

Sermon Transcript from July 3rd, 2016
A Work in People
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I am so excited this evening to start the book of Esther. Esther's one of my very favorite books in the Bible, and here's why: Esther takes the wisdom literature – like Ecclesiastes and Proverbs – and it brings it to life. A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Dave Lomas taught on the book of Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiastes is this book that tells us what life is like when you're chasing after all of the trappings of this world. Right? Love and sex and money and power and pleasure and all of these different things. And, at the end of it, it's "hevel." Everything is "hevel." It's meaningless; it's worthless, is what the author of Ecclesiastes says.

The thing you have to love about Ecclesiastes is it's an honest book. It's someone who's run this road and gives you this testimony at the end of it of what they got for their journey. But, there's this moment of enlightenment in Ecclesiastes 3 where the author says He (God) has set everything beautiful in its time. He set eternity in the hearts of men. And then, with emphasis added here, here's this idea: "Yet they (humanity) cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

So, we run this course, we go through our lives, we chase these things and we don't know, we don't really know what the Lord is up to from beginning to end. Hevel, hevel. Everything is hevel. And we can relate to this. We eat, we drink, we love, we get in relationships, we do all these things hoping that we're on the right track. But, we don't really know what the Lord is up to in all of it. Sometimes we get little glimpses. But, we don't know, from beginning to end, what God has been doing. Now, Ecclesiastes is a philosophy book; it's a wisdom book. A book of observations and statements. A book of facts. And I imagine that you Type-A, analytical type people love that stuff; love Proverbs and love Ecclesiastes. God bless you. That's not me.

So, I think, what if the book of Ecclesiastes, this ambiguity in life, all of these crazy things going on around us and we don't know what God is up to, what if that could be a story? What if there was a narrative that actually brought that to life? That's what the book of Esther is. It is this story of all of these crazy circumstances, all of these moral failures, all of this chaos going on, all of this tragedy that doesn't seem to have resolution until the end. And you don't really know where God is or what He's doing through this story. That's what makes the story so great.

So, God bless wisdom literature. God bless the facts and analytics. Not my thing. I'm a story guy. And you guys know this about me. I like to tell stories. I tell you guys stories about my life and my kids and my family and everything. I love to read stories. I'll choose non-fiction before fiction nine times out of ten. I love to watch movies. Getting lost in a story is one of my favorite things to do.

Recently, my family drove. I did a wedding in Montana and we had this great idea: let's make a road trip out of it and drive across the U.S. and go almost all the way across. We went to Wisconsin. I guess that's not all the way across. Like the Midwest. It felt all the way across though. So, threw our three kids in a Chevy Traverse and we went for it. While we're on this trip, my wife and I listened to a book on tape. It was, "All the Light You Cannot See." Anybody read that book? So good. If you like stories, get that book.

So, we listened to this story and you just get lost in the story. My wife's crying. We're in the middle of South Dakota and my wife's crying in her seat just listening. You get lost. And you understand, experientially, wisdom and failure and heart ache and love and all these things. It's powerful. Stories are powerful. I think this comes from even a deep place in my heart as a kid. My favorite elementary school teacher was Mr. Raegan, and his reward to us if we were really good – if we got enough points on the chart that day or we got the room cleaned up or whatever – is at the end of the day, he would tell us a story.

And they were good enough that we actually did all the stuff. We wanted to hear the story. I remember there was this one story that he told. I don't know why I remember this. There's this one story he told of he and his brother. They grew up in Los Angeles. They were in their backyard. It was summertime and it was extremely hot and they were just baking out there. They had the little kiddie pool and they just kind of splashed each other and tried to keep cool. It was so hot out in the day and there was not place to go to hide from the sun. Their mom had bought this giant bottle of super soaker bubbles. That was it. Super soaker bubbles. They took the entire container and poured it into their kiddie pool and they began to make bubbles and they tried to make bigger bubbles and bigger bubbles.

And finally, Mr. Raegan's brother made a bubble so big that he actually fit inside of it.

Then, as he was inside of this bubble, this warm breeze blew by and it lifted him off the ground and he went up and he could see. He got up so high he could see all of his neighborhood. He looked down and he could see his neighbor. Then the breeze kept blowing and he went up and he was looking down on the winding freeways of Los Angeles and he could see everything and he began to get afraid. He cried out, "Please. Bring me down from this bubble. If it pops, I'm going to die."

And the bubble slowly came down and it rested on center field of Dodger Stadium. And it wasn't until the freeway part that I looked at my buddy Jeff and I'm like, "Can he really do that? Can bubbles do that? Do they make those kind of bubbles?"

This is your teacher. Like, you're supposed to believe everything they say. So, from the very formative stages of me, I loved stories. I get lost in stories. My kids are this way. So, when I read Ecclesiastes, good stuff. Good information. Not my genre. But, Esther? Esther takes all of these things of Ecclesiastes and they come to life in people and in circumstances that we can understand. So, we're going to spend the next four weeks in the book of Esther and I want us to savor it. I want us to chew on it. Eugene Peterson says that a good story is like a meal that you sit down to and you savor every bit and every flavor of what you're consuming and it becomes a part of you. I hope – maybe that's setting the bar a little high – for the next four weeks we can do that in this amazing story of Esther. It's such a rich story.

I'm going to give you five reasons that Esther's an amazing story. Okay? And then a few challenges that we're going to have with the book. The first amazing thing about Esther is that it is part of the traditional history of the Jewish people; deeply embedded in the Jewish history and tradition of the Jewish people, which is where our Christian heritage comes from. So, we should care about this.

At a counsel of rabbis, they said that there were six books in the Old Testament. All of the Hebrew Scriptures were important, but there were six books that we would read into eternity. So, what they would say is at the day of resurrection, these six books would remain and we would keep reading them. That was the Torah – so, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – and the book of Esther. That it would go on into eternity and the Jewish people would be reading these stories and reading this wisdom literature. And a festival, there's a festival called the Festival of Purim that the Jewish people still celebrate today. 2,500 years after this story was written, they still celebrate it. And they read the story of Esther in the morning and at night. Still. Every year.

So, this is important to our heritage. We should care about this. Secondly, the second amazing thing about this book, it's one of the few in the Bible that gives us a realistic glimpse of what day to day life was like for the Jewish people living in exile. Remember that God had made a nation called Israel, His chosen people, and He had intended for them to be a different type of nation and they failed miserably. They turned their back on God and He sends armies to destroy Jerusalem and scatter His people from the land He had given them and they're taken, dragged into exile into these foreign nations.

We don't have many books or many stories about what that time was like. We read the Prophets, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and they're lamenting and they're crying out about what God is going to do and how He's going to rectify it and the feelings that they were feeling. But, real stories of what's happening? There's not a whole lot of stories in that time. So, this is a great glimpse for us of the Jewish people in exile.

Thirdly, it's one of only two books in the entire Bible whose title carries the name of a woman, which is remarkable if you think about when these books were written. In this completely male dominated society, women had really no status, had no authority or anything. This is one of two books that carry the name of a woman that have the woman as the centerpiece of their story. In this male dominated society, a woman becomes this vehicle for social justice; becomes the hero of her nation. It's remarkable.

Fourthly, and relevant for us today, this is a good place to stir up for those of us who are Christians, what it's like for a religious minority to live in a nation, in a government system, that basically opposes everything that you believe in. Maybe that resonates with you. We love our city. We love this place. But, let's just face it: there are things that we are trying to walk out, ways we're trying to follow Christ that are just in direct opposition to the culture around us. How do we do that? Do we hide? Do we just pretend we're going to live in this little bubble off people and pretend like no one else exists? That doesn't seem to be the answer. Are we going to fight everyone? Are we going to picket and oppose everyone? I don't think that's the answer. So, this should stir up for us. This has happened before. We're not in a new situation here. Esther and her family and her people were living in this kind of hostile environment as a religious minority, and it's

good for that to stir up in us.

And finally, the fifth reason I love this book, maybe most importantly, is that Esther is a book that tells the story of God at work in people. Crazy revelation, I know. God at work in people. Ordinary, dysfunctional, sinful, disobedient, messy people. God at work. And He does incredible things. They're living through crazy and unpredictable circumstances and they don't know where God is and what He's doing in the midst of it. And that should be something that we resonate with for sure. Now, it doesn't come without its challenges though. God is never mentioned or referenced in the entire book of Esther, which is weird because this is the Bible. Never mentioned. There's not a prophet who gives a word of like, "Hey, this is what God thinks about what's going on."

Nope. There is not anything from the author or narrator to tell us what God's doing or where He's at or what He thinks. There is not a miracle in this book and there's not even a prayer. No one even prays a prayer in this book. And that's weird. So, that's a challenge. Secondly, the main characters, Esther and her guardian cousin, Mordecai, they seem to have no reverence or obedience toward God's laws; the way He set His people up to operate. They compromise in every way possible in their circumstances. So, we're not looking at models of how to live the Christian life here. Like, we don't get that. We get people surviving in this crazy time.

Lastly, through the twists and turns of this story, we never get a sense for what God's doing or how this is going to play out until the very end. So, with that, are you guys ready to dive in?

Okay. We're going to dive in anyway whether you're ready or not. So, I don't want to assume that everyone's read this story. So, for this week, we are actually going to get a little summary overview of the book of Esther by watching a video from our good friends at The Bible Project. So, check this out.

[Video]

The book of Esther. It's one of the more exciting and curious books in the Bible. The story is set over 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites from their land. And while some Jews did return to Jerusalem – remember Ezra and Nehemiah – many did not. So, the book of Esther is about a Jewish community living in Susa, that capital city of the ancient Persian empire. The main characters in this story are two Jews; Mordecai and then his niece Esther. And then there's the king of Persia, who's something of a drunken pushover in this story. Then there's the Persian official, Haman; the cunning villain.

Now, this is a curious book in the Bible mainly for the fact that God is never even mentioned; not once. Which might strike you as kind of odd. I mean, isn't the Bible about God? But, this is a brilliant technique by the author, who's anonymous, by the way. It's an invitation to read this story looking for God's activity, and there are signs of it everywhere. The story is full of very odd "coincidences" and ironic reversals and it all forces you to see God's purpose at work, but behind the scenes.

Let's just dive into the story. The book opens with the king of Persia throwing two elaborate banquet feasts that last a total of 187 days. It's all for the grandiose purpose of displaying his greatness and splendor. On the last day of the banquet feast he's really drunk and he demands that his wife, Queen Vashti, appear at the party to show off her beauty. She refuses. So, in a drunken rage, the king deposes Vashti and makes this silly decree that all Persian men should now be the masters of their own homes. Then he holds a beauty pageant because he wants to find a new queen. This is like a really bad soap opera.

But, it's right here that we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai. Esther hides her Jewish identity and enters the beauty pageant and wins. And the king is so obsessed with Esther that he elevates her to become the new queen of Persia. Now, after this, and even more serendipitous, is the fact that Mordecai just happens to overhear two royal guards plotting to murder the king. So, he informs Esther who, in turn, informs the king, and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life.

Now, right here from the beginning, God's not mentioned anywhere. But, this all seems providentially ordered. What is it that God's up to? You have to keep reading. We're next introduced to Haman, who's not actually a Persian. He's called an "Agagite." He's a descendant of the ancient Canaanites. Remember 1 Samuel 15. The king elevates Haman to the highest position in the kingdom and he demands that everybody kneel before Haman. Well, when Mordecai sees Haman, he refuses to kneel. Which, of course, fills Haman with rage. And when he finds out that Mordecai's Jewish, Haman successfully persuades the king to

enact this crazy decree to destroy all of the Jewish people.

And, to decide the date of the Jews' annihilation, Haman rolls the dice. A die is called "pur" in Hebrew. Tuck that away for later. Eleven months later, on the 13th of Adar, all the Jews will die. Haman and the king then have a drinking banquet to celebrate their really horrible decision. So, the focus now turns to Mordecai and Esther, who are the only hope for the Jewish people. They make a plan that Esther's going to reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask Him to reverse the decree. But, approaching the king without a royal request is, according to Persian law, an act worthy of death. So, in a key statement, Mordecai, he's confident that even if Esther remains silent, that deliverance for the Jews will arrive from another place. And then Mordecai wonders aloud, he says, "Who knows? Maybe you've become queen for this very moment."

Esther responds with bravery and she purposes to go to the king with her amazing words, "If I perish, I perish."

Knowing what unfolds, we watch the ironic reversal of all of Haman's evil plans. So, Esther hosts the king and Haman at a first banquet and she says that she wants to make a special request to both of them at an exclusive banquet the following day. So, Haman leaves the banquet totally drunk and he sees Mordecai in the street. He fumes with anger and he orders that a tall stake be built so that Mordecai can be impaled upon it in the morning.

It seems like things can't get any worse for the Jews and for Mordecai. But, all of a sudden, the story pivots. It just so happens that night, the king, he can't sleep and he has the royal chronicles read to him for good bedtime reading, and he just happens to hear about how Mordecai had saved the king's life. He had totally forgotten. So, in the morning, Haman enters to request Mordecai's execution and the king, in that moment, orders Haman to honor Mordecai, publicly, for saving his life.

So now, Haman has to lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse telling everyone to praise him. Now, this moment in the story, it's a pivot for the whole book. It begins Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to power. Watch how this works.

The day after is Esther's second banquet. So, the king and Haman arrive and Esther informs the king that, first of all, she's Jewish and second, that Haman has enacted a decree to murder her and to murder Mordecai, who saved his life, and to murder all of the Jews. Now, the king's had a lot to drink. So, when he hears this news, he goes into yet one more drunken rage, and he orders that Haman be impaled on the very stake he made for Mordecai.

It's ironic and a grizzly way for Haman to go. Haman's execution, however, doesn't solve the problem of the decree to kill all of the Jews. So, the focus now turns to Esther and Mordecai as they make a plan to reverse the decree. They discover that the king can't revoke a decree that he's already made. So instead, the king commissions Mordecai to issue a counter-decree on the appointed day that all of the Jews were supposed to be killed; the 13th of Adar. Now, the Jews are ordered to defend themselves and to destroy any who plotted to kill them. Then Mordecai, Esther and Jews everywhere hold banquets and feasts to celebrate this new decree, and Mordecai is elevated to a seat beside the king.

Eventually, the decreed day comes and the Jews triumph over their enemies. First, they destroy Haman's family and then any other Persian officials who had joined in Haman's plot. Then, on a second day, they get permission to destroy any who plotted against them throughout the entire kingdom. This results in joy and celebration as the Jews are rescued from annihilation. The story then tells about how Esther and Mordecai establish, by decree, this annual, two-day feast of Purim to commemorate their deliverance from destruction. And the name of the feast comes from Haman's dice. Remember? Pur-im. The book concludes with a short epilogue as Mordecai is elevated to second-in-command in the kingdom and we are told now with his royal greatness and splendor as the Jews thrive in exile.

Now, step back. Notice how this whole story's been designed. The story was full of moments of ironic reversal, but we can now see the whole story is structured as an ironic reversal, right down to the details. So, the king's splendor and feasts and decrees are mirrored by Mordecai's splendor and feasts and decrees at the end. Esther and Mordecai, they first save the king. But now, in the end, they save all of the Jews. Then you have Haman's elevation and edicts and banquet that gets reversed by Mordecai's elevation and edict and banquet. Then, at the center, you have Esther and Mordecai's planning scenes and then Esther's two banquets that act as a frame around the greatest moment of reversal in the whole story. Haman's

humiliation and Mordecai's exhalation. Beautiful.

Another fascinating feature of this book is the moral ambiguity of the characters. There's a lot of drinking and anger and sex and murder of which Mordecai and Esther are a part. Not to mention their violation of many commands in the Torah like marrying gentiles or eating impure foods. So, the story's not putting Mordecai and Esther forward as moral example, as if it endorses all of their behavior. But, they are put forward as models of trust and hope when things get really bad. So, the book of Esther comes back to that question with which we began. Why God is not mentioned.

The message of this book seems to be that when God seems absent, when His people are in exile, when they're unfaithful to the Torah, does this mean that God is done with Israel? Has God abandoned His promises? And the book of Esther says, "No."

It invites us to see that God can and does work in the real mess and moral ambiguity of human history. And He uses the faithfulness of even morally compromised people to accomplish His purposes. So, the book of Esther asks us to be willing to trust God's providence even when we can't see it working and to hope that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming His world. And that's what the book of Esther is all about.

[End video]

Man, aren't those good? Those videos? So good. If you guys haven't been tracking with us, we are doing this Year of Biblical Literacy and there's a video like this for every book of the Bible that we've read so far, and that will continue through the end of the year. They're awesome. Super informative and helpful.

So, that's our summary. That kind of gives everyone a picture of the book of Esther. Now, today, what I'd like to do is just look at these opening scenes of the book. What is the author trying to set in the stage of this story? Who are these people and what's going on? So, would you guys open to Esther 1 with me? I'm going to read these opening scenes. It's a little bit of a mash up. So, you can just listen and follow along if you'd like, or you can try to read but I'll be jumping a little bit. But, here's what I want. I want you to imagine you're in Mr. Raegan's sixth grade class. You guys have been so good today; so obedient. You're going to get a little story time right now. Okay? So, enjoy it; savor it.

"This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

"For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa.

"Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.

"On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him..." – these guys – "...to bring him before Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

"According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti? he asked. 'She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.'

"Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, 'Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' This very day the Persian and Median women of nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.'"

Some insecure men here.

"Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

"The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. He sent dispatches to all the parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming in each peoples' tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household.

"Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed, 'Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' [Surprisingly], this advice appealed to the king, and he followed.

"Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew in the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who what been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

"When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

"Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.

"She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

"Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

"When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

"During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on the gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king."

Now, there are three main movements. If we think of this as a play that we're watching, there are three scenes. This Act 1, scene 1, 2 and 3 that happened in the opening of this story. Let's unpack what's happening. Let's understand who these people are and what's going on.

In the first scene in Act 1, Xerxes displays his wealth and his power to influence and make friends and allies. So, what's going on here? What's the context? There are a few

things that the author of Esther assumes that you already know about King Xerxes and his kingdom. The first is that King Xerxes is about to go to war with Greece. He's about to go to war with Greece. He is trying to accomplish something his father, King Darius, didn't accomplish. To expand the empire, to take over Greece and cement his legacy.

Fun fact: if you saw the movie "300," this is it. This is King Xerxes, who goes into trying to get into Greece and has to go through the gates of fire. Right? So, "We are Sparta!" That's this. That's what's happening here. So, this is not just a party for 180 days, this is a war council. This is making friends and influencing people that Xerxes is doing. He's trying to build up his team and get support for this great work. And here's how these councils would go. Commentator Karen Jobes describes it like this:

"In this day, people thought that drinking would get you closer to the divine."

Maybe for some people that's true. I don't know.

"So, the way they would structure these meetings is that decisions that were made in a drunken council had to wait 24 hours when everyone was sober to be approved."

That makes sense. Right? Here's the thing, though: it worked in the reverse as well. So, if you had a sober council, you had to wait 24 hours until everyone was drunk to make sure that everyone approved. Think of sophomore year of college. Like, "Did we...? Is that what we decided we were doing? Did we say that?"

That's essentially what's happening for six months at this war council and they're just drinking and drinking and making decisions and plotting their strategy against Greece and making promises. And all of this, the author is setting up for us, Xerxes is trying to display who he is by wealth, extravagance, this party that goes on forever, his hospitality and liberality. It talks about that a lot that he is so wealthy he can just pour wine for six months straight. Goblets made of gold. Everyone's goblet looks different. Just this extreme wealth. Okay? That's what the author is putting forth. This is who Xerxes says he is.

But, there's a problem; there's a twist. Xerxes hits a snag toward the end of his partying days with his war council. He asks Vashti to come. "Come to our frat party and just display how pretty you are so we can all look at you."

Vashti says, "No," which is a remarkable thing for a woman to do in this day and age and in this framework. This could mean three things for Vashti. Best case scenario, she gets forgotten. King Xerxes just never talks to her again. Best case scenario. Very possibly, she loses her crown, which ends up happening. But also very possibly, this is a death sentence for Vashti. To say "no" to the King? King Xerxes? In front of all his boys? Death sentence. Okay? Terrible things are going to happen. This is an incredible strong thing for Vashti to do.

However, the point that the author's trying to make is not the feminist power of Vashti in this moment, although it is a great moment for her; a courageous moment. That's not the point the author's trying to make. Because, what happens is as soon as Vashti says "no" to King Xerxes, what does he do? He calls a council meeting. Like, "My advisor, the wisest men in my council, my wife said 'no.' What do I do?"

And they have to have this meeting and come up with a ridiculous decree and put something into law that every woman will respect her husband. And it's supposed to be funny. There's humor in the Bible. This is supposed to be funny. We're supposed to laugh at this because here's this man who's claiming to be great and powerful and he can't have a conversation with his wife. He can't even run his own household. It's meant to show you what a fool Xerxes is. He's a drunken fool. He doesn't know what he's doing, and that's supposed to bubble up through the story. It's supposed to make us laugh and also make us think.

That's the second scene. When Vashti says no, he goes into this, "I don't know what to do. She said 'no.' What do you do with people who say 'no?'"

And they have this council meeting. In the final scene in Act 1, we're introduced to Esther. And here's what you need to understand about Esther: she is as low as you can possibly get on the power totem pole. She's a woman. She has no authority. She has nothing. No power. She's an orphan. She has no family credentials. She's poor. How do we know this? She doesn't have a husband lined up. She's not been given to anyone. She's alone and she's poor. There's not a lower person that we could find in this day and age. And yet, God is doing

something with this woman, and this is a theme throughout all of Scripture where God takes the least likely of us and does something incredible; does remarkable things to move His story forward.

So, that's what's happening. That's kind of unpacking the opening scenes. Three takeaways for us to understand. To kind of dig in like what is there for us in this? The first: God's silence does not mean He is absent. The Jews here are in great danger, the Jewish people. They are living in a hostile nation. And we've been conditioned, as we read through Scripture, that every time the Jews were in trouble, God did something extraordinary. Right? There's fire that comes down from heaven. Seas are split open. Plagues fall on their enemies. God does radical, amazing things when His people are in trouble. But here, He seems completely absent and silent. But, His silence is not absence.

There are a thousand little things that happen along this storyline that we would say are coincidences. Xerxes gets drunk. Vashti says "no" for no apparent reason. We're not told why. The king's council way overreacts to Vashti's response. Mordecai is in the right place at the right time when he hears about the assassination attempt. Esther wins the favor of this guy, Hegai. Who's he? Why does that matter? And over and over. Each step seems insignificant, but it's vital to this master plan that God is doing.

So, I want to ask you: how did you get here? How did you get here? How did I get here? I got here by going to a taco shop on a Monday. That's how I became a pastor. I went to a taco shop on a Monday. I was working in a business job and we were just getting ready to have Gracey, our first daughter, and I decided to go to Bobby's Tacos on a Monday and, at that time, at lunch at Bobby's Tacos on that Monday, my old football coach happened to be there. Now, we're hundreds of miles from where I grew up, right? I hadn't seen him for 10 years. He was at this taco shop. We exchanged numbers. We started talking. Keeping in touch and things.

Three or five months later, he calls me and says, "Dave, I took this job as a principle at a Christian school and I've got this position and, for some reason, I just feel like I'm supposed to ask you. Would you be interested?"

And I said, "Well, what does it pay?"

And he told me and I said, "No human can live off that amount of money. That's impossible. Much less a family. No way."

But, I said we'd pray about it and we prayed about it. There was a pivot in Noelle and I and our family's life story. All of a sudden we were in ministry and we were doing ministry things and I said, "This is my offering to the Lord. I'll do this. I'm not going into church ministry though. I don't want to be a pastor. No, thank you. Not interested."

Guys, here I am. It's been almost five years with a hundred thousand different little choices along the way. I'm a pastor in San Francisco at this church. This is crazy. Never would've written this story. Your story's not any different, you guys. I don't know where you are, what decisions you've made. There are little things that you're deciding every day and the Lord has a plan for your life and for my life and His bigger story. He's doing things. He's doing things that we can't see. His silence is not His absence. Okay?

I still think we need to pray and we need to seek the Lord and read His word. And yes, He speaks to us in prayer. We should seek that out; listening to the Lord. All of those things. He gives prophetic words. I believe all of that. But, there are times and seasons where it's just silence. That doesn't mean He's absent. Okay?

Second takeaway: appearances can be deceitful. Appearances can be deceitful. Xerxes has all the looks of a great king and he's proved to be a fool. Esther seems to be completely insignificant and she proves to be a courageous leader. Appearances can be deceitful. Here's the irony in this story: men are judged by their wealth and their power and women are judged by their sexual appeal and overall beauty. Gosh, can we just say how far we've come since 500 B.C.? What a mature and cultured people we are that we aren't like that anymore.

Guys, appearances can be deceitful. In this day and age where all of us are putting out on social media the very best of who we are and what we want people to believe we are on all the dating apps that are just mind boggling or people trying to make an impression of who they are. You guys, appearances can be deceitful. Look for substance, please.

Look for substance. Talk to other humans for more than two minutes. Right? Get to know people. Walk with people in life. Alright? And you will find out that appearance is a reality or not. Okay? Appearances can be easily deceiving.

And finally – and this is probably the hardest one of them all – there's a question that should rise up as we read through all of this: are you, am I, a concubine to our culture? Are you a concubine to our culture? See, Esther gave up all of her identity as a Jewess, underwent massive preparations physically and treatments, all to win the favor of a foolish king. Now, did she have a choice? Not really. But, we do. So, I just have to ask you: what kind of treatments and things are you putting yourself through to try to win this culture's approval in your office, in your neighborhood, in your social groups? What is it?

Because, there is a contrasting difference. We have a story of a man named Daniel, who was also in exile in the Bible. Daniel shows up – go to the book of Daniel and read it – in Babylon and he says, "Hey. I'm a Jew. This is how we do things. This is what I eat. This is how I operate. You don't like it? Burn me."

He's like a New Yorker in exile. He's like, "I don't care."

Now, Esther's in a totally different position. She's a woman. She doesn't have any of those privileges. Daniel was an elevated man. He was an educated man. He had a different situation. But, he made this stand of like, "I'm not going to be what that culture is. I'm going to change the culture around me."

So, this question should come up with us: have become a concubine to the culture around us? And I have to say this. My time is up, but I can't go without addressing this, because this has been the heaviest thing on my heart as I've prepared this sermon. Noelle and I, my wife and I, we know many of you and we love you guys. We've walked through life with you. And there are so many great young men and young women in this church family. We have seen the dating culture of this church and it's terrifying. I don't mean that as a joke. Like, it is heartbreaking to watch what you guys are doing to one another; to watch what you're walking through. It's heartbreaking.

And I know how this works. I know that you guys have a list. You have a list of 10 people that you would possibly date at this church. You have your list. And 8 or so of those people don't have the credentials or the resume or the sex appeal or the looks or whatever. So, you cross those people off and you just pray to God that those top two, one: would say "yes" to you and then two: would have some kind of character. Hopefully they have some kind of character or have spiritual maturity. Please define that for me. That they'd be spiritually mature people.

Guys, I just want to tell you that you have become a concubine to your culture in the way you're treating each other. Swiping right and swiping left is dehumanizing. It is. It is not the way we're meant to interact with one another. So, listen to me. There's more. There's so much more for you.

Okay. That was my dad talk. I'm sorry. I love you guys. I love you guys. So, I know I came hard there, so I want to leave you with a word of encouragement. Are we guilty? Are we concubines in this system, all of us – married, unmarried – preparing ourselves, selling our souls, for one night with the king? Are we guilty of it? Yes. Every single one of us. In some way, shape or form, every single one of us are guilty of that. We are like Esther. We are like Esther. Here's the thing: at the start of the story, Esther's a total disaster. She's compromised in every possible way. She's become a prostitute for the king who gets elevated, by chance, to queen.

All of us can relate, in some way, shape or form, to that. But, that's not the end of the story. That's not the end of the story. By the end, Esther is a Braveheart; Esther is a hero; Esther is courageous. And she takes the broken, mangled pieces of her life being an orphan and a woman and put through all of these different things by her choice or not, she takes what's there and she does amazing things for God's people and His story. So, I don't know where your story started, I don't know where your story is today. But, the story's not over. There's so much more that God's going to do in you, through you, around you that you may not even see, you may not even hear a whisper of, or you may get beautiful revelations. I don't know. But, God is still at work.

God works with her, He's patient with her, He does something great with her. So, no matter what a mess you may be in, if you're here today, God's not done with your story, because He's not done with His story. He's at work, and this is God's grace given to all of us.

Let's pray.

God, we come before You humbly – I pray we would be humble – and just admit, God, that we have compromised so many places and that there are areas of our lives that we have made a total mess. And the beauty of Your story, Lord, is You say You love us. You have not rejected us. You don't stand in condemnation over us. It says, actually, the reverse, Lord. That You come to the door of our hearts and You knock and just ask to be let in to know us; to be known by You.

So, I pray that over my brothers and sisters tonight, Lord. Whatever their circumstances might be, God. That lie they'll never be loved or lovable. That lie that they've messed it up too bad; they're too far gone. Would You just silence that in Jesus' name right now? Would You remind us, Lord, of Your promise, God? That You are a faithful husband and You see us as Your bride and You will not stop. You will continue pursuing and loving and forgiving and reconciling with us. You'll never stop.

So, may tonight be a reconciliation night with You, Jesus. Lord, we lay at Your feet in repentance the places we've compromised and made a mess of our lives and we leave it there; leave it at Your feet, Jesus. And be able to receive Your grace and Your love abundant upon us. Would You do that tonight? In Jesus' name, amen.