

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

Who Knows...?

(A look at the life of Esther)

Study #2

Introduction: Timing is everything...

When next summer's Olympics are held in Paris (Not Texas. France), you'll find me watching as many of the track and field events as I can. I've been a fan of running events since the days that I ran track.

The gold medal goes to the athlete who runs fastest around the track, whether that be the 100 meters, 1600 meters, or a 10k. Speed is everything when it comes to a footrace. It's a matter of time.

But there is another way to think about time that has nothing to do with a stopwatch or with speed. Viewed from this perspective, *timing*, not time, is everything.

The Apostle Paul wrote that we Christians are to conduct ourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, **[Colossians 4:5]...making the most of the opportunity...**

The word that my Bible translates "**opportunity**" is often rendered "**time**." Make the most of the time. The idea here is not speed, but timing.

The Greek word that reflects time's measurement in terms of seconds and minutes is *chronos*. It's the word from which we get chronology and chronometer.

Paul used a different word to urge us to make the most of our opportunities. It's the word *kairos*.

Kairos reminds us that all times are not equally opportune. *Kairos* says, "*When opportunity knocks, open the door.*"

This morning, we're following up a character sketch of the prophet Daniel with a second character sketch. And just like Daniel's character was forged in crisis, this young woman's was, as well.

She lived a generation or so after Daniel, after Babylon fell to the Persian Empire. She grew up Persian in the 5th century BC.

We're going to immerse ourselves in the story of this Jewish orphan, watch her as she faces a life-threatening crisis, and see her emerge on the other side, faithful, and having made great impact for God in her day.

Today, we're looking at Esther. And, as we've already thought about time, her story begins with a time stamp.

An Improbable Life-Changing Road to the Throne

[1:1] Now it happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Cush over 127 provinces...

Banquets Fit for Royalty

The king's banquets

Ahasuerus became king at about age thirty-five, in 486 BC, when his father, Darius, died. Historians believe that King Ahasuerus was in his late 30's when the events recorded in the book of Esther took place.

He had been in power for about three years. After Persia had some military successes 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,¹ his military commanders, and the empire's nobility for a party that lasted one hundred and eighty days.²

He threw this over-the-top party in the palace at Susa,³ the location of Persia's winter capital, positioned right on the banks of the Tigris River.

Then, after the one-hundred-and-eighty-day party was over, we read, ***[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 courtyard of the garden of the king's palace.***

Here's a description of the banquet and 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 floor of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and mineral stones. [7] Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful in proportion to the king's bounty.

The queen's banquet

While the king was throwing his seven-day feast, the queen, named Vashti, was holding her own banquet for all the women in the palace, also lasting seven days (1:9). Now comes the drama...

Queen Vashti is Banished

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

He wanted her to ***"display her beauty"*** to everyone present, for, as the Bible tells us, ***"she was beautiful."***

This, though, Queen Vashti was not willing to do. Vashti refused to appear.⁴

Not surprisingly, Vashti's refusal made the king furious. He banished her from the royal court. But that meant that there was a royal vacuum, because, just like that, there was no queen.

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

A New Queen is Found: ESTHER!

Throughout all the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces search committees went looking for beautiful young women who could audition to be 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, because her parents had died.⁵

Along with all the other candidates for queenship, Esther⁶ went through a year's worth of beautification before she was presented to the king. (Esther 2:12-13)

When she was brought to the king in her turn, she won the competition! The king loved Esther more than all the other women and she became his queen.

******Parenthetical - Esther hides her Jewishness (2:10)***

¹ The empire Cyrus established was huge. 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.

² 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.

³ Susa was excavated by French archaeologists in the late 19th century.

⁴ Many scholars believe that the king was calling on her to do something lewd.

⁵ Since Esther's parents were no longer living, Mordecai served as her guardian. She was the daughter of Mordecai's uncle, who was his uncle's daughter.

⁶ The Jews in the story of Esther were given names that speak to their living in an alien land. The name "Mordecai" is related to a major Babylonian god, Marduk. Esther's name is related to the Babylonian "Ishtar" - the name of an important goddess. Hadassah, her Jewish name, means "Myrtle," as in the tree.

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

[2:10] Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, because Mordecai had instructed her that she was not to reveal them.

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

And, that Mordecai wanted Esther to keep her Jewishness under wraps mainly tells us how protective he was, because it was, historically, not safe to be a Jew.⁷

We don't know how long Esther served as a queen in relative peace, but my sense is that it was not very long. The peace was broken by Haman, the villain in Esther's story, who was a high-ranking Persian official.

Haman Plots to Destroy the Jews

Haman was an important person in Persia. So, everybody in Susa bowed down to Haman when he walked by. That was what you did when a high-ranking official passed by in Persia.

Everybody bowed down to Haman, except Esther's guardian, Mordecai, the Jew.

Mordecai wouldn't bow.

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

⁷ That he was ashamed of being a Jew? Not likely. That he wanted to protect Esther from 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.

He presented the king with his plan.⁸ And, without asking any questions, the king endorsed the plan, only knowing that killing these people would bring a lot of money to the royal treasury.

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 this people (the Jews) and kill them.

Here is Mordecai's reaction when he heard the news:
[4:1] When Mordecai learned of everything 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.

When Esther heard what Mordecai was doing, she was also distraught - and curious. Evidently, she didn't know about the king's plan to kill the Jews. Whatever was going on that made Mordecai so upset, she wanted to know about it and to cheer him up.

A Life-Changing Conversation

The Limits to Order-Giving

Mordecai ordered Esther to go to the king

She loved this man. He had raised her as his own daughter. She tried to get him to put on normal clothes, take off the sackcloth.

He wouldn't even consider it. Instead, he gave Queen Esther an order. As queen, she probably didn't get a lot of orders. She had more of the role of "order-giver."

But Mordecai made sure that Esther knew what the king's command said. And, yes, he ordered her (4:8) to beg the king to show favor to her people, the Jews.

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

Esther told Mordecai that she could not go

⁸ We are not told if he told the king that the people he wanted killed were the Jews.

Early challenges for Esther

While we are never told her age, she is undoubtedly a young woman. When she was younger, both of her parents died.

Don't miss that. The death of a parent is always devastating to a young child. Losing both parents is doubly devastating.

An orphaned child - in the ancient and modern world - faces a world unprotected. Without a strong and loving sponsor, an advocate, a foster home, adopting parents, bad things happen to orphans.

Orphans understand their vulnerability and orphans often carry scars into adulthood. They may struggle with depression, a sense of insecurity, a poor self-image, and trust issues.

Esther had suffered loss. She had experienced a lot of ups and even more downs in her short life.

Everything's coming up roses!

It may well be that Esther struggled with some of the emotional issues that plague kids who lose parents. But the bad things that often happen to orphans didn't happen to her when her parents died.

That's because she was given the gift of a loving home with a loving, wise relative. Mordecai raised her. He stepped into her life and became the father Esther had lost. He gave her stability and security.

And now, Esther is 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 losing both parents, Esther now enjoys unparalleled privilege.

She's not alone. She is loved by her husband. She is surrounded by servants who live to do her bidding. She has wealth beyond imagination. She lives in the lap of luxury.

Her life had turned into a fairy tale. She had so much - and she had so much to lose.

Old insecurities arise...

It is easy to imagine old insecurities surfacing when Mordecai told her ("ordered") her to go to the king to beg for her people's protection.

She would have instantly seen the threat of losing everything she had. She could lose her relationship with a king who loved her (Esther 2:17), her wealth and comfort, and her station in life. It was all at risk if she did what Mordecai ordered.⁹

Prior to this note from Mordecai, I think that Esther viewed herself as an outsider looking in on Mordecai's hardship.

Sure, she's a Jew. But she had lost her sense of identity as a Jew first. Her identity was wrapped up in being the Queen of Persia.

She figured that this whole, "*death to the Jews*" thing that Haman convinced the king to command, 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 heard Mordecai's order and then reminded Mordecai of palace protocol.

She reminded him that anyone who entered the king's inner courtyard without an invitation could expect to be put to death...unless the king held out his golden scepter.

⁹ 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.

She told Mordecai that she had not been invited by the king for thirty days. Esther's message to Mordecai was a firm, *"No. I won't go. No. I can't go. It's too dangerous."*

But Mordecai didn't take Esther's "No" for an answer. He sent a three-part message back to his daughter, the queen.

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 other Jews."

He completely understood her concern and he knew that she might well die if she did what he ordered. Crashing into the king's courtyard was risky.

But if she didn't do it, and the annihilation order remained in place, 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.

THAT woke Esther up to what was at stake. She now sees that her own life was at stake. Mordecai's life was at stake. Her people's existence was at stake. This is bigger and more personal than she had imagined.

Mordecai has helped her see that she didn't have a safe choice to make. She could risk a quick death by going to the king, uninvited, or face an eventual death with all the other Jews.

But Mordecai did much more than leave her with bad options. His assignment to her to go to the king came with hope.

Along with the reality pill about her own risk, he provided Esther with a redemptive vision.

First, a vision for her people's survival.

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

[14a] "For if you keep silent at this time, liberation and rescue will arise for the Jews from another place, and you and your father's house will perish."

The book of Esther is unique among the books in the Bible in that we never hear the Name of God. This is the only book in the Bible that does not contain one overt reference to God.

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

He assured Esther that God wasn't taken by surprise by Haman's plot against the Jews. God will see to it that the Jews survive.

God first promised, fifteen hundred years earlier, 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. Mordecai's confidence in the survival of the Jews was as solid as the promises of God.¹⁰

The point of saying that to Esther was to say that if she chose to not step up to the plate and speak to the king, if she decided to remain on the sidelines, God will use something or someone else to rescue them. He was certain of this.

But in what he says next, he moves from certain to "iffy." There is a tantalizing tentativeness in what follows. Mordecai does some creative wondering with his daughter.

A reflective wondering about her crown (4:14b)

¹⁰ In addition to the promise of the coming Messiah/Savior/King (Jesus), there are also 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 plan for the Jewish people.

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

What wonderful wondering. There is genius behind him saying what he says here. It was genius for him to say it exactly the way he said it. He has shifted from “order-giving” to “vision-casting.”

Mordecai didn’t thunder, “*God wants you to go to the king!*”

He didn’t preach, “*God put you here for a purpose.*”¹¹ He whispered. He suggested. He did nothing more than wonder out loud. “*Who knows...?*”

He invites Esther to stop for just a minute and consider her unlikely rise to the throne.¹²

She was the orphaned daughter of refugee parents. She’s not even 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, the king set his affections on her.

She is now, against all odds, the wife of the king of the Medo-Persian Empire. Mordecai’s implicit question is, “*So, Esther, do you think that maybe, just maybe, your becoming queen might be a part of a Plan?*”

He didn’t say “God.” But he is asking Esther to entertain the possibility of a divine purpose behind her ascension to the throne.

And it may be that before this moment, Esther hadn’t allowed herself to think of the big picture. Maybe she’s just thought that her rise

¹¹ 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. Prophecy is more easily interpreted after the fact. :-)

¹² There is dramatic and situational irony throughout the book. It is ironic that (a). Esther, a Jew, replaced Vashti as queen; (b). the gallows Haman prepared for Mordecai were eventually used against him; (c). Haman believed that the king desired to honor him, not Mordecai; and (d). Haman’s pleading with Esther was misinterpreted as an assault on the queen, leading to Haman’s execution.

to the top was due to her own stunning good looks - or to sheer, dumb luck.

Mordecai’s, “*Who knows...*” gives Esther space to consider.

It invites her to wonder if her situation was based on serendipity and happenstance, her own merit...or maybe the orchestration of a gracious, sovereign God.

Personally, I think God’s hand in Esther’s rise to the throne is obvious.

And I think Mordecai’s “*Who knows...*” allowed Esther to see it, too. And seeing THAT, she was free to consider her options from a very different perspective.

She now sees her two options more clearly than she had to this point.

- One, she can hope for deliverance as she risks death and barges into the king’s inner courtroom.
- Two, 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. It just might be that God will 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.”

And Esther got it.

She got up off the bench, walked away from the sidelines, and got into the game. Her posture shifted one hundred and eighty degrees from “*I can’t*” (v. 11) to “*I will.*”

For what was probably the first time in her life, Esther gave Mordecai an order.

From Esther

An assignment for Mordecai, from Esther

[4:16a] Go, gather 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 attendants will also fast in the same way. And then I will go in to the king, which is not in accordance with the law...

Notice again. God’s Name is not here. Esther mentioned fasting, but not God; fasting, but not prayer. But it isn’t significant that Esther didn’t say “God” or “prayer.”

Why fast if not to seek God? Why fast if not to plead with God for wisdom and for deliverance? Her words assume God, even if He is not mentioned by Name.

Esther knew that she was powerless to guarantee a good outcome to this meeting with the king.

She knew that if God didn’t come through for her, she was sunk. So, she ordered Mordecai (!) to have her fellow Jews fast - and pray to God!) - for her.

And then, as she concludes her response to Mordecai, she says what may be the most famous five words in the book.

Esther’s willingly taken gamble

[4:16b] “...if I perish, I perish.”

She has no 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, and her own death, eventually.

GOING to the king might have resulted in her immediate death, but it also just might turn the king’s heart to save her and all the rest of the Jews.

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

Spoiler alert: Esther’s risky move to go to the king was completely successful. The king received her when she barged into the throne room and she, along with Mordecai, worked out a plan that saved the Jews.

That, though, is mostly irrelevant to the message Esther brings you and me today. As we close, I’ll tell you what I think was the life-changing moment for her.

Conclusion:

The winner in a footrace is the one with the fastest time. Racing is all about time.

But the life of faith has a different metric. Stopwatches are useless in the life of faith because God doesn’t call us to go as fast as we can. (*chronos*) He calls us to make the most of the time / opportunity (*kairos*) we are given. (Colossians 4:5)

Esther found herself in a situation of great need AND in a position of influence. The confluence of her position and that need created a crisis that forged character.

The hammer in the forge was Mordecai's question, "***Who knows...?***"

Esther's crisis of faith and obedience resolved when she took Mordecai's provocative, "***Who knows...?***" to heart. So, today, let's all consider the "***Who knows...?***" question.

Who knows...

- ...but that you are living where you are, right by the neighbors you have, for a divine purpose?
- ...but that God might want to leverage your place at work for a redemptive purpose?
- ...but that the stable and loving home you enjoy may be perfectly fit to serve, through adopting or fostering, a needy child who is in the state's care?
- ...but that your wealth might be leveraged for the support of people - here and around the world - who are suffering for Jesus, or who are simply suffering?
- ...but that your interests dovetail so well with someone you know that your shared interest could become common ground for a redemptive friendship?

"Who knows...?"

No guarantees, of course. There wasn't for Esther and there won't be for us. But what a provocative question.

"Who knows..." what God might do through you if you take advantage of the opportunities He gives you to shine for Him?