

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

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

#### **Mordecai: The Doors Faithfulness Opens** Study #4

(selected passages from Esther)

#### Introduction: Faithfulness...

Stephen Pressfield is a very fine author whose personal story is every bit as compelling as the historical novels he writes. One of his books, though, is not an historical novel.

In 2002 he wrote The War of Art. In it he tells of the internal battles he fought early in his life before he learned to do the work necessary for his artistic creativity to thrive.

Pressfield blew through lots of different jobs<sup>1</sup> and he says that he wrecked a marriage and destroyed his family, eventually living out of the back of his car before he learned to fight the “war of art.”

Having just finished his retelling of the battle of Thermopylae (Gates of Fire, the story also told in the movie, “300”), the battle of the millions of Persians who fought (under Xerxes, the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther) against a few hundred Greeks - most notably Spartans - I’m glad he figured it out. It is a tale well told.

Stephen Pressfield would tell you that the key to his success as a writer has been - Wait for it. Ready? - is to write. Every day. Period.

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<sup>1</sup> He worked as an advertising copywriter, schoolteacher, a tractor-trailer driver, bartender, oilfield roustabout, attendant in a mental hospital, and as a fruit-picker in Washington state.

Another author knew the same thing. W. Somerset Maugham was once asked if he only wrote when he was struck by inspiration. Maugham replied, *“I write only when inspiration strikes. Fortunately, it strikes every morning at nine o’clock sharp.”*

Who knew?

The key that unlocks world-class creativity is work. Perspiration produces inspiration. Simple, plodding faithfulness to the task at hand is both remarkable and effective.

And what is true in the world of creative writing applies equally to the life of faith.

Faithfulness. It’s not flashy.

It’s not showy. It’s not sexy. But there is something about faithfulness / persistence / stick-to-it-ive-ness in doing the right thing, without compromise, that pleases God. It’s solid.

Faithfulness is reliability. A faithful woman tells you something’s going to be done, and you can check it off. It’s as good as done. A faithful man keeps his word. Period. No excuses and no alibis.

Faithfulness is what gave the prophet Daniel favor in the eyes of a whole series of foreign kings. It was faithfulness that kept Jeremiah proclaiming God’s Word to God’s people for decades, even though they consistently rejected what he had to say.

The Apostle Paul told younger brother, Timothy, to look for faithful men whom he could teach what Paul had taught him. (2 Timothy 2:2). And, when it’s all said and done, while your faithfulness in this life will NOT determine whether you receive eternal life (that is determined by your *faith* in Jesus), yet it will determine whether you will receive the reward of **[Revelation 2:10] the crown of life** from your Savior.

Throughout history God has been pleased to use the person who plods, faithfully. Faithfulness isn’t “shock and awe.” But faithfulness opens doors to great kingdom impact.

Today we return to the Old Testament book of Esther and meet a man, Mordecai, who was faithful. He wasn't showy. He didn't lead a flashy life. He lived mostly "under the radar."

But there came a day when this quiet, faithful man was thrust to the forefront of a drama in which his people's survival lay in the balance. And it was Mordecai's faithfulness that made the difference. Ironically, it was Mordecai's faithfulness that brought about the crisis in the first place. First, some background...

### *Background...*

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded Jerusalem in 605 BC and took the leaders of the people into captivity.<sup>2</sup> Nearly twenty years later (586 BC), he utterly destroyed Jerusalem.

The Jews living in Babylon were forced to remain there for the whole seventy years of captivity. They stayed there until the Babylonian Empire was defeated by the Medes and the Persians under King Cyrus in 539 BC.

When Cyrus took power, he invited any Jew who wanted to return to Palestine to do so. (Ezra 1:2) Well, lots of the Jews wanted to return. Some fifty thousand went back, in waves, first with Zerubbabel the governor and later with Ezra the scribe.

The decision facing every Jew living outside of Palestine, from the time of Cyrus' invitation to return, forward, was always, "*Should I return to live in Israel, or should I stay here in Babylon, in Persia?*"

### **Mordecai - Faithful in Persia**

#### **To Return or NOT to Return?**

##### *For those who returned to Palestine*

While it might seem to you to be a no-brainer, this was a tough choice for most of the Jews.

To leave Persia and go live in Palestine meant leaving a stable society for one that was not.

Palestine suffered from a collapsed economy. There was no military protection from the Jews' enemies (Samaritans, Ammonites). The grand society built by David and Solomon and other great Jewish kings was gone. Palestine was third world, through and through.

Plus, the returning Jews still weren't "free." Those living in Israel lived under the thumb of the Persians and life was tough there.

Still, those who returned accomplished a lot. They rebuilt the temple and re-established worship there. They would eventually (after Esther) rebuild the walls around Jerusalem under Nehemiah's leadership.

They did all of this despite great hardship and tough living conditions. For those involved in these rebuilding ventures, there was almost always a huge toll on personal wealth and on families.

But, the Jews who returned to Palestine after the Babylonian exile were motivated by a passion to see God's earthly kingdom returned to the way it was in the glory days.

They were willing to endure the hardship and the danger and the long travel and the work. These temple builders and wall builders were visionaries.

So, many Jews returned. But many more Jews did not return. Do you think you would have returned? Let's think about that...

#### *Would YOU have returned?*

When we meet Mordecai, it has been roughly one hundred and forty years since the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and deported the leaders of the Jews to Babylon. And what is one hundred and forty years, anyway?

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<sup>2</sup> The prophet Daniel was included in this first group of deportees.

One hundred and forty years ago...

- these United States were just emerging from the reconstruction era following the Civil War;
- Rutherford B. Hayes was set to be the new president;
- Alexander Graham Bell was granted a patent for something he called “the telephone”;
- Wild Bill Hickok was killed in a poker game in Deadwood, South Dakota.

And all of that looks a little bit like ancient history.

Looking at the time scale more personally, one hundred and forty years ago my great-great-grandfather was a young man living in Virginia. I have very little sense of connection with the events of a century and a half ago.

If I were offered the chance to return to Virginia, the home of my great-great grandfather, I don’t think I’d be all that eager to go.

My family has lived in Texas since my great-grandfather moved his family here in the late 1800’s. Texas is my home. I have lived here all my life. San Antonio is where I’m comfortable. I like it here.

Now, imagine that you are Mordecai, living in the city of Susa, the capital of Persia. Like every Jew, you are aware of the opportunity to return to Palestine if you want to.

*Mordecai did not return from Persia*

But, you have never been to Palestine. Your father had never gone to Palestine. Your grandfather had never been there, either. Your great-grandfather (whom you never knew) would have told your grandfather stories of Palestine he had heard from his father.

What you have heard, lately, is that life is hard there.

- There is a temple, but it’s nothing like Solomon’s Temple.
- The walls around the city are still flattened, a century and a half after the city’s destruction.<sup>3</sup>
- The Jews living in Jerusalem are surrounded by groups who don’t want them there.
- The economy is horrible. Houses have yet to be rebuilt. The whole thing is a mess.

Then, while considering the option of pulling up stakes and moving to Jerusalem, you (Mordecai) look around you and think to yourself, “*Susa is nice. Persia’s not bad at all.*”

Your family has never known anything but Susa. You make a decent living. You speak the language and you know the culture.

You can worship as you please and carry out all of your Jewish customs. You fear no enemies. The economy is strong and creature comforts are plentiful.

So, you decide to stay in Susa. Mordecai turned down the invitation to return to Jerusalem.

And what does that tell us about Mordecai?

Frankly, not much.<sup>4</sup>

It may tell us that he was not a trail blazer. Not a visionary. His willingness to remain in Susa may indicate that he was comfortable and at ease.

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<sup>3</sup> They were rebuilt during the days of Nehemiah and Artaxerxes, a generation after Esther and Mordecai.

<sup>4</sup> Many Bible students are not impressed that Mordecai, a Jew, chose to remain in Susa. As one wrote, “*One might think that the most zealous Jews would have chosen to return to Israel with Zerubbabel and Ezra or with other delegations who traveled the long distance between Susa and Jerusalem.*” The thinking is that Mordecai’s stay in Susa meant spiritual compromise. Or...maybe not. There was no “*Thus saith the Lord*” to the Jews to return. It wasn’t a sin to remain in Persia.

But it doesn't suggest that he was a bad guy at all. In fact, we know that he was a good guy. For one thing, we know that he was a committed family man.

### Getting to Know Mordecai

#### *Mordecai, faithful family man*

When Mordecai's aunt and uncle died, they left behind a young daughter named Hadassah. Without a sponsor, she would have been an orphan, and we can assume that Persian Social Services weren't very adept at orphan care.

Mordecai took over the significant responsibility of raising Hadassah. The girl's Persian name was Esther.<sup>5</sup>

As well, he was a very good citizen of the Persian Empire.

#### *Mordecai, faithful subject of the king*

#### Cooperating with the king

When King Ahasuerus went looking for a new queen to replace the banished Queen, Vashti, he allowed the king to take his step-daughter, Esther/Hadassah for consideration to succeed Queen Vashti.

Esther had always been beautiful. But over the course of a year, Mordecai watched as she was groomed to enhance that natural beauty.

And we assume that he was happy when Esther married King Ahasuerus and became the queen of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Mordecai also played a role, once, in protecting the life of the king.

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this makes Esther and Mordecai of the same generation. They were cousins, though probably separated in age by some years.

#### Protecting the king

One day, while sitting by the palace gates, Mordecai overheard two high-ranking government officials plotting to assassinate the king.

Without any fanfare, Mordecai reported what he had heard to his step-daughter, Queen Esther. She informed the king. The plot was aborted and the king's life was spared by Citizen Mordecai.

King Ahasuerus could not have asked for a more loyal subject than Mordecai.

And what else do we know about Mordecai from the book of Esther? What about his spirituality?

Well, in the few particulars we find in the book, it is clear that Mordecai was serious about his faith.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Mordecai, the faithful Jew*

#### Widely known as a Jew

Everyone knew that he was a Jew. If he didn't shout it from the rooftops, he sure didn't hide his Jewishness.<sup>7</sup>

When we first meet him, he is identified for us as a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>8</sup> Mordecai retained his "roots" - not only his racial roots, but his tribal roots.

Beyond being identified as a Jew, though, I am convinced that he was a devout Jew.

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<sup>6</sup> The author declined to overtly mention God in his book, for reasons that are not stated.

<sup>7</sup> Ahasuerus referred to him as "*Mordecai the Jew*" (8:7). He is identified as "*Mordecai the Jew*" when he drafts the letter allowing all the Jews to defend themselves against attack. (9:29). He is identified as a Jew when the Feast of Purim is established. (9:31). When he is elevated to second in command in the Kingdom, he is referred to as "*the Jew*." (10:3)

<sup>8</sup> This was the tribe from which came the first Jewish king, Saul. Eugene Peterson contrasts Mordecai to King Saul. ([Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work](#))

### A devout, God-fearing Jew (3:4)

We know that he refused to bow down before Haman, a high-ranking Persian official. This refusal to bow was odd for a faithful subject of the king like Mordecai.

The refusal was not because he didn't like Haman (although Haman appears to me wholly unlikeable). It was a result of his commitment to the first of the Mosaic Law's Ten Commandments, **[Exodus 20:3] "You shall have no other gods before me."**

He didn't bow down to Haman for the same reason that a century earlier, Daniel's friends didn't bow down to the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar on the plains of Shinar.

Jews don't bow down to anyone or anything but God. Mordecai was a Jew and for him to have bowed down to Haman would have been an act of idolatry.<sup>9</sup>

Haman was fiercely committed to NOT committing idolatry and that's why he didn't bow to Haman. That's why he continued to not bow down to Haman (5:9), even after the death sentence was passed against him and his people.

But notice that the act that prompted such a response from Haman was nothing outrageous. It was nothing more than simple faithfulness. All he did was NOT bow down. And what a firestorm that non-act created.

### **Mordecai - Challenges Born of Faithfulness**

It first resulted in Haman's anger - he was **[3:5] filled with rage** for not being bowed down to. THEN, it resulted in Haman putting a plot in place to kill all the Jews. And THEN, it resulted in Haman building a gallows fifty cubits high on which to hang Mordecai.

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<sup>9</sup> For centuries, idolatry had been a big problem for the Jews. Read through the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Kings and you'll find the people of God worshipping idols right and left. But then came God's judgment of the Babylonian exile. That severe chastising taught the Jews to never bow to anyone but God. And never, after the Babylonian captivity, did the Jews revert to idolatry.

We have seen that Mordecai wasn't the type to return to Palestine. But that didn't mean that he was a spiritual lightweight. He adamantly refused a faith compromise.

And that refusal to compromise, that simple faithfulness, created a crisis.

### *Mordecai and you...*

Mordecai's story brings us to a crisis as well. We are forced to admit that if he precipitated a crisis due to nothing more than faithfulness, our faithfulness might lead to a crisis, too.

Simple, plodding faithfulness can bring about genuine hardship, inconvenience, and opposition.

- Our church currently supports cross-cultural missionaries who serve in some hard places. All the inconveniences and difficulties involved in living in these places is simply the outworking of making that one decision to be faithful to serve Jesus.<sup>10</sup>
- Your commitment to not tell lies will usually protect you from harm. Sometimes, though, telling the truth will put you and a friend or you and a supervisor at odds.
- Your commitment to generosity will bless you in many ways. But the Bible doesn't promise that if you give money away to invest in the Lord's work you will have more money to spend on yourself.
- In some circles a commitment to share the Gospel of Jesus with others brings applause. In others, you'll be criticized for being narrow-minded, small-minded, and old-fashioned. In some places in today's world (recently, Russia), nothing more than faithfulness to obey the Bible's command to evangelize is met with resistance and punishment.

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<sup>10</sup> A couple Kathy and I knew back in seminary days, Jim and Diane Egan, spent several years serving at a Bible college in Guyana, a country on the north coast of South America. Jim and Diane suffered a good bit of hardship there. Guyana was a tough place to live. Jim told me that he found comfort by reminding himself that their sufferings in Guyana were being experienced solely because they had faithfully chosen to serve Jesus there. It was their obedience to the Great Commission that brought about their suffering.

If it is your faithful service to God that brings hardship, you'll be able to say, with faithful disciples of Jesus throughout time, "If I had not been faithful to God, I wouldn't be in this mess / missing sleep / missing my family / hungry / in jail..." And you'll also say, with Christ-followers though the centuries, "With God as my Witness, it is worth it all."<sup>11</sup>

Mordecai's experience, and that of others through the centuries, tells us that sometimes our faithfulness may be exactly what gets us into trouble.

In short, faithfulness is a catalyst. It isn't flashy, but over time, faithfulness does things. And what Mordecai's story does, as much as anything, is open our eyes to the power of faithfulness.

Yes, your faithfulness can get the attention and draw the ire of an enemy. But your faithfulness will also be a great witness to your friends of your faith in Jesus. Faithful service to God, over time, will produce character. Faithfulness can sometimes provide a steady pressure that will open doors to serve people in Jesus' Name.

And faithfulness always, without exception, brings a smile to God's face.

All of that - and more - is what happened because of Mordecai's faithfulness. His simple refusal to bow before Haman, which resulted in a plot to slaughter the Jews, also provided opportunities for him to become involved in what God was doing on a stage he never would have dreamed he would have.

Your simple faithfulness will produce fruit in your life and will bring impact for God's kingdom and will gain the pleasure of your God.

Now, when Mordecai first discovered that his people, the Jews, had been condemned to extermination, he was undone.

***[Esther 4:1-4] When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city and wailed loudly and bitterly. [2] He went as far as the king's gate, for no one was to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.***<sup>12</sup>

That is a picture of emotional distress.

True, he himself was condemned to death. And that is no doubt a part of the reason for his weeping. But after what we have seen of Mordecai to this point, I think he was concerned for more than his own welfare.

He now foresees untold suffering throughout the empire. His own loved ones and family members will be put to the sword. He is devastated by this vision of what is going to happen to his people.

Plus, he knows that the threat of Jewish extermination goes against God's promise for His people. It wrecks God's plans for the world because the Jews are God's chosen people. They are the people through whom Messiah will come. "**Death to the Jews!**" is an affront to God's plans.

Mordecai's heart was broken, for himself, for his people, for the purposes of his God. In his grief, he sent a message to Hadassah, his step-daughter, Queen Esther.

### **Mordecai - Through the Doors Faithfulness Opened**

#### **He Called Esther to a Bigger-Than-Life Life (Esther 4:8-14)**

We all love our children and we long for the best for them.

<sup>11</sup> Often, of course, opposition doesn't follow obedience to God. Very frequently, blessing follows obedience. The book of Proverbs tells us that a life of simple faithfulness to God is blessed. But it is the nature of Proverbs to speak in terms of how the world generally works, not guarantees about how the world always works.

<sup>12</sup> The passage continues, ***[3] In each and every province where the command and decree of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes. [4] Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. And she sent garments to clothe Mordecai that he might remove his sackcloth from him, but he did not accept them.***

There are cruel exceptions to that rule, and we hear about them. But these exceptions are so rare as to prove the rule. Parents love their kids. We parents would give an arm or a leg for our children.

We want our children's happiness, security, well-being, health, and safety.

Mordecai's ties to Esther, now the queen of the Medo-Persian Empire, were thick and tight. We have already seen that he had given himself to the self-sacrificing task of raising Esther, as if she was his own daughter. (2:5-7)

This makes the conversation between Mordecai and Esther all the more striking.

Formerly, for unstated reasons, Mordecai had told Esther to not let it be known that she was a Jew. Now, he tells her to declare herself. She is to use her influence with the king for the benefit of her people.

Evidently, Esther did not know the details of the king's edict that allowed the slaughter of the Jews until Mordecai sent word to her.

So, to add validation, Mordecai gave his messenger (Hathach) a copy of the king's edict, **[4:8] that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her people.**

Having received the message, Esther sent another message back to Mordecai. And to this man who had been her father figure since her parents died, this man who had raised her as a daughter, she replied (rough paraphrase),

*"I can't go. I haven't been summoned to the king's presence for thirty days. You just don't go to the king's presence unless you are summoned. If you do and he doesn't welcome you with the golden scepter, you're killed. It's too dangerous. I know you'll understand, dear Mordecai."*

Well, yes, Mordecai understood. He received the queen's message and sent his own back to her.

He repeated the order and called her to an assignment that was bigger than she was. He called her to a transcendent purpose.

***[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?"***

His order to Esther (yes, it was an order; **[4:8] to order her**) stands. Even at the risk of her life, he sent her to go to the king's palace to plead for her people.

It is understood that among the most difficult chores of military leadership is ordering soldiers into battle, knowing that some will not return.

The officer has to understand that the good of the unit and the "cause" is more important than the individual. The officer has to be willing to sacrifice soldiers to further the cause.

What a gut-wrenching order to have to give to one of your soldiers. Here, Mordecai is giving that order to his daughter.

*"Hadassah, I've always hoped you would live to a ripe old age, safe and healthy. But I've raised you to love the Lord your God with all your heart. And this is where the rubber meets the road, young lady. This is your moment to lay it all on the line for God."*

It was faithfulness to God that moved this father's heart to tell his daughter to risk her life for her people.

To the casual observer, daily, routine, faithfulness looks benign. You might not have ever guessed that Mordecai's commitment to God went so deep. But what we see of his faithfulness is like the tip of an iceberg.

Most of his faithfulness is below the surface, unobserved. But that unseen faithfulness adds weight for the time of testing.

He may have appeared to his contemporaries - Jewish and Persian - as nothing more than a nice Jewish young man. This test revealed him to be so thoroughly committed to a transcendent purpose that he was willing to urge his daughter to that same higher calling.

*You and Mordecai today...*

And it is here that Mordecai says something to those of us who deeply love the people God has allowed us to enjoy in life.

Those we love most will most benefit when they hear us call them to a bigger-than-life purpose.

Parents, there are all kinds of wonderful things you can do for your children - and you are doing them. You provide for their material needs and give them emotional nurture.

Are you calling them to follow Jesus? Are you talking with them about their role in the Great Commission? Are you exposing them to what God is doing in the world and urging them to serve Him?

No child can bear the weight of being the center of their parents' world. Show them that God is the center of your world and invite them to join you in following Him.

The same holds true for all of the key relationships in our lives.

- You, take the initiative to urge your friend to greater commitment to Jesus.
- Husbands and wives, cheer your spouse's every investment of time and energy and in serving Jesus.
- Be a champion of your brothers' and sisters' - flesh and blood or in Christ - sacrifices for Jesus.

Mordecai leads the way and invites all of us to invite each other to the glory of a life given to God. And then he answered the call to a bigger-than-life life himself.

## **He Gave Himself to a Bigger-Than-Life Life (Esther 8-10)**

The last three chapters of the book show Mordecai working tirelessly to save the Jews from extinction.

He wrote a letter. He alerted the Jews, empire-wide, that they were allowed to fight back when attacked. He travelled for the better part of a year to prepare his people for the day of attack. He played the role of statesman to calm his people's fears.

And then, after they successfully defeated their enemies, he created the festival of Purim so that the Jews would remember their deliverance and celebrate it annually.

Here's Mordecai doing exactly what he had been urging Esther to do. He went "all in" for God and His kingdom.

I love Mordecai. He was a man who had led a life of quiet faithfulness to God. He lived off-stage. He was a respectable family man. He was loyal to the government that had authority over him.

But he never forgot Who had ultimate authority over his life. So when it came time to choose, he chose easily. He did not bow to Haman.

And that one non-act launched him into a pitched battle for his people's survival and elevated him to a bigger stage than he would have ever dreamed possible.

For Mordecai and for you and for me, the ultimate reality in life is God. He is more important than health, wealth, safety, and comfort.

Crisis is a part of life, but crisis creates nothing. Faithfulness will create crisis, though. And our response to that crisis will reveal how deep our faithfulness runs.