

4 When Mordecai learned what had been done, he tore his clothes, dressed in mourning clothes, and put ashes on his head. Then he went out into the heart of the city and cried out loudly and bitterly. 2 He went only as far as the King's Gate because it was against the law for anyone to pass through it wearing mourning clothes. 3 At the same time, in every province and place where the king's order and his new law arrived, a very great sadness came over the Jews. They gave up eating and spent whole days weeping and crying out loudly in pain. Many Jews lay on the ground in mourning clothes and ashes. 4 When Esther's female servants and eunuchs came and told her about Mordecai, the queen's whole body showed how upset she was. She sent everyday clothes for Mordecai to wear instead of mourning clothes, but he rejected them.

5 Esther then sent for Hathach, one of the royal eunuchs whose job it was to wait on her. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and find out what was going on and why he was acting this way. 6 Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the city square in front of the King's Gate. 7 Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him. He spelled out the exact amount of silver that Haman promised to pay into the royal treasury. It was in exchange for the destruction of the Jews. 8 He also gave Hathach a copy of the law made public in Susa concerning the Jews' destruction so that Hathach could show it to Esther and report it to her. Through him Mordecai ordered her to go to the king to seek his kindness and his help for her people. 9 Hathach came back and told Esther what Mordecai had said.

10 In reply Esther ordered Hathach to tell Mordecai: 11 "All the king's officials and the people in his provinces know that there's a single law in a case like this. Any man or woman who comes to the king in the inner courtyard without being called is to be put to death. Only the person to whom the king holds out the gold scepter may live. In my case, I haven't been called to come to the king for the past thirty days."

12 When they told Mordecai Esther's words, 13 he had them respond to Esther: "Don't think for one minute that, unlike all the other Jews, you'll come out of this alive simply because you are in the palace. 14 In fact, if you don't speak up at this very important time, relief and rescue will appear for the Jews from another place, but you and your family will die. But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family."

15 Esther sent back this word to Mordecai: 16 "Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa and tell them to give up eating to help me be brave. They aren't to eat or drink anything for three whole days, and I myself will do the same, along with my female servants. Then, even though it's against the law, I will go to the king; and if I am to die, then die I will." -**Common English Bible**

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*(Sung to tune of "Where is love?") "Where is God?"* This is a good question, set in a perfect minor key, for the season of Advent and a consideration of the Book of Esther. It's a good question as we consider the plight of refugees that our focal image evokes, surely mamas who left papas behind to fight a brutal war and found themselves and their children en route to a strange land might have been singing "Where is God?" Those whose lives have been upended by natural disasters, disease, or violence might sing "Where is God?" Those struggling to stay

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warm in their tents or their vehicles might sing “*Where is God?*” There are moments, for all of us, when our hearts are filled with wonder and awe and absolute confidence in the presence and power of God. But there are other moments, many moments, when God’s presence is hidden or imperceptible. Our vision can get crowded by all the demands on us, and all the hurts and fear in us, and all the wrong around us, on all the threats to balanced, healthy life that seem so numerous.

Sometimes when we need to make a decision and don’t know what is best and clarity eludes us.... we ask “*Where is God?*” Most of us don’t get burning bushes or dampened fleece... we don’t hear God’s voice audibly... we rely on brief flashes of insight, on gentle nudges, or gut feelings, or whatever door happens to open in front of us...understandably, many of us can live with great uncertainty about whether God is actively at work in our lives and in our world more generally. We hope God is. We pray, sometimes, as if God is. And sometimes we know for sure God is, but often deep down we ask “*Where is God?*”

On the one hand, you can imagine the Jewish people of the Diaspora, at large in the great Persian empire, threatened by a capricious order authorized by a buffoon king and drafted by his villainous henchman, an order that called for all of the Jews, both young and old, even women and little children, to be wiped out, killed, and destroyed... and then their property plundered... you can imagine that in their mourning they might have been asking “*Where is God?*” This is the situation that prompted the grief at the beginning of our story today... I’ll say more about that, but there’s another reason to sing this when you’re reading Esther— God is never named in this entire book, not once. There is a re-write of Esther that seeks to remedy this, in the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Bible, but in the Original Hebrew, not a single mention of God. There are some hints, but not even a direct mention of the act of prayer. It sure seems like it does because we hear of fasting... and so often in the Bible fasting and prayer go together like a wink and a smile... but look at chapter four closely... read the whole book... no mention of prayer. I learned this week that the name Esther means “hidden,” perhaps this name is a clue to God’s presence in the story.

Many faithful, both Jewish and Christian, have questioned the value of this book. But I’m glad it stuck around. There’s a lot of humor in the book. And the chapter before us today, while not as obviously funny, is quite inspiring... it has captured imaginations for millennia... But let me

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catch you up. I've told you about the dread order for the total destruction of Jewish people in all the Persian provinces... but where did that come from? And who was Mordecai? And Esther? And Haman?

Let me fill you in... For the past two weeks we've been hanging out in a pretty rough moment in Israelite history, just before the Babylonian conquest and exile. Now we've jumped quite a bit ahead to the Persian period... the Persians conquered the Babylonians and controlled massive territory, from the Balkans to Central Asia, and massive numbers of people, millions, half the world's population at the time, for over two hundred years. Now, on the one hand the Persians are remembered rather kindly as it was a Persian emperor who returned the exiles to Jerusalem. But... a lot of time had passed... and some of the exiles had settled in to their new lands... and they didn't go back. And generally there was religious tolerance in the Persian Period. It was the most diverse and pluralistic empire of its time... and tolerance was key to survival. The story of Esther suggests that occasionally the practices of the Jewish people marked them as a distinct and easily targeted minority in this diverse empire. It is not surprising that this book still captures imaginations; we know that this has been true repeatedly throughout history.

A word about history... this book, while rooted in history, and referencing some historical characters... appears to be more of a historical novella than history proper per se.. It's pretty enjoyable, if, at times, disturbing, reading. If you didn't take me up on my invitation to read it before this morning, why not read it this afternoon?

Though by chapter 4 Esther is the Queen of Persia, the primary chosen one of King Ahasuerus, at the beginning of this book he has another queen— Vashti. He throws a raucous six month party, followed by a one week party... alcohol flowing freely all the while and then summons his gorgeous queen Vashti to make an appearance before him and all his drunken friends. She refuses to appear... and for her disobedience, to deter other women from following suit... she is deposed as queen and a search for a new queen begins. Ultimately Esther, a.k.a. Hadassah, is selected for her beauty. Mordecai is her cousin and foster father. He counsels Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity and so she doesn't. Meanwhile Mordecai hangs out just outside the palace a lot... listening in... he actually overhears a plot on the king's life once and passes it along to save the king... yet he attracts the ire of one of the king's officials, Haman. Haman got

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the king to order everyone to kneel and bow down when Haman passes them and Mordecai persistently refused to do so. We assume Mordecai doesn't bow because he's a pious Jew and only bows to God, but it doesn't say that exactly. Remember, no mentions of God, prayer, piety... Haman has no question that Mordecai is a Jew though... and for his disrespect, Haman wills the destruction of all Jewish people in the empire. An order all out of proportion... He talks the buffoon king, who doesn't seem to have a single thought of his own, into issuing the deadly order... and that order is written down, sealed with the king's seal, and carried throughout the empire... to authorize mob violence, I suppose. Lovely. And those in the city of Susa, the first to hear the order, were in shock.

And that's where we pick up today... Mordecai and other Jews in the empire are getting word and are devastated. I found it interesting that it didn't prompt fleeing and hiding, but rather open grieving. Mordecai tears his clothes and sits in ashes and weeps and wails in the heart of the city, the city square, just outside the king's gate. This was a common place for grieving, but it seems an awfully vulnerable choice, to situate oneself close to the power that wills your destruction. Perhaps he wanted to get Esther's attention... We don't know his motivation. He did get Esther's attention... but not because she could see or hear him. She was deep within the palace, in queen's quarters, quite isolated from the affairs of the outside world and the fear of her people. Her servants somehow know she has a connection to Mordecai and they carry word of his public grief to her. She is deeply shaken by this news, but doesn't know where his grief is coming from. So begins the process of messages passed back and forth by eunuch servants. Mordecai fully informs Esther's servant of the circumstances... revealing insider information, he knows that Haman bribed the king to get this order through (isn't it ironic? Esther is inside and clueless. Mordecai is outside and aware.) Anyway, Mordecai fully informs Esther's servant of the circumstances and sends along a written copy of the order so Esther can see for herself the danger her people are in. Where before Mordecai ordered her to stay silent about her Jewish identity, now he asks her to approach the king on behalf of her people, to expose herself. Even this process of passing information back and forth was likely undermining her secret identity. Esther initially hesitates because of yet another law— a law that says she may only appear before the king when summoned by the king, the violation of which could lead to her death. And then comes the most famous verse of this book... Mordecai suggests that her life

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is in danger no matter what... and that perhaps she has come into the royal family for just such a time as this. And Esther resolves to take action, but orders Mordecai to get all the Jewish people fasting with her for three days so she could gather the courage and fortitude to break a law in order to possibly save her people.

And that's as far as we get... but what happens next? We're left with the time of waiting and preparation.... Appropriate for Advent, no? Esther is fasting and maybe praying as she contemplates the dangerous invitation before her— break a law; change her capricious king's mind; avoid the malice of Haman; reverse the planned devastation... assuming she doesn't get killed at step one. We might wish for a prophet or an angel or a sign for Esther... some clear, unmistakable, divine intervention. But we don't get it. You get the sense from chapter four that God is just around the corner... not far away... but definitely hidden. Mordecai may be expressing faith in God when he suggests help will come for the Jewish people. He may be suggesting God put Esther where she is so she could facilitate God's intended rescue. But he doesn't say so directly. And she and her servants and all the Jewish people may have been calling upon God as they fasted... but we have no record of their prayers. It's hard to say what sort of faith and religious practice the Jewish people had in the Persian Diaspora... they were surrounded by many different religious practices. But the suggestion of the wider canon in which this book sits is that the people of God are the people of God whether they use God's name or not, whether or not they can answer the question, "*Where is God?*" The God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Moses and Miriam, the God of Isaiah and Habakkuk.... is their God. And as we know... as we've been hearing all fall, this God is a God of promise and rescue and deliverance. In the Book of Esther that promise is fulfilled, that rescue arrives, deliverance comes through the courage of a young woman who breaks a law and stealthily advocates for her people... with a few other interesting twists that I'm happy to credit to God even if the book doesn't do so.

"*Where is God?*" In just a few weeks we will find God in frail and feeble human flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in manger. We will find God hidden in an infant boy threatened by a king not afraid to kill baby boys. And before too long, we will find him hanging on a tree, outlaw in the eyes of another empire and an emperor not afraid to annihilate anyone deemed a

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threat. Yet, this vulnerable, threatened, executed one is the one raised up and now ruling over all.

So we can have confidence that God is with us— living in our flesh by God's Spirit. And we can see evidence of God's presence in simple actions to share what we have, to use the power or privilege we possess, to assist the vulnerable. We see this in the actions of others, like those who lined up prams in Poland. But we also can find it in our own actions. We can find courage like Esther to break unjust laws if it means preserving life, even at risk to our own lives. We can find courage to speak truth to power. We can find courage to seek the common good. Even when we can't see clear evidence. Even when there are no obvious signs. Even when the wrong seems off so strong... we belong to God. God's got us. God's in us. God will fulfill God's purposes through us. That's what God does. That's who God is. That's where God is.

Resources in addition to scripture that significantly influenced this sermon:

The podcast *I Love to Tell Story* helpful in my study for this sermon. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1078](http://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1078)

The commentary at [workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3838) was also helpful. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3838](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3838)

Carey A. Moore. Esther in *The Anchor Bible Commentary Series*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971.

Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. "Episode 415: For Such a Time as This (Esther 4:1-17)" on their *BibleWorm Podcast*, <https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/e/episode-415-for-a-time-such-as-this-esther-41-17/>