an act of courage. Esther is not telling Mordecai to calm down as an act of civil responsibility, but rather I think she's doing it because she does not yet understand how dire the situation has become.

Cousin Mordecai refuses to do as she asks. He rejects Esther's plea, and he sends her servants packing back to her carrying the royal garments with them.

So she ups the ante. This time she sends **Hathach**, one of the *king's* eunuchs. Maybe Mordecai can ignore Esther's young women and eunuchs, but surely, he will not ignore the king's own butler! **No one ignores the king's butler and gets away with it.** Just watch *Downton Abbey*, and you will see—Mr. Carson is a force of nature, not a man to be trifled with, and no one takes his entreaties lightly.

So Esther commands Hathach to go have a talk with Mordecai and get to the bottom of this.

Hathach confronts Mordecai in the open, in the daylight, in the public square. And Mordecai spells it out for him. Mordecai gives him the inside information and tells the exact sum of money that Haman has paid as a bribe to acquire this power from the King. He backs up his case by giving the butler a copy of the king's written decree. Then he sends Hathach back to Esther, to *command* her to go to the king and plead face-to-face with the king for the deliverance of the Jews—"your own people," Mordecai says. "These are your own people. How can you possibly refuse to take action now that their lives are at stake?!"

Now Esther is confronted with the terrible truth. How does she take this news? She can no longer hide behind her innocence or the cloak of her secret identity. Remember, the whole time she's been in the king's court she has never identified herself as a Jew! Now that she knows what's really going on, and sees the death decree in writing, does she want to expose her identity as a Jew? Does she jump into action? Does she try to do something about it? **No.**

No. instead she makes an excuse. It's a good excuse, to be sure, but no matter how good an explanation it is, it's still an excuse to refuse Mordecai's command, which the king's butler has delivered to her, with proof in writing. Poor Hathach must feel like a shuttlecock, because Esther commands him to go right back to Mordecai and tell him, *"This is crazy! Doesn't he know that if anyone, woman or man, goes to the king without being invited, they will be put to death? Why? Because it's the law, that's why.*

It seems to me there's a **whole lot of commanding** going on here in this story. Right from the get-go.

Let's go back to the beginning—

The story begins with a huge party and the king commands the queen to show off. She refuses his command. The king commands for new queen be chosen. The issues and edict that wives should obey the commands of their husbands. The commands escalate and eventually Haman commands that all the Jews be annihilated. Mordecai and Esther also issue commands.

I went though and counted, how many times someone in this story issues a command. *Eighteen times!* Eighteen times. This is recurring theme, the back story of the story, like the bass line of the symphony that goes on and on, from beginning to end. The back story is this—what happens when everyone tries to take matters into their own hands and command everyone else to do whatever strikes them as their desire of moment? This path leads to disaster, as the story shows.

Next comes the most famous line in the whole book of Esther. It's a verse I teach my students when we discuss the whole idea of *calling*: what it means to be *called*. If there is one sentence in this entire story that you want to remember, this might be it:

“Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. <sup>14</sup>For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

***“For such a time as this...”***

**Then everything changes, in a moment.** The whole story turns on this hinge right here, right now. Something happens here that is different from everything else in the story. It makes all the difference for Esther, for the Jews of Susa, and all Jews of all time up to the present day, and for all of us, too. It's a life-changing, historic moment. **What is this amazing thing that Esther does?**

**She submits.** She doesn't take matters into her own hands. She doesn't miraculously save the day by taking charge of events. She doesn't rush into the king's court to confront him. She does something that seems relatively passive, actually, although it is also brave.

Esther submits and calls for prayer and fasting. This is the most powerful thing anyone in the whole story does. It's the most powerful thing anyone *can* do! She invokes the power of the Creator and Savior of the world, although His name is never mentioned. We all know who the God of the Jews is—the Lord, Yahweh, whose name need not be spoken.

Somehow, some way or another, it dawns on her that this is her time to pray. For some reason, something happens in her that changes her. She cannot say no to this. Esther submits to Mordecai's appeal. She says “Go...

“Go back to Mordecai. Gather all the Jews all around and fast for me. I and my young woman will also fast, as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, **and if I perish, I perish.**” [v. 16]

Then Mordecai submits to Esther's request. He goes and does as she tells him. This is the turning point in the story. It comes not by forcing one's will upon the other, not by telling the other what to do—they tried that already. **No, this turning point in history swings on the hinge of submission—Mordecai and Esther each submit to the other.**

I wonder, what's going on in Esther's mind? Why this sudden change of heart? What changed? What is she thinking? What convinced her to take a stand?

At first, we wondered if she even understood what's going on. She seems unaware of why her cousin is acting so strangely until the king's butler investigates.

Then we wonder if she even understands what it means to be a Jew? Does she even know who her people are? Or has Mordecai done such a good job of grooming her and preparing her for life in the palace that she really doesn't understand the depth of the problem? She has not been practicing as a Jew in the king's court, and she has been cut off from her people for a long time. Her identity has been kept secret, as Mordecai desired.

So I wonder, where she suddenly find the courage to step into the middle of this horrible, deadly mess and confront the king face-to-face?

When it seems like all hell is breaking loose, how does she make sense of this?

**I'll tell you: it only makes sense in the context of story. The whole story. The phrase "for such a time and place as this" implies that this is *part of a story*.**

The meaning of this story is not clear yet. It is certainly not clear to Esther. Not yet. But Mordecai at least seems to have a sense of what this story is all about. Where else does he get the faith to act as he does? To bravely defy Haman? Mordecai refuses to back down from Haman's bullying and from the decree of death and destruction.

Why? What does he know that the rest of us don't know? Mordecai tells Esther that even if she doesn't help, the Jews will still be saved: "Relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish." [v. 14]

Mordecai doesn't know the details, but he certainly knows the direction of events. He seems to know how the story ends. How else could he act so bravely and speak so boldly?

Here's what I think Mordecai knows that Haman and Esther and the king and the rest of the characters in this story don't know—

He knows the unstoppable power and direction of history—God's power and plan to redeem. He can't see where God is in all this mess, but he knows the power of God.

Two weeks ago, on an early morning hike at Mt Rainier, I stood and stared at Comet Falls—a 500-foot high silver beam of dazzling energy, flinging itself off the precipice high up on the mountain and soaring through the air in glory. What force swung this arc? The invisible power of gravity.

God's power is often invisible also, but we know its direction and we know where the story is headed. It is headed for redemption and healing and justice. It is headed for the resurrection.

Mordecai knows this God and knows this is the direction God has promised.

This is the knowledge that gives us the courage to pray, even when we ask, “Where is God in this?”

**Where is God in this?**

**Good question.**

**Sometimes it seems like the only way to find out is to take part in the story: live the questions and see what happens.**

**This means submitting, praying, and stepping into the story in a way that gives God a chance to show up and do what God does. It means taking a chance on God even when we don’t see how He is going to work this out. It means being present each time, every time, to be available to be used by God.**

*(Practicing the Sacrament of the Present Moment.)*

God only knows how this time fits into the bigger story. One thing we can be sure of— if we ask whether we are called to such a time as this, the answer is always yes!

Friends, we know how the story ends. It ends in the resurrection, and the creation of the new heaven and new earth. All things becoming new. It’s what Jesus said when his time came:

“The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” [John 12:23-25]

The time is always right for us to remember we have a place in the bigger story. Are you called to live out your faith in such a time as this? The answer to that question is always yes.