

Where is God? 1: Who Are You Listening To?

Esther 1-2

June 11, 2017

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Every now and then, I see a movie or I read a novel, and I think, “This was such a good story; the only thing missing was any mention of God or a reliance on faith.” At least in my mind, that would have completed the story. But later, as I reflect on the story, I realize that even though God was not mentioned by name, God could be found behind the scenes, if only the characters in the story had been open to such guidance. That’s also been true in my life – in the moment, God has been hard to identify: Where is God in all of this? But later, I realize God was there working in my life – if only I had tapped into that! In the ten chapters of the book of Esther, God is never mentioned, and for some of us that’s how it is in our lives. We go through seasons in life when we can feel that God is very close, but then there are other times in life when we know there is a God, but where? As we begin our study of this Old Testament book these two questions will be our focus this morning: Where is God? Who helps us discern that God is at work in our lives?

So, let’s begin. The story of Esther takes place in Susa which is the capital city of the Persian Empire, during the reign of King Xerxes in the early 5th century BC. A century earlier, the Babylonian Empire entered the city of Jerusalem, destroying everything and taking most of the people back to Babylon where they lived in exile until in 539 BC when King Cyrus led his army into Babylon, expanding the Persian Empire from India in the east to Greece in the west and northern Africa to the south. Cyrus also made it possible for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and the city wall. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe those events. But not all of the Jews returned to Jerusalem. The book of Esther describes what happens to those Exile. As the book of Esther begins, Cyrus is no longer the king but his grandson Xerxes (or some translations use the Hebrew word, Ahasuerus). **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.** This is not your average banquet. It lasts 180 days during which Xerxes showcases his wealth and power to the officials who have come from every region of the kingdom. He wants them to see what they will be part of if they stay loyal to the king. At the conclusion of this six month showcase, Xerxes throws a banquet for everyone who lives in the capital city of Susa. This banquet is one long drinking party, and by the end of seven days, they are inebriated. And Xerxes, as inebriated as any of them, wants to do something that will impress his inner circle of advisors. He settles on this idea: I will have my wife, Queen Vashti, the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, enter the room wearing nothing but the crown on her head. It is an incredibly stupid idea but Xerxes is drunk and no one questions king Xerxes. So, he sends seven servants with the order for Queen Vashti to come. **But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come.** She says, No! Good for her, right? In this culture, no one says no to the king no matter how outrageous the command, but Vashti does. She has the courage no one else has. She says, I am the Queen and you are going to treat me like one. I will not let you or anyone else grab and grope me. I won’t play your game. The answer is No.

But Xerxes is the king, so what’s he do? **Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king.** The seven are listed by name. They are Xerxes’ inner circle. They have special access to the king. One of these advisors, Memukan, goes to the king and says, we have a problem. “Because your wife said no to you, this is trouble for us. Our wives can now say no. You’ve got to fix this.” And so, Xerxes issues a decree that every woman

must respect and say yes to whatever their husbands want. Do you see what they've done? Their only focus – this inner circle of advisors - is themselves and they do not even consider how destructive this is for others. It's horrible advice, but Xerxes listens and takes it. I wonder – who do we listen to? When you are in a difficult situation who do you bring into your inner circle to give you guidance on what to do? There are some who want people around them who will give them permission to do whatever they want to do. They will say “yes” to anything in order to keep their place in the inner circle.

I asked a few of the people in our church how they select the people in their workplace who are part of their inner circle. And at the top of the list is trust. We need people close to us that we can trust to be honest with us, to speak the truth. But that only works if we, in turn, will listen to the honest feedback that is shared. In fact, what I heard over and over again is that character is even more important than competency. Who do you listen to? There are times when we need other people to help us discern what's right and what God wants us to do. And if you don't have the right people with the right motives, you can be led in a direction that at first is slightly off center, but the longer you continue in that direction, the further you go from what's right. The wrong people can take you and those around you down a path to destruction. Imagine if Xerxes' advisors had provided different advice; what that would have meant for women in the Persian Empire and how that might have changed the course of history. But Xerxes had a group of men who were more afraid of losing their power and their access to the king and they were quick to sacrifice any possible respect for women. But... God was up to something.

Chapter two, verse one: **Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.** It is now four years later, and Xerxes is still thinking about what he's done. Vashti is no longer the Queen. During these four years, his advisors also recommended they attack and bring down the Greeks, but the Persians failed miserably. Xerxes comes home defeated, much of his wealth depleted as a result of listening to that same group of advisors who also advised him against Vashti. He had it all, but no one would tell him the truth, except for one person who said No and she was rejected. What do Xerxes' advisors come up with next? They think Xerxes needs a new queen, and they come up with a plan to bring all the beautiful virgins from throughout the empire. They will put together a pageant beyond all pageants where Xerxes can select the next queen. And what does Xerxes do? He accepts their advice.

Have you ever watched the Bachelor? It's a dating show on television where women send in audition tapes to be on the show and compete to see which one the Bachelor will select. That's not exactly what we find in the book of Esther. The women on the Bachelor choose to be there, but for the women our story, who were probably 14 or 15 years old, they didn't have a choice. They are kidnapped from their homes and those not chosen to be the queen will end up forced into a lifetime of prostitution. The word in scripture is “concubine,” but make no mistake – it is prostitution. Among the women abducted for Xerxes' pageant is a girl named Esther – young, frightened, but also extremely courageous. She must have wondered, “Where is God in the midst of this? What is happening to me and where are you, God? I don't want to be where I am.” Let's not overlook what's going on: here's an extremely powerful person getting what he wants and a young woman get caught in the middle. It's wrong. It was wrong in the 5th century BC. It is wrong when it happens today. So, where is God in this? That's what we see next.

Esther's father and mother had died, and she was adopted by her cousin, Mordecai, who raised her as his own daughter. **When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai...** (and Esther was among them). **Esther pleased him and won his favor.** As a result, Hegai assigns

seven servants to stay with Esther and guide her. What we discover is that God is bringing people into Esther's life to help and to guide her. And God does this in your life, bringing people – even unlikely people into your life – but we have to be open and ready to listen. Esther also has an inner circle. There is Mordecai who shows up each day at the gate to the king's palace to encourage her. There is Hegai who sees something in Esther and decided to be her coach. There are the seven women assigned to Esther who help her understand what's happening and how to prepare herself so that she is selected by the king. And later, there will be a man named Shaashgaz who selects Esther to meet the king. These are the people who enter Esther's life and we see that God is working behind the scenes to provide direction – and Esther is paying attention. **The king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval... so he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen.**

Esther goes from least to greatest: orphaned child of a refugee family in exile, taken forcibly from her home, her life and future at risk, and yet people enter her life at critical moments along the way and she is open and willing to receive their help. Her circle of influence was entirely different from Xerxes' inner circle. Who are you listening to? What are you tapping into for advice and direction in your life? Are they people focused on their own self-interest or are they alongside you for your benefit? As I look back on my life, the reason I am who I am and where I am today is that I listened to the people God sent into my life. There were times when I was alone and didn't have people I could talk to, people I could trust and those were the lowest points in my life – not because of the circumstances surrounding me and not because there were not people around me, but I was alone because I wasn't open and I wouldn't listen and I thought I already knew what was best for me. And the very best times of my life were not necessarily when the circumstances were easy, but I was meeting with people who listened to me and prayed with me, challenged me and held me accountable. I am convinced that we were not created to do life alone. Being Christian is about being in community – doing life together.

Some of us have friends, but not the kind of friends who would pray with us. Some of us have hundreds of friends on Facebook, but no one to help us discern what God is up to in our lives. And what I want for you is for you to have people in your life who can look you in the eye and say God loves you – you have worth and value, people who can ask you the tough questions and say things you may not want to hear, and won't walk away from you.

Who are the people on your team? You may be in a place where you need to do one of these three things. You may need to ASSEMBLE a team. Who are the people in your life that you've given permission to be there – and you will be there for them. If you don't have a team, invite someone to coffee and say I need your help – would you listen to me? Or you may need to ASSESS your team. You have people in your life, but are they really listening and helping or are they saying yes and telling you what you want to hear. It may be time to take an audit of the people closest to you. Or you may need to ADJUST your team. You may have buddies who do things together, but you cannot go deep. It's all Minnesota nice, and you don't share weaknesses and vulnerabilities and doubts you have about life. When did you stop and pray for each other? You may have a lot of friends and still end up very lonely.

As you ASSEMBLE, ASSESS, and ADJUST, you will begin to see and others will help you see where God is in your life – and will help you to be everything God wants you to be. This church can help you. We have faith groups that are a small group of people who meet regularly to come alongside each other to share and pray and study and serve. We need other people and other people need us. That's how God is best able to work in our lives.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of June 11, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Almighty God, your way of working in our world is often beyond our ability to comprehend. You work in and through the people around us. You can redeem what seems beyond repair to us. You can transform what seems hopeless. You can bring life out of death, and for that we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

Monday, June 12

Scripture: Esther 1:1-12

This is what happened back when Ahasuerus lived, the very Ahasuerus who ruled from India to Cush—one hundred twenty-seven provinces in all. At that time, Ahasuerus ruled the kingdom from his royal throne in the fortified part of Susa. In the third year of his rule he hosted a feast for all his officials and courtiers. The leaders of Persia and Media attended, along with his provincial officials and officers. He showed off the awesome riches of his kingdom and beautiful treasures as mirrors of how very great he was. The event lasted a long time—six whole months, to be exact! After that the king held a seven-day feast for everyone in the fortified part of Susa. Whether they were important people in the town or not, they all met in the walled garden of the royal palace. White linen curtains and purple hangings were held up by shining white and red-purple ropes tied to silver rings and marble posts. Gold and silver couches sat on a mosaic floor made of gleaming purple crystal, marble, and mother-of-pearl. They served the drinks in cups made of gold, and each cup was different. The king made sure there was plenty of royal wine. The rule about the drinks was "No limits!" The king had ordered everyone serving wine in the palace to offer as much as each guest wanted. At the same time, Queen Vashti held a feast for women in King Ahasuerus' palace. On the seventh day, when wine had put the king in high spirits, he gave an order to Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served King Ahasuerus personally. They were to bring Queen Vashti before him wearing the royal crown. She was gorgeous, and he wanted to show off her beauty both to the general public and to his important guests. But Queen Vashti refused to come as the king had ordered through the eunuchs. The king was furious, his anger boiling inside.

Observation: Over the next four weeks, we will read the entire Old Testament book of Esther and also related readings from other parts of the Bible. The story of Esther takes place in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire, during the reign of king Ahasuerus (in Greek, king Xerxes) in the early fifth century B.C. What's striking about this story is that God is never mentioned, prompting some to wonder why it was included in the Bible. But as we will discover, even though God is never mentioned, God can be seen throughout this story.

Application: In the midst of a week-long banquet which becomes a drunken brawl, the king orders the queen to do as he pleases. She says "No!" She defies the king even though the consequence may be dire. She knows his order was inappropriate and wrong. When have you stood against what is wrong even though you knew (or at least thought) there would be consequences for saying, "No"?

Prayer: God, help me to know that you are with me even when I cannot feel your presence or see what you are doing in my life. Give me the courage to boldly stand against anything contrary to your command to love. Amen.

Tuesday, June 13

Scripture: Esther 1:13-22

Now, when a need arose, the king would often talk with certain very smart people about the best way to handle it. They were people who knew both the kingdom's written laws and what judges had decided about cases in the past. The ones he talked with most often were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan. They were seven very important people in Persia and Media who, as the kingdom's highest leaders, were in the king's inner circle. So the king said to them, "According to the law, what should I do with Queen Vashti since she didn't do what King Ahasuerus ordered her through the eunuchs?" Then Memucan spoke up in front of the king and the officials. "Queen Vashti," he said, "has done something wrong not just to the king himself. She has also done wrong to all the officials and the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. This is the reason: News of what the queen did will reach all women, making them look down on their husbands. They will say, 'King Ahasuerus ordered servants to bring Queen Vashti before him, but she refused to come.' This very day, the important women of Persia and Media who hear about the queen will tell the royal officials the same thing. There will be no end of put-downs and arguments. Now, if the king wishes, let him send out a royal order and have it written into the laws of Persia and Media, laws no one can ever change. It should say that Vashti will never again come before King Ahasuerus. It should also say that the king will give her royal place to someone better than she. When the order becomes public through the whole empire, vast as it is, all women will treat their husbands properly. The rule should touch everyone, whether from an important family or not." The king liked the plan, as did the other men, and he did just what Memucan said. He sent written orders to all the king's provinces. Each province received it written in its own alphabet and each people received it in its own language. It said that each husband should rule over his own house.

Observation: The king assembles a circle of seven advisers. How will he respond to his wife, the queen, who defied his command? The advisers tell the king what he wants to hear, because any other advice would threaten their position of power in their homes and their positions of prominence as advisors to the king. Their advice pleases the king who then imposes this morality on every household in Persia.

Application: Self-interest is a powerful thing, and the book of Esther shows what harm can be done when you consider your interests more important than others. We need a team of advisors who will tell us what we don't want to hear and hold us accountable to godly principles. Who are the people in your circle that you can trust? How are your decisions shaped by the advice of others?

Prayer: Lord God, you are ever-present and ready to be my guide. Help me to hear your voice in the people around me. When my enthusiasm for what I want tempts me to ignore those you have sent into my life, give me the patience to listen and the willingness to seek your purposes. Amen.

Wednesday, June 14

Scripture: Esther 2:1-4

Sometime later when King Ahasuerus was less angry, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what he had decided about her. So his young male servants said, "Let the king have a search made for beautiful young women who haven't yet married. And let the king choose certain people in all the royal provinces to lead the search. Have them bring all the beautiful young women together to the fortified part of Susa, to the women's house, to the care of Hegai

the king's eunuch in charge of the women so that he might provide beauty treatments for them. Let the young woman who pleases you the most take Vashti's place as queen." The king liked the plan and implemented it.

Observation: After Vashti is banished, the king needs a new queen. His advisors once again provide a flawed solution, but one that appeals to the king's self-interest. What might appear to be a forced beauty pageant is more analogous to a kidnapping of young women. This book may not mention God but the story of scripture is of a God who will cast down the powerful and lift up the lowly (Luke 1:52).

Application: The beginning of Esther points out the constricted world of women not only in ancient Persia but in many parts of contemporary society. Vashti had no acceptable choices. It was a man's world in which women were treated as property, and all too often not even valued. But scripture calls us "to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8).

Prayer: Thank you, God, that your ways are higher and just and always valuing each person. Give me the awareness that I need whenever I am tempted to diminish someone's worth in order to increase my status or importance. Help me to be fully available to your will and ways. Amen.

Thursday, June 15

Scripture: Esther 2:5-16

Now there was a Jew in the fortified part of Susa whose name was Mordecai, Jair's son. He came from the family line of Shimei and Kish; he was a Benjaminite. (Benjaminites had been taken into exile away from Jerusalem along with the group, which included Judah's King Jeconiah, whom Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar exiled to Babylon.) Mordecai had been a father to Hadassah (that is, Esther), though she was really his cousin, because she had neither father nor mother. The girl had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at. When her parents died, Mordecai had taken her to be his daughter. When the king's order and his new law became public, many young women were gathered into the fortified part of Susa under the care of Hegai. Esther was also taken to the palace to the care of Hegai, the one in charge of the women. The young woman pleased him and won his kindness. He quickly began her beauty treatments and gave her carefully chosen foods. He also gave her seven servants selected from among the palace servants and moved her and her servants into the nicest rooms in the women's house. (Esther hadn't told anyone her race and family background because Mordecai had ordered her not to.) Each day found Mordecai pacing back and forth along the wall in front of the women's house to learn how Esther was doing and what they were doing with her. According to the rules for women, the moment for each young woman to go to King Ahasuerus came at the end of twelve months. (She had six months of treatment with pleasant-smelling creams and six months with fragrant oils and other treatments for women.) So this is how the young woman would go to the king: They gave her anything that she asked to take with her from the women's house to the palace. In the evening she would go in, and the next morning she would return to the second women's house under the care of Shaashgaz. He was the king's eunuch in charge of the secondary wives. She would never go to the king again unless he was so pleased that he called for her by name. Soon the moment came for Esther daughter of Mordecai's uncle Abihail, whom Mordecai had taken as his own daughter, to go to the king. But she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch in charge of the women told her. (Esther kept winning the favor of everyone who saw her.) Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, to his own palace, in the tenth month (that is, the month of Tevet) in the seventh year of his rule.

Observation: We now meet Mordecai and Esther, Jews living in exile. Esther is rounded up in the king's plan to find a new queen. Mordecai is Esther's adoptive father. What we learn is that Esther has her own circle of advisors: Mordecai who meets her at the gate, Hegai who befriends her, and seven attendants. Something about Esther's countenance and readiness to listen to these varied voices will position her to be the heroine of this story.

Application: Who is on your team? Have you assembled a team? The Christian life is not a solo endeavor. If you have a team, is it time to assess the ways you are supported and held accountable? At Messiah, our faith group ministry is intended to be a circle of people who do life together.

Prayer: Lead me, Lord. Guide me in your ways. Help me see what is pleasing to you and give me the courage to change directions when necessary to live into your path. Amen.

Friday, June 16

Scripture: Exodus 18:13-21

The next day Moses sat as a judge for the people, while the people stood around Moses from morning until evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What's this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people are standing around you from morning until evening?" Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When a conflict arises between them, they come to me and I judge between the two of them. I also teach them God's regulations and instructions." Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing isn't good. You will end up totally wearing yourself out, both you and these people who are with you. The work is too difficult for you. You can't do it alone. Now listen to me and let me give you some advice. And may God be with you! Your role should be to represent the people before God. You should bring their disputes before God yourself. Explain the regulations and instructions to them. Let them know the way they are supposed to go and the things they are supposed to do. But you should also look among all the people for capable persons who respect God. They should be trustworthy and not corrupt. Set these persons over the people as officers of groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens.

Observation: Today, we look back to an earlier time in history when Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt. The people had been slaves in a foreign land and now that they were free, they needed ways to function as a community. What Jethro, who is Moses' father-in-law, observes is that Moses as the leader has taken responsibility for everything. Jethro wisely sees Moses has assumed a role that is impossible to fulfill alone.

Application: Fortunately, Moses listens to his father-in-law's advice and assembles a team to whom he delegates the work that needs to be done. Have you ever tried to do alone what could have been done more effectively with others alongside you? What is it that prompts us to resist help even when such help is needed? And, there are others who need you to be part of their team.

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, set me free in those times when I am unwilling to let go and let others into my life. Remind me that you created me to live in community. Guide me toward those I can trust, and help me to be the person that others need. Amen.

Saturday, June 17

Scripture: Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, which is near Jerusalem—a sabbath day's journey away. When they entered the city, they went to the upstairs room where they were staying. Peter, John, James, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James, Alphaeus' son; Simon the zealot; and Judas, James' son—all were united in their devotion to prayer, along with some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Observation: The book of Acts opens with the ascension of Jesus. He gives his final instruction to his apostles before he is “taken up” into heaven. Then the apostles return to the Upper Room in Jerusalem, not knowing, yet waiting for what will happen next. In verse 14, we read that they were “united” and “devotion to prayer.”

Application: What will happen next is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will break through in ways they did not imagine, but what prepares them for what's next is their commitment to be together and to be constantly in prayer. Who are the people who are praying for you? Who are the people you are praying for? Consider becoming part of a faith group at Messiah. These groups meet regularly and offer prayer, support, study and service. Contact Kami Pohl at kpohl@messiahchurchmn.org.

Prayer: Almighty God, your way of working in my life is often beyond my ability to comprehend. You work in and through the people around me. Bring me alongside others as you bring others alongside me so that together in prayer, we may be available to your direction each day. Amen.