

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: God - At Work in the Shadows**

#### **Esther, a Very Good Story**

(Overview of the book of Esther)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: The power of story...**

Years ago, I was approached after delivering a message by a Sunday morning guest. This man was concerned about something I had said in the message and he expressed his concern to me. That's not terribly unusual and it's not a problem. I appreciate alert, engaged listeners.

He believed that I had made an error when I referred to a narrative in the Bible as a "story."

He told me that when I said, "story" many people heard me saying, "tall tale" or "fairy tale" or "legend."

Some people might think that, but I assured him that when I refer to any narrative in the Bible, I assume historicity<sup>1</sup>, whether it is a description of a military battle, the crossing of the Red Sea, Noah's flood, or Jesus' miracles.

So today, please know that my use of the word "story" doesn't imply make-believe. The stories of the Bible are historically true.

I've wondered, though, if the gentleman who called me on the carpet for using the word "story" had another concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless there is a clue in the text that the narrative should be taken allegorically, symbolically, or unhistorically - as in Nathan's parable given to King David in 2 Samuel 12 or any of Jesus' parables.

I wonder if he was expressing his own opinion that story / narrative is "fluff" compared to the meatier parts of the Bible, like Ephesians and Romans.

I understand that opinion. There was a time when I would have shared it. But no more.

Now I would never take away from the importance of the didactic parts of the Bible, like Paul's and Peter's and John's letter. But the letters are built on the foundation of the history recorded in the Gospels and Acts.

Both the Old and New Testaments give a lot of space to story.

- The first five, foundational books of the Bible are filled with stories.
- And so are Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all narrative.
- We don't understand the prophets unless we understand the historical background against which they are written.

God does His work through story. History is "His story." And, just as surely as He worked through the stories of the Bible, so, today, He is working through the stories of your life to accomplish His purposes.

It is with a firm confidence in the power of STORY that I want us to look at one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible. Beginning this morning, we are going to explore together the Old Testament book of Esther. And Esther is a very good story.<sup>2</sup>

This morning, I'm going to tell the story of Esther. You may think we don't have time. Trust me, we'll get 'er done.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Esther's Very Good Story**

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<sup>2</sup> Over the next four Sundays, we are going to look more deeply into the lives of the four main characters of Esther. Ahasuerus - a man of power; Haman - an enemy; Mordecai - called to integrity; Esther - called to courage.

<sup>3</sup> Esther is included in the "Writings" section of the Old Testament.

Like all good stories, Esther takes place in a specific setting, with a clear historical reference.

Fairy tales begin, “Once upon a time...” Esther begins, **[1:1] Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces...**<sup>4</sup>

### Set-Up

*From Queen Vashti...*

#### Party time! (1:6-7)

And right off the bat we are taken to a party. This was a party thrown by a king and a party for a king.

We don’t know why King Ahasuerus threw this party for his nobles. We know from history that this king of the expansive Medo-Persian Empire did love a good party.

And this was a long, drawn-out party. It lasted for one hundred and eighty days - six months of partying.

The Bible says that the point of this party was so that the king could display the splendor of his great majesty, which also says that he displayed his character for six months. The party was all about showing off. Ahasuerus was rich and powerful - and he arrogantly flaunted it.

After his party, Ahasuerus wasn’t finished. He followed it up with a second seven days long banquet, also in the royal city of Susa.

For your enjoyment, here is a description of the banquet and of the palace.

**[6] There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry,**

**marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. [7] Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king’s bounty.**<sup>5</sup>

At the same time that this seven-day feast was taking place, Ahasuerus’ wife, Queen Vashti, was holding a banquet for all the women in the palace, also lasting seven days (1:9).

Then, on the last day of the banquet, after the king had been drinking for seven days and following a six-month long party (!), he ordered his queen to make an appearance.

#### A command performance disobeyed (1:12)

He wanted her **[1:11] to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.**

Queen Vashti clearly understood the king’s command, but she refused to make a command performance.

It is likely that the king was making an indecent proposal and was asking the queen to do something lewd. So we understand why she refused. But her refusal prompted a royal tantrum.

#### A royal tantrum (1:12b-22)

**[12b]...Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.**

And the king punished Vashti - with a punishment that seems only to have allowed her to do what she didn’t want to do anyway.

She was no longer allowed to come into the presence of the king. But, the punishment did have “teeth.” Vashti also lost her position, which meant that the king needed to find a new queen.

*...to Queen Esther (2:1-18)*

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew construction validates that this is historical narrative. The book starts with a waw-consecutive - the way the Hebrew Bible indicates sequential history.

<sup>5</sup> The author shows intimate knowledge of Persian customs and of the fifth century BC historical situation.

As the search for a new queen began, we learn of a certain young woman, a Jew, who lived in Susa. Her name was Esther.

Esther was an orphan who had grown up to be very beautiful. She was being raised and cared for by her relative, Mordecai.<sup>6</sup>

King Ahasuerus' servants searched the empire for beautiful young women. They saw Esther and immediately took her to the palace. They placed her in training to be further beautified and groomed her for possible queen-hood.

The beautification process lasted a full year and some of that process, involving a special diet and cosmetics, is detailed in our book. (chapter 2)

Esther fulfilled her year of preparation, was brought to the king in her turn, and then was returned to await the king's choice of a queen. (2:9-13)

And out of all the women of his realm, the king set his affections on Esther. He loved her and made her, Esther the Jew, his new queen.

**Sidebar:** Esther hides her Jewishness (2:10)

In the middle of this story of Esther's ascension to the throne, the author slips in a detail that is most important.

***[2:10] Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known...[20]...for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care.***

The fact that Esther didn't advertise her Jewishness does not mean that Esther was a bad person. It does tell us that Esther was obedient to Mordecai.

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<sup>6</sup> 2:7 tells us that Mordecai was raising Esther (Hadassah) as his own daughter, even though she was his uncle's daughter - meaning that Mordecai and Esther were of the same generation, although they may have been separated by many years.

It might also tell us something about Mordecai that he wanted Esther to keep her Jewishness a secret - but we don't know exactly what it is that it tells us.<sup>7</sup>

**Sidebar #2:** Mordecai saves the king (2:21-23)

Then, at about this some time, a very important incident occurred that involved Mordecai. This Jewish step-father to the new queen saved the king's life.

Mordecai had overheard a conversation between two of the king's officials. He heard them plotting to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther to warn the king. She did so, the assassination attempt was foiled, and a record of Mordecai's deed was written down in the official chronicles of the Medes and the Persians. (2:11-23)

Don't forget Mordecai's act of saving the king's life.

So, that's the set-up for the story. Now comes the critical element in any story worth telling: the conflict. Enter Haman, a rapidly advancing official in King Ahasuerus' court. (3:1)

**Conflict**

*Haman plans to destroy the Jews*

*Haman gets no respect*

Everyone in Susa knew Haman, knew that he was the king's favorite, knew that he was on a fast track to power.

So, when Haman walked by, people bowed down. They were showing respect to one of the king's favorites. It was smart to bow. So everybody in Susa bowed down to Haman - except Mordecai, the Jew. (3:2)

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<sup>7</sup> That he was ashamed of being a Jew? Not likely. That he wanted to protect Esther from possible harm? Probably. That he, a part of a people who had been singled out for persecution many times, was understandably cautious about giving information? Very likely. I think Mordecai's instruction to Esther was wisdom, not cowardice.

When he was asked why he didn't bow, Mordecai explained that he was a Jew. Everybody seemed to know that Jews don't bow down to people.

But this reasoning didn't pass muster with Haman. Haman was furious that this Jew would not pay him the respect he so richly deserved and bow down.

So, Haman did what any self-respecting official would do in his shoes. He decided to do what he could to put all the Jews in the Persian Empire to death. (3:6)

### Haman plans genocide

Haman sought and got an audience with the king. He went before the king to explain that there was this people who lived in the kingdom who were different from all the other peoples.

Of course Haman meant the Jews, but he didn't say "Jews" here and it is unclear if the king knew that Haman was talking about Jews.

He promised the king money - lots of money (ten thousand talents of silver!) - if the king would just allow him to kill this people and confiscate all their property.

Hearing about this problem - that there are people in his kingdom who are "different" - and the proposal - which involved putting to death thousands of otherwise innocent people, but which also involved putting a fortune into the king's treasuries - the king agreed with Haman that these people should certainly die. (3:10-14)

So the king made the decree and he gave Haman a full year to prepare for this genocide. King Ahasuerus and Haman then sat down to toast their horrible plan, but the Bible tells us, **[15] the city of Susa was in confusion.**

Most especially, the Jews in Susa were undone. Mordecai the Jew, Queen Esther's step-father, went to the gate of the king's palace,

dressed himself in sackcloth and threw ashes over himself, weeping and mourning over his people's plight.<sup>8</sup>

### *Mordecai persuades Esther to work to save her people*

When Queen Esther learned of the king's decree and of Haman's plot, she, too, was distraught. But it is possible that she was less distraught than Mordecai, perhaps believing that she would escape death because, after all, she was the queen AND no one knew that she was a Jew. (4:4-7)

Mordecai forced the issue. He begged her to go to the king on behalf of her people. (4:8)

Queen Esther was sympathetic, but unwilling. She reminded Mordecai that if she were to go, unbidden, to the king's throne room, the king might just put her to death. She needed to have an engraved invitation to know that she was welcomed. And she had not been summoned to the king for thirty days.

So her answer to Mordecai was a sad, but realistic, refusal, "You can see that I just can't go to the king. It would be dangerous." (4:9-12)

That's when Mordecai "explained" things to his step-daughter, the queen.

***[13] Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. [14] "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"***

### *Esther's response*

And THAT woke Esther up to what was really at stake. Esther now "owns" that her improbable placement as queen just might be part of a bigger story. Life and racial survival were at stake. She will have to seek a meeting with the king.

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<sup>8</sup> It may be that he was there with other Jews as well.

Realizing the danger involved in going to the king without an invitation, she told Mordecai to get all the Jews in Susa to fast. She and her attendants will fast. And her message to Mordecai ends with, **[4:15] “if I perish, I perish.”**

Let’s follow the main characters as preparations are made for this royal meeting between Esther and the king. First, Esther. (5:1-8)

### **In Advance of a Showdown**

#### *Involving Esther*

Esther approached the king on the third day of her fast, and there is high drama here. The king has the power of life and death in his hand. If he doesn’t extend the golden scepter to Esther when she enters the room, she’s toast. But...

He does extend the scepter to her and welcomes her into his presence. It turns out that he is glad to see her and asks her what she wants. He promised to give her up to half the kingdom. Whatever she wishes is his pleasure to give her.

So, Esther makes her request. She would like the honor of having him and Haman attend a banquet she has prepared for them later in the day.

From the first chapter, we already know that King Ahasuerus loves banquets. So he is more than happy to attend her party. Then, later in the day, at the banquet, with Haman and the king fat and happy, after eating, Esther speaks.

**[7] So Esther replied, “My petition and my request is: [8] if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and do what I request, may the king and Haman come to the banquet which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king says.”**

She’s dragging this thing out. She didn’t make her request at once. And the king, eager for another party, no doubt more lavish than this one, dismissed Esther to party another day.

That’s Esther. Now, let’s follow Haman as he walks home from the banquet at the palace. Who does he pass on the way, but Mordecai, that Jew who refused to bow down.

#### *Involving Haman*

This time, Mordecai was seated. So this time Haman was angry because this time Mordecai did not stand up when he passed. (5:9)

Haman made it all the way home and bragged to his wife, Zeresh, about the honor he had received on this day. He got to go to a private party with the king and queen!

But, he confided to his wife that even this stellar day was ruined because he was so disrespected by that Jew, Mordecai.

That’s when Zeresh gave counsel to her husband, Haman.

**[14] Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, “Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it; then go joyfully with the king to the banquet.” And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.**

Haman went to bed that night a happy man. Mordecai will die before all the other Jews will die, and that, by means of the gallows he himself will build for the purpose.

Next, we turn to see the king on the night before Esther’s big banquet. On this night, the king was tossing and turning because he couldn’t sleep. (6:1-3)

#### *Involving the King*

Whenever the king was unable to sleep, he would ask for a scribe to read to him from the officials records of Persia, sort of a royal

lullaby. (much as some people listen to sermon podcasts from Northwest...)<sup>9</sup>

All night long the king listened to the scribe read from the records of his kingdom. Near the end of this sleepless night, as dawn was near breaking, the king heard about the exploits of a man named Mordecai, who had thwarted an assassination plot against him not too long ago.

The king had never been told about this heroic deed, and now he wanted to reward this patriotic citizen in some way.

At just that moment - proving that timing is everything - who should walk in to the king's chambers but Haman. Haman has come to see the king about the matter of hanging Mordecai on the gallows he has constructed during the night. (6:4)

Before Haman could pose his request, the king has a question of his own for Haman.

#### *Involving Mordecai*

##### Haman's recommendation (6:6-9)

**[6] So Haman came in and the king said to him, "What is to be done for the man whom the king desires to honor?"**

Haman, of course, assumed that the king was speaking about him, and suggested a course that the king could follow to reward the man whom the king desired to honor.

**[7] Then Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king desires to honor, [8] let them bring a royal robe which the king has worn, and the horse on which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown has been placed; [9] and let the robe and**

**the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes and let them array the man whom the king desires to honor and lead him on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, 'Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor.'**"

The king told Haman, "Great idea, Haman!"

##### Haman's plans backfire (6:10-11)

**[10]... "Take quickly the robes and the horse as you have said, and do so for Mordecai the Jew, who is sitting at the king's gate; do not fall short in anything of all that you have said."**

This is the beginning of the exaltation of Mordecai, but it is also, clearly, the beginning of the end of Haman.

If you can put yourself in Haman's shoes, you'll admit that this is your worst nightmare. You will have to honor the man you have been hoping to execute. But you have no choice in the matter. This is the king's order.

**[11] So Haman took the robe and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city square, and proclaimed before him, "Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor."**

##### The beginning of the end (6:13)

When he returned home after the morning's parade, he told his wife and friends everything that had happened. His wife's response was insightful, if lacking something of the compassion a husband might enjoy -

**[13]... Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him."**

While Haman was getting this honest - if unsympathetic - advice from his wife, the king sent a message that it was time for him to come to Esther's banquet. (6:14--7:1)

<sup>9</sup> The references to the historical records of the Persians in Esther gives credence to the reliability of the story. Any reader could search these records to confirm what the writer is saying.

## A Banquet to Remember

### *Esther's entreaty*

Haman arrived, depressed from the morning parade, and found the banquet set. Everything was fit for a king with lavish settings, fancy food, and the finest touches all in place. The servants were serving.

At this banquet, reclining on couches, were the king and his queen and Haman. The king turned to Esther and asked her, again, what was her request. (7:2)

This time Esther hid nothing. She revealed that she was a Jew, one of those who have been doomed to destruction and she begged the king for protection. (7:3-4)

The king, evidently not understanding until this very minute the injustice of the decree he had signed to kill all the Jews, asked her who was responsible for this mess.

I picture Esther turning from the king to Haman, pointing her finger at him, and shouting, [7:6]...***“A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!”***

The king was immediately overcome with anger. He got up from the couch and walked away to compose himself. Haman was terrified.

### *Haman's demise*

Haman ran to the couch on which Queen Esther was lying to plead for mercy. You get the mental image of what was happening.

And at that very moment (again, timing is everything), the king walked back in and saw Haman falling all over his queen while she was lying on her couch.

Misunderstanding what was going on, he gave the command to take Haman away and hang him on the conveniently just-built gallows Haman had prepared for Mordecai. Talk about poetic justice! (7:6b-10)

So, Haman has received the punishment he so richly deserved. But, all's not well yet. The king's command was still in place. The Jews were still in mortal danger and will be destroyed.

Now Esther speaks to the king again. She begged the king for protection against Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews, and asked him to make a second decree that would overrule the first. (8:3-6)

## Deliverance for the Jews!

### *The king's RE-decree*

By this time, Mordecai has been brought to the dining hall. The king thought Esther's idea was a great one and he allowed Esther and Mordecai to write a letter in the name of the king, sealed with the king's seal. (8:7-8)

The letter, which was sent all throughout the Empire, permitted the Jews throughout the empire to defend themselves against any enemies on the previously decreed day of destruction. (8:9-14)

### *Escape from genocide*

The final chapters of Esther show us the Jews courageously fighting for survival against those who would destroy them, all the while being careful to not lay their hands on the plunder.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Three times in Esther 9 (vv. 10, 15, 19), there is this comment about not laying hands on the plunder. That is especially important because Haman's plans for

The Jews are victorious, Haman's family is the only family that was wiped out (9:6; what he had wanted to do to the entire Jewish race), and there was great rejoicing in both the city of Susa and throughout the empire for the deliverance of the Jews. (8:6-17)

#### *Honor and reward for Esther and Mordecai*

The book wraps up with Esther remaining as Queen and receiving the wealth of the house of Haman (8:1) and Mordecai exalted to second in command over the whole Medo-Persian empire. (8:1-2; 15-17; 10:3)

It was the Jews' great victory over those who would have exterminated them that led to the establishment of one of the Jews' annual celebrations, Purim, a festival that is still celebrated by the Jews to this day on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month, Adar (This year Purim was observed from sunset of March 23-sunset March 24).

And that's the story of Esther.

It's a wonderful story of deliverance and it is an important historical explanation of the preservation of the Jewish people at a time when they faced annihilation.

But the story of Esther is also an odd story. It is a story that has been much maligned by people of faith and of non-faith. There are difficulties with this book.

### **Esther Has "Issues"**

#### **Historical Issues**

##### *Esther not found with the Dead Sea Scrolls*

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enriching King Ahasuerus was to have been by means of plundering the slaughtered Jews.

For one thing, when the famous Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in desert caves in 1948, fragments from every book in the Old Testament were found - except for Esther.

That "argument from absence" led some to believe that in antiquity (the Dead Sea Scrolls date from around the turn of the first century, AD) Esther was not considered inspired by God.

And yet, besides this Dead Sea Scrolls omission, there has never been a hint of objection by the Jews to Esther's inclusion in the Old Testament collection of inspired writings.

#### *Questions about Esther's historical accuracy*

Then, beginning about 150 years or so ago, concerns were raised about Esther's historical accuracy.

Many historians in the 1800's dismissed the book as nonsense. They called it "historical fiction" viewing it as we would view a novel.<sup>11</sup>

However, as so commonly happens, archaeology has come to Esther's rescue and has erased any doubts about its reliability.

Today, most scholars - even those who don't hold to the inspiration of the Bible - will admit to the essentially factual nature of Esther's story.

But there is another reason to wonder about Esther, and it is THE reason many people of faith have questioned it even being included in the Bible.

#### **A Theological Issue**

There is no mention of God. Not one in the whole book. Every other book in the Bible is loud about God. But not Esther. And this fact

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<sup>11</sup> Among the quotes I have read - "*The historical problems with Esther are so massive as to persuade anyone who is not already obligated by religious dogma to believe in the historicity of the biblical narrative to doubt the veracity of the narrative.*" (Jon D. Levenson); "*It is doubtful whether even a historical kernel underlies its narrative.*" (Lewis Baytes Paton)



has prompted some to wonder if we should take Esther as seriously as we do Genesis or Psalms or Romans.

But, orthodox Jews have always taken Esther seriously and so have Christians always recognized Esther as an important part of God's inspired Word.

And it is right to see this book as a part of the Bible, because here's the thing about Esther. While God isn't overtly mentioned, He is all over it. He's in the shadows, but His fingerprints are evident everywhere.

To read Esther's story and to not see God's hand is to read it wrong. The writer assures us without saying it out loud, that the deliverance of the Jews was orchestrated by God's unseen hand.<sup>12</sup>

### **Esther, 2016...**

God works through story.

Sometimes He does what He does for all to see. We read about Exodus crossings of the Red Sea and fire from heaven on Mount Carmel and thousands fed by a boy's small lunch multiplied by Jesus. These are events seen by everybody.

But sometimes God works behind the scenes. You and I know that barnyard animals were the only eyewitnesses to Jesus' birth. We also know that nobody witnessed the resurrection.

But God left plenty of fingerprints behind to tie the story of that birth and that empty tomb to Him.

It has been tempting to dismiss the involvement of God in the story of Esther because He's not mentioned and because there are no overt miracles.

But through the ages, God's people have seen in Esther's story that He works through the courage of redeemed hearts and through the timing of improbable events.

This is what Philip Yancey describes as a "divine shyness."

It is what happens when He leaves behind fingerprints, but no photograph.

But He is always at work, even if He's not on center stage. It is your assignment and mine to take this *modus operandi* by faith.

Our memory verse for the month of July is Philippians 2:13, where Paul writes, **[13] for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.**

Your story, with all of its twists and turns, ups and downs, victories and defeats, is the story through which God intends to display His glory for your friends and family to see.

And this - story, history, His story, your story - is how He has consistently worked to accomplish all His will. He did it that way in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC with Esther. And He is doing it in the same way in 2016, through the epic drama that is your life.

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<sup>12</sup> "Although there is no explicit mention of the name of God, nothing could be clearer than the irresistible power of His omnipotent decree, watching over His covenant people, preserving them from the malignity of Satan in his vain attempt to work through Haman and accomplish the annihilation of the Jews. "Archer, Gleason S. A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Moody Press, 1974. P. 417.