

In my email to you this week I mentioned one thing about the book of Esther, that gets a lot of attention. You'd expect books in the Bible to speak about God, but curiously, the story of Esther never explicitly mentions God.

Yet God's fingerprints are all over this story.
Evidence of God's presence, power, and protection are everywhere.

Have you ever looked at certain events in your life, and wondered what God was doing at those times, or if God was working behind the scenes at all?

Well the story of Esther is a story of amazing courage –the courage of a person who risked everything trusting that God is indeed working behind the scenes.
Esther put all her chips in, betting on God.
It was win or lose and for Esther that meant risking her life

The setting for this story is the fifth century B.C.
The city was Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire.
The southern kingdom of Judah had been carried into exile, a move orchestrated by God as loving discipline because of their repeated unfaithfulness.

According to God's plan, after 70 years the Jews finally had an opportunity to return home
About 50,000 of them did. The rest acclimated and became integrated into the Persian culture.
So this explains the dynamics going on in our Lower Story, the story of the Jewish people in Persia.

In this story we meet Esther.
Aside from her beauty, Esther didn't have a lot going for her.
She was an orphan, she was raised by her cousin, Mordecai.
And while most of God's people had returned to Jerusalem, she and Mordecai remained behind in the city of Susa. Living as a Jew in the heart of the Persian Empire wasn't particularly easy and carried with it risks of prejudice, even death.

The king at the time, Xerxes, was considered the most powerful man in the world. He was known for his extravagance and recklessness.

During the third year of his reign, Xerxes threw a huge party and showcased his vast wealth to all the military and civic leaders from his kingdom, which stretched from India to the Mediterranean Sea.

After seven days of partying, and far too much alcohol, Xerxes sends for his wife, Queen

Vashti, to show off her beauty to his guests. The implication here, is that she was being made an object for these drunken men to lust after.

But she takes a stand and refuses to go.

Furious, the king consults with his legal experts to determine what he should do about this perceived slight. They advise him to issue an irrevocable decree to banish her from the palace and find a new queen.

That was the end of Vashti.

And so Xerxes sends his aides throughout the entire kingdom to find a replacement.

Whoever was selected had no choice in the matter.

They were simply carted off.

And as it turns out, Esther is chosen as one of the candidates and taken to the palace.

Her protective cousin, Mordecai, warns her not to reveal to anyone that she is a Jew, and he hangs out near the palace gates every day to try to find out how she is doing.

After twelve months of pampering, it is time for the candidates to go before the king so he can choose his new queen. And the instant Xerxes sees Esther—he immediately selects her to be his queen, places the royal crown on her head, throws another huge party, and proclaims the day a holiday throughout his kingdom.

So far all we have is another Lower Story event –

a king using his power to get whatever he wants.

But the story is about to take a decidedly Upper Story turn.

Esther was in the right place at the right time for a reason

and that reason is God's plan to bring salvation through His chosen people, a plan which extends all the way to you and me.

In the Lower Story, coincidences and random events occur almost daily.

But in the Upper Story, there are no coincidences.

It is no accident that a Jewish girl in exile finds herself wearing the queen's crown.

Shortly after Esther's coronation, Xerxes promotes one of his officials, Haman, to a position of prominence. And Haman had a Napoleon complex, so he required everyone at the king's gate to kneel before him.

But Mordecai, who still visits the palace each

day to check on Esther, was a faithful Jew and would not bow to anyone except for God, and so he refuses to kneel to Haman.

The other officials notice and urge him to comply, but Mordecai refuses, telling them he is a Jew. When the aides report this back to Haman, he decides it wouldn't be enough to just kill Mordecai — he asks and receives permission from the king to kill every Jew in Persia.

Every Jew in the 127 provinces of Persia is targeted to be killed, but it has to be on one specific day. To determine the date when Haman and his forces will go after the Jews, they roll the dice and land on Adar 13 (equivalent to our February or March), a day roughly eleven months away.

So a decree goes out, naming the date for the execution of every single Jew in Persia, in essence placing every Jew on death row for eleven months, because once the king's seal is stamped on a decree, nothing can repeal it.

When Mordecai sees the decree, he is so distressed that he publicly mourns in front of the palace. Day in and day out, he marches in front of the palace wearing sackcloth and ashes, the symbol of grief, to mourn the approaching day of annihilation.

When Queen Esther's attendants tell her about her cousin, she sends them to him to find out why he is in such distress.

Mordecai sees his opportunity.

Only he knows that the queen is a Jew. He tells her about Haman's plot to kill every Jew in the kingdom and begs her to approach the king and beg for mercy for her people.

Remember Vashti? Esther did.

As much as she wanted to go to bat for her people, she feared it would be hopeless.

Approach the king without being summoned, and you mysteriously vanish.

That's when Mordecai must have gotten a glimpse of the Upper Story.

- Why had they stayed behind in Babylon when all their Jewish friends returned to Jerusalem?
- Why did Vashti refuse to go to her king when she was summoned?
- Why was Esther among those chosen to become candidates for Xerxes's new queen?
- And why did Haman have to have it in for the Jews?

Mordecai's reply to Queen Esther reveals, through a question, why all of these random events occurred: "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?"

What would you do if you had to risk everything to accomplish the one reason you were placed on this earth?

Esther weighs Mordecai's sobering question and replies,

"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."

After three days, she approaches the king.
 What should have been certain death is greeted with yet another "coincidence" as the king tells her she can request anything — up to half his kingdom — and it will be hers.

What luck! Or should we say, “what providence!”

She requests a dinner that very evening with the king and Haman, a dinner at which she simply asks the king if he and Haman will join her for another dinner the next night. At that dinner she exposes Haman's plan to destroy her and her people, revealing for the first time that she is a Jew.

The king is so upset that he storms out of the room, but Haman remains behind to beg for Esther's mercy.

And in yet another case of bad luck, Haman stumbles and falls on Esther's couch, right on top of Esther, just as the king walks back into the room. He sees his beloved queen on the couch under Haman and orders him put to death. He also appoints Mordecai to Haman's vacated position, sign that God is working behind the scenes.

Remember, the king's decree to kill every Jew cannot, by law, be revoked. But Mordecai now has the power to be granted a request of the king, so he asks Xerxes to give the Jews permission to at least defend themselves.

On Adar 13, non-Jewish people from all 127 provinces attacked the Jews. But the Jewish people were ready, and they defeated their attackers.

The next day they celebrated, a tradition that continues to this day. It's called the feast of Purim, from the word pur, which means “dice.”

Jews celebrate Purim every year on March 10 as a reminder that life is not ruled by chance but by his sovereign power. And God's sovereign power is not limited to Jerusalem but reaches into Babylon and Persia and anywhere else his people live.

So let's bring this story home to you and me.

What if your greatest fear, your heaviest burden, has been given to you "for such a time as this"? What if God is working behind the scenes in your life right now?

What if God is calling you to take a faithful stand for a friend who is close to losing their marriage, or a friend whose son or daughter who is struggling with addiction or a friend who keeps making bad decisions, because they are drifting through life and don't know Jesus?

Esther could have told her cousin to mind his own business: "Leave me alone. It's comfortable in the palace. Being a queen has its privileges. Only a fool would risk all that I have." And who would have blamed her? Look what happened to the last queen who refused to obey the palace rules?

Thankfully, the risks we face are not matters of life and death, but what if you took a stand for God this week?

What if the next time you are at school or work, or with some friends, and they start bad-mouthing someone, and know what you are hearing is gossip, it's harming the reputation of that person, and breaking the 8th commandment...
 ...what if instead of standing by silently, what if you spoke up and took a risk...
 and had the courage to say something kind about the person who is being attacked and defended them
 ...or maybe even call the conversation what it is: gossip
 and refuse to participate as a matter of principle.

The truth is, God is working behind the scenes every day:

- to save a person's good name and reputation
- to save marriages
- to save people from addiction
- to save people who are lost and drifting through life
- and in many places in this world to save people like Pastor Saeed, who face persecution for their faith.

Like Esther, I believe God still speaks to us in a quiet whisper, offering us the blessed privilege of "saving his people" through courageous acts of loving obedience.

Imagine all the ways we can reflect God's love.

Imagine what may happen in our families, neighborhoods, cities, nations, and world if we were more willing to take a stand for God.

Esther was willing to take her chances because she knew who controlled the dice.

King Solomon wrote in the book of Proverbs: "We may roll the dice, but the LORD determines how they fall."

Let us put our faith in God,
 who is always working behind the scenes for your good and for mine.¹ Amen.

¹ This sermon is indebted to the preaching of Pastor Randy Frazee