

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

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

#### **Esther: For Such a Time as This**

(selected passages from Esther)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: Timing is everything...**

In a swimming race, *time* is everything. Just ask Michael Phelps.

Phelps dominated the swimming events in the 2008 Beijing Olympics like no one has ever dominated an Olympics. He had already won six gold medals but the seventh looked to be slipping away.

The race was the one-hundred-meter butterfly and Michael was badly behind at the half-way mark. But in those final fifty meters, he put on a kick for the ages and won his seventh gold medal by 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a second over the Serbian swimmer, Milorad Cavic. If you YouTube that race, you'll see that it looks for all the world like Cavic won. But as the announcer says, "*Touch pads don't lie.*"

In the case of swimmers Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte, Katie Ludecky and Missy Franklin, the time, the steady ticking of the clock, is everything.

When the Olympics competitions begin on August 5, the same will hold true for runners and bikers. Time marches on. The clock never stops.

So, one way to view time is through the lens of a stopwatch. Tick. Tick. Tick.

There is another way to view time, though. And, viewed from this perspective, *timing*, not time, is everything.

The Apostle Paul wrote, ***[Colossians 4:5] Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity...*** We could easily translate the word "***opportunity***" with the word "***time.***"<sup>1</sup>

Michael Phelps swims against the chronometer. The Greek word that reflects time's measurement is *chronos*.

Paul encouraged Christians see a second way to view time, and that is as opportunity. This is reflected in the Greek word Paul used in Colossians, *kairos*. Kairos reckons with the truth that all times are not equally opportune. Kairos says, "*When opportunity knocks, open the door.*"

This morning, we'll think about taking advantage of opportunities that come our way to serve God's purposes. And our Exhibit A for how this is done is the Jewish orphan, the young girl who was adopted by Mordecai, Hadassah, who grew up to become the queen of the Medo-Persian Empire: Esther.

Esther lived in the fifth century BC and was faced with an opportunity. Her willingness to walk through the door of opportunity provides a great model for each of us, today, who are also faced with tremendous opportunities.

Let's consider, together, the life and times of Queen Esther.<sup>2</sup> The book named after her begins with a crystal clear time stamp.

#### **An Improbable Life-Changing Road to the Throne**

***[1:1] Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces...***

<sup>1</sup> The word is frequently translated this way.

<sup>2</sup> We believe that the book was written shortly after the events recorded took place. That is, during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. And it was probably written by one of the heroes of the book, Mordecai, the Jew.

## Banquets Fit for a King and Queen

### *The king's banquets*

As far as the king's personal time, historians believe that Ahasuerus was in his late 30's when the events recorded in the book of Esther take place.<sup>3</sup>

He had been king for close to three years and had enjoyed some military success over Egypt. The king figured it was party time - so party he did.

He called in all one hundred and twenty-seven of the ruling princes,<sup>4</sup> his chief military commanders, and the empire's nobility for a party that lasted one hundred and eighty days.<sup>5</sup> The party was held in the palace in Persia's winter capital, Susa.<sup>6</sup> Susa was located on the banks of the Tigris River and was noted for its royal splendor. In fact, Ahasuerus threw this party just to show off his wealth and majesty.

Following this party, the Bible tells us that ***[5]...the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.***

Listen again, as you did a few weeks ago, to a description of this 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.***

<sup>3</sup> Ahasuerus became king at about age 35, in 486 BC when his father, Darius, died.

<sup>4</sup> The empire Cyrus established was enormous. It spread across what are today the lands of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey as well as parts of Greece and the Balkans, Russia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

<sup>5</sup> Esther's story includes grand themes such as the lavish wealth and despotism of a pagan king, pompous royalty and extravagant banqueting, a beautiful orphaned heroine facing a crucial moral choice, an evil villain, court intrigue, a dramatic reversal of events, and a happy ending.

<sup>6</sup> Susa was excavated by the French in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

***[7] Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty.***

### *The queen's banquet*

At the same time that the king was throwing this seven-day feast, Queen Vashti was holding her own banquet for all the women in the palace, also lasting seven days (1:9).

Now comes the drama. On the last day of the king's banquet, he ordered the queen to make an appearance.

## Queen Vashti is Banished

He wanted her to display her beauty to everyone present, for, as the Bible tells us, ***"she was beautiful."*** But the queen was not about to ***"display her beauty"*** (whatever that might have meant) and she refused to appear.

Vashti's refusal made the king furious. He banished Vashti from the royal court. And, of course, that banishment led to a royal vacuum. All of a sudden, there was no queen.

And so, there began an intensive, empire-wide search for a woman who could serve as the king's queen.

## The Discovery of - a Queen: Esther!

Throughout the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces "search committees" went looking for beautiful young women who could audition for queen. Think "The Bachelor" on an epic scale.

One of the young ladies who was brought to the king's palace was Esther. She was a Jew who lived in Susa and was being raised by her older cousin, Mordecai.

Along with all the other candidates, Esther<sup>7</sup> was subjected to a year's worth of beautification, a process that is described in the Bible, before she was presented to the king.<sup>8</sup>

Esther fulfilled her year of preparation, was brought to the king in her turn, and then was taken to the king's harem. Then, we find that Esther won the competition. She was loved by the king more than all the other women and became his queen.

We don't know for how long Esther sat as queen in relative peace. My sense, from living with this story, is that it was not very long.

The peace was broken by Haman, a high-ranking Persian official, and the villain in Esther's story. His appearance signals the beginning of trouble for Esther, for Mordecai, and for all the Jews.

### **Haman Plots to Destroy the Jews**

Haman was an important person in Persia, so everybody in Susa bowed down to Haman as he walked by. That was just what you did when a high-ranking official passed by. Everybody knew that. Or at least everybody except Esther's step-father, Mordecai, the Jew.

Mordecai wouldn't bow. And his refusal to bow made Haman so furious that he developed a plan to not only kill Mordecai but also annihilate all of Mordecai's people, the Jews.

He presented the king with his plan and the king swallowed the plan, hook, line, and sinker.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Jews in the story of Esther were given names that speak to their living in an alien land. The name "Mordecai" is probably related to a major Babylonian god, Marduk. And Esther's name is likely related to the Babylonian "Ishtar" - the name of an important goddess. Hadassah, her Jewish name, means "Myrtle")

<sup>8</sup> [2:12] *Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women—for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women— [13] the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.*

Letters were sent out to all the provinces announcing that in one year - on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month - every Persian citizen was to take up arms against the Jews and kill them.

Here is Mordecai's reaction when he heard the news: **[4:1] *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.***

Now Esther was also distraught. But it seems to me that she was all torn up, not about the news, but about how Mordecai was taking the news. She loved this man who had raised her as his own daughter.

### **A Provocative Life-Changing Father-Daughter Conversation**

#### **The Limits of Giving Orders**

*Mordecai orders Esther to go to the king*

So, she tried to encourage Mordecai. She sent her servants to cheer him up. She tried to get him to put on normal clothes and to take off the sackcloth.

He wouldn't even consider it. Instead, he gave Queen Esther an order - something that she might not have been used to getting in her new role as queen. She had more of the role of "order-giver."

But Mordecai, as her father, was well within his rights to give Esther an order to use her influence as the queen to plead with the king on behalf of her people.

Now, before viewing her response to Mordecai's order, let's think about Esther.

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<sup>9</sup> He evidently wasn't even aware that it was the Jews who were being consigned to extermination.

*Esther tells Mordecai that she cannot go*

### Early challenges for Esther

Here is a woman who has experienced significant ups and downs in her short life.

While we are never told her age, she is undoubtedly a young woman. When she was younger, perhaps a young child, both of her parents died. The death of a parent is always devastating to a young child. Losing both parents is doubly devastating.

Without belaboring the point, orphaned children - in the ancient and modern world - face a world unprotected. Without a strong and loving sponsor, an advocate, bad things happen to orphans.

Orphans understand their vulnerability and orphans often carry scars into adulthood. Among those scars may be suffering from depression, a sense of insecurity, poor self-image, an unwillingness to trust, and much, much more.<sup>10</sup>

### Everything's coming up roses!

Now Esther may have struggled with some of these issues, but the bad things that often happen to orphans didn't happen to her when her parents died. And that's because she was given the gift of a loving home with a caring and wise relative.

Mordecai, an older cousin (her parents were his aunt and uncle), raised her and stepped into her life as father.

Mordecai became the father Esther lost and Esther has become the queen of the Medo-Persian Empire. Her husband is King Ahasuerus and she, the former orphan, sits on a throne.

After an early life experience of the loss of both parents - an experience that often leaves children feeling fearful and insecure - she's now enjoying unbelievable privilege.

She is surrounded by servants who live to do her bidding. She has wealth beyond imagination, and comfort on every level.

There is nothing for her to feel fearful or insecure about and there is every reason for her to want to continue in her current lifestyle.

### Old insecurities arise...

So, when Mordecai approached her with an order to go to the king, she was sympathetic, but clearly unwilling.

I can imagine old insecurities rising to the surface. She saw the threat of losing all that she had. Her station in life and her relationship with a king who loved her (Esther 2:17) were at risk.<sup>11</sup>

At this point, Esther views herself as an outsider looking in on Mordecai's hardship. Yes, she's a Jew. But, she has lost her sense of identity as a Jew first. She has become queen of Persia first.

I think that she thought the "*death to the Jews*" sentence didn't apply to her. She's the queen. And, yes, she's a Jew, but *incognito*.

So, not to be mean, but it seems to me that Esther is a bench-warming observer to the plight of God's people. She's strolling the sidelines, hoping all goes well, watching the game. But there is no sense in which she sees herself - or wants to see herself - in the game for God.

She tells Mordecai, politely, but firmly, "*No. I won't go.*"

That's when Mordecai cut to the chase. He sent a message back to the queen. And the first part of his response is blunt and to the point.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Thomas, *Personality Differences Between Orphans and non-Orphans*, "Creative Psychologist", 1991, Vol. 3, No. 1.

<sup>11</sup> If she were to go, unbidden, to the king's throne room, he might just put her to death. She needed to have an invitation to know that she was welcomed. And she had not been summoned by the king for thirty days.

## The Power of Vision-Casting

*From Mordecai*

A warning against the folly of silence (4:13)

***[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.***

He leaves Esther with no room for doubt or confusion. She may die if she does what he ordered and crashes the king’s throne room. But if she doesn’t, and the death sentence stands, she’ll die anyway. She won’t be able to hide behind her crown. She will be found out and she’ll die by Haman’s plot.

Mordecai helps her see that her choices really aren’t all that great. Risk a quick death by going to the king, uninvited, or face an eventual death with all the other Jews.

That’s a pretty fatalistic way to look at her situation. But Mordecai does much more than leave her to fatalism. His commission to her to go to the king comes with hope. Because, along with the reality pill, he provides Esther with a redemptive vision.

An assurance of the Jews’ survival (4:14a)

***[14a] “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.”***

I have mentioned several times over the weeks of our study in Esther that the Name of God is never heard. This is the only book in the Bible that does not contain one overt reference to God.

Yet, in this exchange between Esther and Mordecai, He is clearly present. Mordecai affirms God’s sovereignty, without needing to say it out loud.

He’s saying that God’s not taken by surprise by a plot hatched by Haman against the Jews. God will see to it that the Jewish race survives.

The promise was first made in the book of Genesis that Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation and that from that great nation would arise a Savior King. God was not finished with His people and Mordecai’s confidence in the survival of the Jews was as solid as the promises of God.<sup>12</sup>

So, if Esther chooses to not step up to the plate and speak to the king, if she decides to remain on the sidelines, God will use something or someone else to rescue them. He is certain of this.

But in what he says next, he moves from certain to “iffy.” There is a tantalizing tentativeness as Mordecai does some creative imagining with his daughter. And he shifts from “order-giving” to “vision-casting” mode.

A reflective wondering at the purpose of her crown (4:14b)

***[14b] “And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?”***

What a wonderful wondering. And there is a genius behind him saying what he says here the way he says it.

He didn’t thunder, “*God wants you to go to the king!*” He didn’t preach, “*God put you here for a purpose.*”<sup>13</sup> He whispers. He suggests. He does nothing more than wonder out loud. “*Who knows...?*”

He wants Esther to stop for just a minute and consider her unlikely rise to the throne.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the promise of the coming Messiah/Savior/King (Jesus), there are also many prophecies of a glorious hope for Israel’s future. God wasn’t finished with the Jews in Mordecai’s day. He wasn’t finished with them even after the time of Jesus. He is not finished with them today. God has a future plan for the Jewish people.

<sup>13</sup> Current events are rarely so clear that we *know* that God is doing this or that. In retrospect, sure, we can tell. But in the moment, life is messy.

She was an orphaned daughter of refugee parents. She's not a native Persian. She was selected from among all the women of the empire to be part of a very small group to be considered for royalty. Then, out of that small group, she was loved by the king and became his queen.

She is now, against all odds, improbably, the wife of the king of the Medo-Persian Empire. His implicit question is, *"So, Esther, do you think that maybe, just maybe, God is in this?"*

He's inviting her to come off the sidelines and into the game.

Maybe prior to this, Esther hasn't really allowed herself to think of the big picture. Or maybe she's just thought that her rise to the top was due to dumb luck or to her own stunning good looks.

But, Mordecai's *"Who knows..."* gives Esther space to consider. It allows her freedom to wonder if her situation was based on serendipity and happenstance, her own merit, or the orchestration of a gracious, sovereign God.

I personally think it's pretty easy to see God's hand behind her rise to the throne. I further think that Mordecai's *"Who knows..."* allowed Esther to see it, too. And seeing it, she was freed to consider her options from a very different perspective.

She can hope for deliverance as she risks death and barges into the king's throne-room OR she can hide in the shadows, remain silent, and hope for safety while her people face extermination.

She can involve herself in God's kingdom-advancing purposes OR she can remain on the sidelines, spectating, warming the bench.

Here's what Mordecai hopes she hears by his *"Who knows...?"*

*"Who knows, Esther? Maybe God wants to leverage your marriage to the king to save our people. If you get involved, you'll be taking a great risk, sure. But then, you're in grave danger if you DON'T get involved. Here's the thing, my daughter. God just might be pleased to use you to save the Jews. But you'll never know if you don't get off the sidelines, take a step of faith, and move."*

Well, Esther got it. Her answer shifted one hundred and eighty degrees. She gave a spectacular reply to Mordecai.

First, she gave him an order.

*From Esther*

#### An assignment for Mordecai

***[4:16a] Go, assemble all the Jews who are found in Susa, and fast for me; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will also fast in the same way. And thus I will go in to the king, which is not according to the law..."***

Notice again. God's Name is not here. Esther mentioned fasting, but not God; fasting, but not prayer. I think that the omission of the words "God" and "prayer" is meaningless.

Why fast if not to seek God and to plead with God for wisdom and for deliverance? This scene assumes the presence of God, even if He is not mentioned by Name.

Esther recognized that she was powerless to guarantee a good outcome to this meeting with the king. She needed God to come through for her or she was sunk. So, she was desperate that her fellow Jews fast - and pray to God! - for her.

And then, as she concludes her response to Mordecai, she utters the five most famous words in the book.

#### Esther's willingly taken gamble

***[4:16b] "...if I perish, I perish."***

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<sup>14</sup> There is dramatic and situational irony throughout the book. Yes, it is ironic that (a). Esther, a Jew, replaced Vashti as queen. But also that (b). The gallows Haman prepared for Mordecai are eventually used against him; (c). Haman believes that the king desired to honor him, not Mordecai; and that (d). Haman pleading with Esther is misinterpreted as an assault on the queen, leading to Haman's execution.

There is no sense of a guarantee that she'll come out of this trip to the palace unscathed or even alive. But, she is now caught in the grip of a passion so great that any risk is worth it.

NOT GOING to the king might have kept her safe for a while, but it would have meant death to all the other Jews. GOING to the king might have resulted in her death, but it also just might turn the king's heart to save the Jews.

She calculated that the downside risk of failure was not worth giving up on the upside possibility of success. So she went to the king, hoping and praying to find favor and salvation for her people.

Now the conclusion of the story is that she was successful. The king received her when she barged into the throne room and she, along with Mordecai, negotiated a plan that saved the Jews. That, though, is irrelevant to the message Esther brings you and me today.

### **Conclusion:**

I really hope that Michael Phelps wins more gold at the just-around-the-corner Rio Olympics. Ryan Lochte, too, along with Missy Franklin and Katy Ledecky. If they do, it will be because they won the race against time. They finished before their competition.

At the end of a swimming or a running race, everybody knows who won. Chronology ensures that. Whoever gets the fastest time wins.

But the life of faith is not quite so clear cut. At the end of any given day, it's often not clear who has won and who lost. Stopwatches are useless in the life of faith because God doesn't call us to make the most of the clock that we have (chronos), but to make the most of the opportunity (kairos) we are given.

Esther's assignment was not to win salvation for the Jews. Her assignment was to be faithful to leverage her influence with the king as best she could, leaving the results with God.

She understood that her efforts might not win the day (*"if I perish, I perish"*). But she was going to do what she could with the opportunity she had to advance God's purposes.

And THAT is Esther's message to you and me today.

If Mordecai was speaking to you, right now, about what in your life would he say, *"Who knows...?"* So, who knows...

- ...but that you are living in the house you are, positioned near the neighbors you have, for a divine purpose?
- ...but that your place in your company is ordained by God for a redemptive purpose?
- ...but that you have attained wealth for the support of people - here and around the world - who suffering or are suffering for Jesus?
- ...but that your interests dovetail so beautifully with someone you know who is far from God that your shared interest could become common ground for a genuine, redemptive friendship?

And then, let's think about our church.

- Who knows if maybe God has planted Encuentro here, now, at a time of palpable racial tension in our society, to show that we are "one" in Jesus, regardless of ethnicity?
- Who knows if the "English as a Second Language" class, starting in September will help us make friends with many people - Hispanics, Asians, Arabs - who are far from God?
- Who knows if this season of having no paid staff over youth nor a Children's Ministry Admin is a season God wants to see us leverage for His glory through enhanced service from many.
- Who knows whether the windfall we will receive if the sale of our ten acres could result in great forward progress for the Gospel, both here at Northwest and elsewhere?

*"Who knows..."* No guarantees, of course. There wasn't for Esther and there won't be for us. But what a provocative question. And if the answer might be *"Yes!"*, it'll be worth any risk we might take to find out!