

Sermon Transcript from July 10th, 2016
A Story of Providence
Pastor Josh Waidley, Reality San Francisco

Last week, we began a four-week series on the book of Esther, and Pastor Dave Dealy, I think, did a really great job just highlighting what a fantastic story Esther is. It's just such a good story. It's funny, it's ironic, it's full of sex, violence and intrigue. And there's almost a burlesque quality to it, I think. Like, it's just full of extravagant displays of opulence and wealth and almost cartoonish scenes and cartoonish characters. It reads like a Shakespeare comedy, where the stakes couldn't be higher and the tone of the narrative couldn't be any more playful and fun.

It really is one of the most unique books in the entire Scripture. The name of God is not mentioned even once. There is no trace of God or the divine in the book of Esther. And yet, Pastor Dave highlighted that Jewish rabbis through history have said that the two portions of Scripture that would never cease to be relevant to humanity and would last into eternity are the Torah – the first five books of the Old Testament – and the book of Esther. He also pointed out that there are a lot of similarities between the culture of Persia in the book of Esther and our culture today, especially when it comes to men and women.

In the story of Esther, women are judged by their physical beauty and their sexual desirability and men are judged by their wealth and their success; their status and their power. And not much has changed, unfortunately, in our culture. So, this week, we're going to move forward in the story a bit. We're going to look at Esther 4, which is probably the most famous part of Esther. And we're going to look at the extraordinary circumstance that Esther is placed in and the choice that she has to make.

I want to say up front that I think Esther has a lot to offer us, especially in light of what has happened in our country this week. So, we'll touch on that towards the end. But, to begin with, if you are new or visiting, we have been in a year-long spiritual practice of reading the Bible together in a calendar year and we're calling it The Year of Biblical Literacy, or YOBL for short. Pastor Dave Lomas hates when I call it YOBL, but I think it is much shorter and easier to say. So, I try to say it around him as much as possible, and I would encourage you to do that as well.

But, if you're reading along, we're currently in the middle of Jeremiah, Lamentations and Ezekiel, which I think is the most punishingly depressing stretch of the entire Old Testament. These are books full of prophetic warnings to Israel. So, Israel is God's people. They have a covenant that God made with them. He is the people through whom He is going to bring redemption to the world. And, for generations, they have been disobeying the laws that He gave them. They have been totally ignoring that covenant and practicing all sorts of evil, from idol worship to child sacrifice. And God has been sending prophet after prophet to warn them to stop and to turn back to covenant faithfulness to Him. And Israel's kings and leaders have just been ignoring those warnings.

So, finally, in the middle of the book of Jeremiah, God sends first the Syrian empire and then the Babylonian empire to destroy Jerusalem and to destroy Israel; to destroy the temple in the middle of Jerusalem and to take the Jews into captivity. This portion of the Jewish history is called the exile, and it was horrific. A generation of Israel's best and brightest were taken into captivity or killed. And eventually, the Persian empire conquers the Babylonian empire and a king named Cyrus allows the Jewish people to return to their promised land; to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it and to rebuild the temple.

This ends the period of exile and starts what's called the Postexilic Period. During this post exile period, the people of Israel are left wondering, "Are we still God's people? Does the covenant that He made with Abraham and then Moses, does that still hold? What does exile mean for us?"

And I think the book of Esther is written to directly address those questions. The events of Esther take place about 50-70 years into this Postexilic Period, and a lot of the Jews went back to Israel, but some did not. So, Mordecai and Esther, two of the main characters in this story, they did not go back and they are living in the Persian city of Susa. And I think it's really important for us to ground Esther in this history of Israel, because the people who would be hearing Esther read, the Jewish men, women and children, would have this history of Israel, they would have this covenant of God and they would have this experience of exile in mind as they hear the story of Esther.

So, I want us, to the best of our capacity, to have that in mind as well. So, we're going to read chapter 4 in Esther and, if you need a Bible, you can raise your hand. Ushers will

come and give you one and you can just keep that. But, before we do, I want to give just a quick recap of what happens in chapters 2 and 3 to get us to chapter 4.

So, Esther is an orphan; she's a refugee living in a foreign empire. She is Jewish and she is very beautiful. In chapter 1 of Esther, King Xerxes, the king of Persia, he doesn't want his queen to be his queen anymore for a number of reasons. So he says, "You're not the queen anymore. I'm going to find a new queen."

So, he goes throughout the empire and he has beautiful, young virgins taken from their homes and thrown into his harem to be concubines. And Esther is taken from her home and put in this harem. And, after a year of preparation – so, she has a year of beauty treatments – she has one night with the king. In the one night with the king, King Xerxes is so pleased with her that he makes her his queen. Soon after she's made queen, Mordecai, her adoptive uncle, who is in the king's court, he overhears two guards plotting to assassinate King Xerxes. He alerts the right people and saves the king's life. But, for some reason, is not given any of the recognition that he deserves. And that will be important later on in the story.

So, in chapter 3, we're introduced to a character named Haman. Haman is a character that is so cartoonishly evil that he should come with a mustache to twirl. He's promoted to second-in-command of all of Persia. And there's no explanation given as to why. King Xerxes just makes him his right hand man right after Mordecai saves the king's life. And because Haman is the second-in-command, he is allowed to have every single person kneel to him as he walks by. The king says, "Everyone needs to kneel to this guy."

And everybody does except for Mordecai. For whatever reason – again, there's no explanation given – when Haman walks by and everyone else kneels, Mordecai says, "No, I'm not going to kneel."

So, Haman finds out that Mordecai is not kneeling and he finds out that Mordecai is Jewish. And he says, "You know what? It's not good enough to just kill Mordecai. I want to go ahead and commit mass genocide on his entire people."

Which is a totally reasonable response, I think. Do you see how cartoonishly evil Haman is? So, Haman goes to King Xerxes, and if you actually read chapter 3 in Esther, his argument is basically, "Hey, Jews are weird. Like, they have different customs than we do. We should kill them all. In fact, I will pay you a ton of money so that you let me kill them."

and King Xerxes, this drunken buffoon, is like, "Yeah, that's sounds like a good plan. Let's do that."

And they throw dice to decide the day that the Jews are going to be extinguished. And then they send a decree to all the Persian empire in multiple language so everybody knows that on the 13th day of the 12th month of Adar, all the Jews are to be annihilated. And that brings us to Esther 4. So, would you open and read with me?

"When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

"When Esther's eunuchs and female attendants came and told her about Mordecai, she was in great distress. She sent clothes for him to put on instead of sackcloth, but he would not accept them. Then Ester summoned Hathak, one of the king's eunuchs assigned to attend her, and ordered him to find out what was troubling Mordecai and why.

"So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

"Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, 'All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without

being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.'

"When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: 'Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?'

"Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 'Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'

"So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther's instructions."

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray.

God, I ask that Your presence would be deeply felt in this room. God, we acknowledge that there are multiple different emotions that our community is carrying in here. God, we want to be deeply sensitive to Your Spirit. We ask, Holy Spirit, that You would prompt our hearts; that You would allow us to be sensitive to the invitations that You have for us.

God, would You anoint me and allow me to communicate what I believe You want me to do to our community? Would you protect my mind, body and soul from the physical ailments of sickness and allow me to communicate clearly? In Your name, amen.

Okay. So, Mordecai hears about the plan of Xerxes and Haman to annihilate the Jews and he goes into mourning in front of the palace gates. Imagine, for a moment, being a Jew and seeing a decree nailed to the community board that says that a few months from now, on a specific date, you and all of your family are going to be murdered. That is pretty horrific. So, Mordecai is mourning in front of the palace gates and Esther sends one of her eunuch attendants to go see what's going on.

Mordecai tells him all that has happened and he urges Esther to go to the king and beg for mercy for the Jews. Mordecai knows exactly what he is asking Esther to do. He knows that she could very well die. You're not allowed to go into the king's presence unless he summons you. Esther replies: "Dude, I could die. And, more than that, the king hasn't actually called me into his presence for 30 days."

What she means is that, for whatever reason, she hasn't been in the king's presence, whether it's in his inner court or in his bedroom, and she seems to potentially have fallen out of favor with the king. What this means is that it's even more dangerous for her to approach the king. There's a higher risk that she would be killed on the spot.

So, Mordecai hears this and he gives his famous response to Esther; probably the most famous line in the whole book. He says, **"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"**

Now, usually, we read this speech as Mordecai giving Esther a motivational speech, right? He's pumping her up so she has the courage to go into the presence of the king. If this were a movie, the music would be swelling, right? This is the Rocky montage before the big fight. But, there's actually a hint of danger in Mordecai's message. What he's implying is, "Don't think that you'll be safe because no one knows that you're Jewish. What is someone finds out?"

Up to this point in the story, the only person who knows that she is Jewish is Mordecai himself. So, he's giving her an ultimatum and a subtly threat. "You need to go and talk to the king on behalf of our people or it might just sleep that you, Esther, the king's prize queen, is Jewish."

Mordecai's doing whatever is necessary to ensure the survival of his people. He's also asking her, for the first time in the story, to identify herself as a Jew; as a member of God's chosen people. Even though at the beginning of this story he explicitly asks her not to do that. When she gets taken into the harem, he tells her, "Hide the fact that you are

Jewish." And now he's saying the opposite. He's asking her to prove faithful to the covenant even if it leads to her death. One commentator puts it this way:

"Mordecai does not offer a confident forecast or any assurance of success, but only the simple imperative of covenant fidelity. Esther's choice was between commitment to God and His people through thick or thin or else allowing her and her family's identity to dissipate quietly into the anonymous winds of history."

So, Esther is faced with a choice. Does she speak up and risk death or does she say nothing, watch her people die and risk being found out and dying anyways? It's a really, really hard decision. Esther weighs her options and she chooses to step into her identity that she has kept hidden this whole time as a member of God's chosen people. She decides, "I'm going to take a step and say that I am Jewish. It might lead to my death, but I am going to do it anyways."

And this is a really courageous choice. This is the difference between her being dragged to her death unwillingly and facing her death bravely. It kind of reminds me of the end of Harry Potter when Harry is walking to face Voldemort for a last time, knowing that he has to die. And there's that great line. It says, "This cold-blooded walk to his own destruction would require a different kind of bravery."

That's the kind of bravery that Esther is forced to step into and chooses to step into here. Now, I want us to notice that it's also an incredibly selfless act of giving up her power. Right? At the beginning of this story, she had zero power. She was an orphan, woman, refugee, living as an immigrant in the most powerful empire in the world. And through a unique set of circumstances and choices made by her and other people around her, she rises to be the most powerful woman in the entire world. She is literally at the pinnacle of power for a woman in this time.

In choosing to go and talk to the king, she's putting at risk all of that power, all of that privilege, all of that influence. She risks not just losing all of it, but losing her very life. In the next couple weeks, we'll look at the events that immediately follow Esther making her decision. But, for today, remember the Bible Project video that we watched last week and remember the end of the story. So, at the very end of this story – spoiler alert – the Jews are saved. So, what that means is that Esther bravely chooses to go to the king and beg for mercy. When she says, "If I perish, I perish," in that split second decision, she ends up saving God's people from extinction.

Her choice affects the lives of an entire people group. And, through this decision, she becomes the means by which God keeps His covenant promise to Israel to never forsake them. So, where does that leave us? Right? What does this story have to say to us? Or, maybe a better way to put it is: what invitation does chapter 4 of Esther – the most famous chapter in the whole book – have for us?

I think it has a couple. To begin with, I think Esther invites us to contemplate the mystery of God's providence and our own lives within it. So, if you're unfamiliar, God's providence is the theological idea that God holds all of creation together; that He manages it and that He is bringing all of history, all of creation and all of humanity to an appointed, redemptive end. And if that sounds to heady or confusing, that's because it absolutely is. Theologians have been wrestling and debating the idea of God's providence for thousands of years; since Christianity and Judaism were even a thing.

If you want to hear more about this idea, I would suggest going and listening to the YOBL lecture from last month by Gerry Breshears. He taught on the problem of evil and he broke down three different views of providence really well. I personally don't even think that there is a good definition of it. I think it's so mysterious and the Bible doesn't really have a lot to say about God's providence. But, for our time learning about Esther and what we're looking at today, what God's providence looks like and what it means is that in some inscrutable, mysterious way, God uses ordinary, mundane, minute-to-minute decisions made by everyday, broken people, to move His plan and His redemptive history forward.

Remember, God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. In fact, the author seems to go out of his way to remove any mention of the divine at all. And yet, at its very core, the story of Esther is very much a story about God keeping covenant faithfulness with His people and saving them. And how does He save them? He saves them through the entirely unmiraculous human choices and decisions made by the characters in this story. Think about Esther, right? She's an orphan who's taken by her uncle and raised an immigrant in a foreign land. She's forcibly taken as a young woman and placed in the harem of the most powerful man in the world. She's basically sex trafficked.

In the harem, she receives favor by the eunuchs who run the harem for whatever reason. And, whether it is for survival or to gain influence and security, she hides the fact that she is Jewish and she breaks basically every Jewish law in order to do so. She breaks dietary laws, sexual purity laws, and she marries a non-Jew. And I have a lot of sympathy for Esther in this moment. I think that she is doing whatever it takes for her to survive in a pretty brutal world. But, regardless, she ends up being complicit in an exploitative system. She does whatever people tell her to do. She is always acting as she is expected to. And in doing this, she rises to the top, the very top, of that system by winning a sex contest with a pagan king who's so pleased by his one night with her that he marries her and makes her the queen of the most powerful empire in the entire world.

She's then put in a position of incredibly complexity with the highest stakes possible because her idiot king husband thinks that the genocidal wish of his Hitler-like henchman is a good idea. She's then challenged, even threatened, by the only father figure she's ever known; her uncle, Mordecai, whose decision, by the way, to not bow down to Haman is the whole reason Esther and the Jews are in this position to begin with. And he challenges her to choose to reveal her hidden identity as a person who belongs to God's chosen people knowing full well that if she does this she will give up all of her power, all of her influence and she will probably die.

And, in that moment, of decision, this brave, brave woman, this queen, who has done everything in this story up to this point, everything in her power to hide the fact that she is Jewish, she chooses to reveal her true identity as a member of God's chosen people. And God takes all of that mess, all of the millions of decisions made by every character in that story, and He says, "Yeah. I can work with that."

And He uses Esther to save His people, restore covenant faithfulness and allow His redemptive plan to continue to unfold throughout history. In our Year of Biblical Literacy, we have read the many miraculous ways that God has interceded for Israel in the Old Testament. But, Esther is the complete opposite. There is no miraculous event in Esther. There is no divine intervention at all. God is uninvoked and unmentioned in the entire story. There's no magnificent display of power, there's no fire falling from heaven, there's no parting of the Red Sea, there's no burning bush, there's no pillar of cloud or fire, there's no even words of hope, promise or warning from a prophet sent by God. God seems to be silent.

And yet, as one commentator puts it, the real miracle in the story of Esther is Esther herself. In saving the Jews from destruction, she takes over the role that was played, for instance, by the east wind that came to part the waters of the Red Sea in the story of Exodus from Egypt. Of course, Esther's influence on events stems from her own human freedom and initiative. Yet, on the Biblical view, the more fully Esther inhabits her capacity as an independent political agent capable of influencing human affairs, the more fully God's will is brought to bear in history.

In turning aside from the road of complacency and cowardice, in facing down the fear that grips her in inventing and going forward with an audacious plan of her own devising, and ultimately pulling it off, Esther's own choices and actions undertaken without any explicit command or instruction from God, make her the principle instrument of God's will in this story. In Esther – not behind, above or in contrast to her – we see God's miraculous action in history; an action that aims towards the redemption of His people and, through them, the redemption of the world.

God uses an ordinary human placed in extraordinary circumstances by a lifetime of minuscule choices to orchestrate His salvation. That's God's providence in this story. And when we realize this and recognize it, I think we're then invited to recognize God's providence in our own story.

So, I want to ask us a couple questions this morning. What is the reality of our current life? What is our "such a time as this?" Think about all the decisions in your lifetime that led you to sitting in this room this afternoon. Maybe you live in San Francisco, maybe you don't. Maybe you're married, maybe you're not. Maybe you are working a job you love, maybe you hate your job. Maybe you're not working at all. Regardless, you have a part to play in God's redemptive history. And we, as individuals and as a community, are invited to contemplate our present reality.

And notice, first, all the choices and circumstances that we and other people around us made to get us here, and then have faith and believe that God somehow holds us and has been working with and through us in some mysterious and unknown way this entire time. That's the first invitation.

The second invitation, I believe, Esther leaves us with is to recognize that the choices that we make affect other people and affect the world around us. Right? We live in a culture where a person's right to do whatever they want is held as basically sacred. And while there's good in being able to choose, we don't live in isolation from others. The idea that we make decisions that only affect our individual lives is a lie. That's not how reality works. That's not how relationships work. That's not how this world works. This kind of thinking allows all kinds of relational and corporate and systematic and institutionalized chaos and evil to perpetuate itself because we think, "Well, it doesn't really matter what I do. It doesn't affect other people. It just affects my life."

So, in light of that, I want us to ask ourselves a few more questions. First: are we conscious of the ways our decisions affect others? Does it even come into our mind when we're making decisions? Second: what would it look like to make decisions in the full embrace of my identity as a beloved child of God? Remember, Esther has no courage up until this point in the story when she fully steps into the true identity that she is as a member of God's chosen people. It is then that she has the courage to face her death and go and talk to the king.

What would it look like for us to step into the full embrace of our identity as forgiven, beloved children of God in making our own decisions?

Third: what opportunities to I have, especially if I'm in a position of power, privilege or influence to make a decision that uses that power to empower others at my own expense? That's what Esther does in this story. She uses her power to empower and give voice to the Jews who are scheduled for extermination at the very expense of her life.

Then fourth, and finally, what is at stake for others if I do not? What is at stake? As I was reading Esther 4 and thinking about this sermon and praying through it, I initially really wanted to stay faithful to the tone of Esther, which is one of I think playfulness and fun and lightness. But, given the events of the past few weeks – past few days, especially in our country – it just doesn't feel, I guess, honest to do that. So, I've been asking myself these four questions and I feel pretty compelled to speak with the power that I have this morning as the person with the microphone teaching from the stage to say something that I think needs to be said from this stage.

And that is this: what I want to say is that black lives matter. It is a systematic and institutionalized racism and evil that allows more black men to be killed by police in the past year than were ever lynched during the worst year of the Jim Crow south. That allows more black men to be in prison today than were enslaved in 1850 at the height of the slave trade. This is evil and this has to stop. We cannot keep having black lives, made in the image of God, turn into black bodies that turn into hashtags on our Twitter feed every few weeks. And this is not a new phenomenon. This has been going on for generations now. We just have videos on our iPhones now to prove it.

Something is deeply, deeply broken in our country. Something is deeply wrong with our entire system. And, if you're black in this room, I want to first confess the failure of especially the evangelical church to even listen to your cries for justice. I am so sorry. We have put our heads in the sand and told you to be quiet for way, way too long. Now, I want you to know that our church community has not done everything perfectly and we will make mistakes in the future when it comes to conversations about this issue. But, we are committed to fostering the kind of humble and hospitable community that allows you to be exactly as you are. To grieve, to rage, to weep, to hope and to seek change.

We're committed to posturing ourselves humbly as listeners and learners first. We want to weep with those who weep. We want to learn to do right; to seek justice, defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless and plead the case of the widow. That means the widow of Philando Castile. That means the widow of Alton Sterling. That means the widows and families of the five Dallas policemen killed on Thursday night. Church, we need to learn to be advocates and partners and peacemakers the way that Jesus was and the way that Jesus commands us to be.

If you're not black in this room and hearing the words "black lives matter" makes you feel uncomfortable, I want to invite you into dialogue. I want to invite you into dialogue with me. I'll be standing up front after service. But, let me say up front that responding to "Black Lives Matter" with "All Lives Matter" is deeply missing the point. As Christians, we of course believe that all lives matter. But, it's not all lives that are disproportionately at risk of being

killed by police or being imprisoned by our criminal justice system. It's black lives. When I get pulled over, the emotions that I feel are embarrassment and annoyance; not fear. I don't have to raise my son telling him exactly how to act when he's pulled over by the police for fear that he could die.

That's privilege. I don't have to do that. To respond "all lives matter" is unsympathetic, it is unkind and it is unloving, because it communicates that you're not interested in listening or empathizing. And our response in our church must be one that seeks to listen to the experience of our black brothers and sisters first before we say anything. My friend, Cammie Jones, who's a community group leader in our church who is black, wrote what I think is a very painful and appropriate post on Thursday in response to all that happened at the end of the week. And I want to read it, because I think it perfectly captures what our "such a time as this" is in our country and in our church. This is what she says:

"My heart is heavy. Seeing the open grief of the victim's families is heartbreaking and humbling. Lord, have mercy. Reading the ignorant, callous, insensitive responses of many of my friends and others with privilege to which they are sometimes willfully blind is exasperating and disheartening. The fact that this is still happening is absolutely infuriating. Wake up. Being afraid for my brother and father, my uncles, my cousins and other family and friends and students and fellow humans is exhausting. Cycling through these all-too-familiar emotions again is draining. Black lives matter. Stop killing us. The blood of your brothers and sisters cries out from the ground. Justice will roll down like waters. Lord, have mercy."

In Esther, we're invited to contemplate a woman's choice that ends up affecting an entire empire. She makes this choice when she steps into her true identity as a beloved of God; a member of God's chosen people. This choice is a conscious one to risk using her position of power to the benefit of her people who are without power. And when she does this, God uses her to bring justice and healing to an unjust system and salvation to her people.

Church, would we be like Esther? Would we be like Esther today? Would we be like Esther in this world; in our "such a time as this?"

Would you pray with me?

God, I thank You for the gift of Esther. It is such a unique book and I thank You for the ways that Your providence has allowed me to teach on this portion of Esther today given what has happened in our world; given what has happened in our communities; given what has happened in our country.

And God, I want to submit this day to You and I want to bring myself and our community before You and I want You, Holy Spirit, to interact with us, to bring comfort, to bring clarity, to allow whatever discomfort we might have, whatever grief we might have, whatever hope – we're longing to be able to hope – before you. And God, I want to pray and ask that You would be glorified; that Your redemptive plan that You are unfolding through history would continue and that we, as a church community, would have a part to play in that.

We love You, Lord. God, we're so thankful that we have a Savior that knows what it is to suffer at the hands of a cruel and unjust system. Jesus, that is what happened when You died. You suffered injustice; You know what that feels like. Would You be with us? Would You empower us to have the courage of Esther? In Your name, amen.