

Where is God? 3. For such a time as this

Esther 4:12-14

June 25, 2017

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A few years ago, my family and I spent a week together on the Big Island of Hawaii. If you've never been there, it is one incredible beach after another. I had been on the island for a week before my family arrived, and every day I would go to a different beach, put up an umbrella and a chair, put on sun screen, and for the next few hours, I would read a book and take time to admire the scene before me. The sky and the ocean with its shades of blue. It was stunning. One day, when my family was with me, we returned to one of those beaches with snorkeling equipment. Instead of remaining on the beach, we got into the water and even swam below the surface and what I saw was even more amazing than above the surface. Sea turtles, that came alongside me and schools of brightly colored fish. I had never seen anything like it.

So often, from the shore we can look out and see the beauty of the world that God has made. But below the surface, there is so much more we cannot see. The deepest part of the ocean is over 36,000 feet, that's 7 miles. Most of the time, all we see is what's happening above the surface. I'm talking about our lives. But below the surface, God is doing great things – if we are paying attention.

This morning, we turn once again to the book of Esther, a book in which God is never mentioned. There are no miracles, nothing supernatural. No mention of faith influencing anyone. One could read the 10 chapters of this book and wonder, "Where is God?" But as we look below the surface of this story, God is at work.

Last week, when we left the book of Esther, the Jews are on the verge of genocide. King Xerxes had welcomed a new advisor named Haman. Haman is so trusted that the king commands everyone to bow down when in the presence of Haman, but Mordecai, who is a Jew, refuses. Mordecai says, "No." As a result, Haman comes up with a plan that will get rid of all the Jews including Mordecai. Dice are cast, called "pur" to select the day and month when this will happen, and according to the pur, it will be in 12 months. Haman takes this plan to the king who is not really paying attention, but the king gives Haman his signet ring which authorizes Haman to do whatever he wants. This order is sent by courier throughout the kingdom. In 12 months, all Jews will be killed, and the entire city of Susa is bewildered. And when Mordecai hears what will happen, his heart breaks, he tears his clothes, weeps aloud, and wonders what can be done to prevent this from happening. He tells Esther what he has heard. **"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 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."** (Esther 4:14-16)

In those days, the queen could stand in the inner court, but the only way she could approach the king and speak to him was if he raised his scepter and pointed to her – otherwise she could be killed. For 30 days, she went to the inner court and for 30 days the king did not raise his scepter. On day 31, she realizes that if he doesn't point to her, she will have to risk her life and approach the king, but on this day, he raises his scepter. As she approaches, the king notices that Esther is distraught. "What is it that you want?" he asks. "I will give you anything." What she asks is to have a meal that evening with Haman and the king. When the three of them arrive at the

banquet, the king again asks Esther what she wants. But Esther is not yet ready to make her request so she asks if the king and Haman would come to another banquet the next night. "Of course," says the king. "I will give you anything you want."

As Haman leaves the palace, who does he meet but Mordecai? Once again, Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. When Haman gets home, he is infuriated. **His wife Zerech and all his friends said to him, "Have a pole set up, reaching to a height of fifty cubits, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it."** (Esther 5:14) So during the night, workers put up this 75 foot pole. Haman is not going to wait 12 months, but the next day, he will ask the king for permission to impale Mordecai on the pole. During the night the king cannot sleep, so he orders a servant to read to him from the book that has chronicled his reign. And the servant happens to open the book to that day when Esther told Xerxes about a plot to assassinate him. And as Xerxes listens to what is read, he learns that it is Mordecai who brought that news to Esther. The king stops his attendant and asks, "Did we ever honor Mordecai for saving my life?" "No, we didn't," replies the servant. And at that very moment, Haman enters the courtyard to ask about killing Mordecai, but before Haman can make this request, the king asks: **"What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?"** Of course, Haman thinks the king is referring to him – he's the king's right hand man. So he replies, **For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'** (Esther 6:6-9) The king likes what he hears and says, do exactly what you suggest for Mordecai. Have you ever had a moment when you thought, I'm getting the award or I'm getting the bonus only to be told someone else gets it and that someone else is the last person you think deserves it? Haman does as the king commands, leading Mordecai through the city proclaiming "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor." He was ready to kill this man and now he's leading the Mordecai parade.

That evening Haman returns to the palace for the banquet that Esther has arranged. As they sit at the table, Esther says to the king, "Xerxes, you've been tricked. You have signed the order that will kill my people." She has never told the king that she was a Jew, and she says, "now the entire kingdom is preparing to kill my people." And Xerxes says, "Who tricked me into signing such a decree?" And Esther points to Haman. Xerxes is so enraged that he needs a time-out and leaves the room. Esther sits down on a couch, and Haman knows this doesn't look good for him. Wanting to make peace with Esther, he walks toward the couch but trips and falls on top of Esther at the exact moment that Xerxes returns to the room. And the king says, "What are you doing? I leave the room for a moment and you try to assault my wife. What am I going to do with you?" And one of the attendants in the room, looks out the window and points to a 75 foot pole that has just been constructed. The king says to Haman, "That's for you." And immediately, Xerxes decrees a new command to be sent throughout the kingdom negating the one Haman had tricked him into signing. And in chapter 9, we read about a celebration known that PURIM, thanking God that someone stood up and spoke out. Because of Esther's courage, the Jews were delivered from a death sentence.

On the surface of this story, God is never mentioned. When we read this story, we're left to wonder, Where is God? But when we look below the surface, God is working his purposes out. This is called providence. The same God who created the universe is not finished yet, but continues to be at work in this world and in our lives. Where is God? Look below the surface. Is it just coincidental that Esther becomes the queen. Is it just coincidental that Mordecai

overhears a plot to assassinate the king. Is it just coincidental that Mordecai's name is written in the book of annals to credit him for saving the king's life. Is it just coincidental that Mordecai does not bow down to Haman Is it just coincidental that the lot or "pur" is cast for genocide in 12 months. Is it just coincidental that after 30 days, Esther finds favor once again with the king. Where is God? Look below the surface! Is it just coincidental that Esther wants another day to make her request to the king. Is it just coincidental that Mordecai does not bow down to Haman as he leaves the banquet. Is it just coincidental that Haman decided Mordecai must be killed the next day and constructs a 75 foot pole. Is it just coincidental that the king can't sleep that night and learns Mordecai saved his life. Is it just coincidental that the king wants to honor Mordecai at the exact moment that Haman arrives. Is it just coincidental that after leading the Mordecai parade, there is another banquet where Esther points a finger at Haman. It just so happens that the king enters the room at the exact moment it appears Haman is assaulting the queen. Is it just coincidental that the attendant looks out the window and sees a 75 foot pole. Is it just coincidental that the king issues a new decree that delivers the Jews. Is all of this coincidental? Look below the surface and all we see is God working. And isn't that our lives as well.

The day after my Dad died, we found a folder that contained an autobiography that he has written. There was much about my Dad's life that he never shared with me, but as I read what he had written I was able to connect the dots – not only of his life, but my life. My grandfather was a Methodist pastor in Minnesota and North Dakota. My Dad also became a pastor, serving churches in South Dakota and Minnesota. He never encouraged me, nor did he discourage me from becoming a pastor. And I fought this calling for years, but what I realize now was that he may not have encouraged me but he prepared me – and as I connect the dots in my life and as I look below the surface, God has never stopped working in my life.

Where is God? For most of her life, Esther never spoke up about her faith. She never identified herself as a Jew, but then one day, she stood up and spoke up – and it changed the course of history. Mordecai comes to Esther and tells her that her whole life, God has prepared her for this moment. And God is orchestrating something in your life, but we've got to tap into that. When the moment came, Mordecai could have remained silent. When the moment came, Esther could have said no. So how do we tap into what God is doing? How can we be aware?

That brings me to this Stand up Paddle Board. I was thinking about this as a metaphor for paying attention to God's providential ways. Many of us are living on the shore. We enjoy the beach and the view. We have the umbrella up, a cool drink and a favorite book, and we are just sitting there. But we were not meant for the shore. There's so much more than what we see on the surface. But we've got to get into the water – Get out of our comfort zone and get in the water. That's the first step. And once we are in the water, we've got to get into position. And as I learned last week, we I got out on the water, it's not that hard to get into position. Just pay attention and then carefully stand up. And the day, I was on the paddle board it was windy. But the water held me up and when a gust of wind pushed me off balance to the point where I thought I could not stand, I put my paddle in the water and what was below the surface held me up. Isaiah 40 tells us: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ... Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength." When we reach a point in life where we think, I can't do this – keep going, God is not finished yet. Because when you are standing and feeling that God is beneath you, holding you up, there is a feeling of joy unlike anything else in this world. There is joy – even when the circumstances are far from it – even when there are waves and wind and condition that make you want to quit – there is joy because we know that God is at work below the surface.

Mordecai says to Esther, If you don't do this, God will find another way and you will miss it. We live in challenging times. God is working below the surface preparing you whether you are 16, 36, 56, or 86. If you remain on the shore, you will miss it. Esther stood up because of what was happening around her. There are people around us who may not be under a death sentence but they are hurting or alone – or not even aware of what their lives could be like once they too tap into the joy of the Lord. And I think God is calling you and me to stand up, know that God is beneath us, and feel the joy.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of June 25, 2017

Weekly Prayer: Holy God, we thank you for your providential grace at work in our lives. We need you. Come alongside us even when we think we already know what's best for us. Give us open hearts, wise minds, enthused spirits, and hands ready to serve you and your purposes in this world. Amen.

Monday, June 26

Scripture: Esther 4:1-8

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. 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. 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. 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. 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. Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the city square in front of the King's Gate. 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. 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.

Observation: In today's reading, we learn how Mordecai and Esther respond to the king's decree that all the Jews be killed. At the end of chapter three, Haman and the king are celebrating. Then Mordecai adds his voice to the outcry against this decree. Only later does Esther learn what has happened.

Application: In chapter two, we learned that behind the decree to exterminate the Jews was Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman. Thus, Haman retaliates by convincing the king to order the decree. Mordecai's response is understandable. He and his people have been placed under a death sentence. But could Mordecai also feel personal responsibility for their peril? Are there times when doing the right thing for the right reason brings suffering? Have you ever stood against a wrong, only to suffer a consequence for doing so?

Prayer: God of justice and mercy, as I see words and actions that harm others, give me the wisdom to know what to do and the courage to respond. May your presence be my constant companion. Amen.

Tuesday, June 27

Scripture: Esther 4:9-17

Hathach came back and told Esther what Mordecai had said. In reply Esther ordered Hathach to tell Mordecai: "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." When they told Mordecai Esther's words, 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. 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." Esther sent back this word to Mordecai: "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." So Mordecai left where he was and did exactly what Esther had ordered him.

Observation: Mordecai provides Esther with the information she needs to understand what is happening and to intercede for her people. To this point, the king does not know that Esther is a Jew. Although she does not refuse to help, Esther seems ready to refuse to lend assistance. Even as the queen, she is forbidden to approach the king without his invitation. But Mordecai responds, "Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family."

Application: How does God work in and through us? The book of Esther raises the question of God's providence. Could Esther be where she is for a purpose beyond what she realized? When have you found that you were in a place where you could do what was needed even though that is not why you came to that place? You may be tempted to refuse getting involved, but maybe you are there "for a moment like this"!

Prayer: All-knowing and ever-present God, in my busyness, I am likely to miss opportunities to respond to the needs of others. And when I see a need, I am likely to defer to someone else to provide help. Slow me down, so I can see what is happening around me. Then, open my heart and mind to what you want me to do. Amen.

Wednesday, June 28

Scripture: Esther 5:1-8

Three days later, Esther put on royal clothes and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace, facing the palace itself. At that moment the king was inside sitting on his royal throne and facing the palace doorway. When the king noticed Queen Esther standing in the entry court, he was pleased. The king held out to Esther the gold scepter in his hand, and she came forward and touched the scepter's tip. Then the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What do you want? I'll give you anything—even half the kingdom." Esther answered, "If the king wishes, please come today with Haman for the feast that I have prepared for him." "Hurry, get Haman," the king ordered, "so we can do what Esther says." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. As they sipped wine, the king asked, "Now what is it you wish? I'll give it to you. What do you want? I'll do anything—even give you half the kingdom." Esther answered, "This is my wish and this is what I want: If I please the king, and if the king wishes to

grant my wish and my desire, I'd like the king and Haman to come to another feast that I will prepare for them. Tomorrow I will answer the king's questions."

Observation: Even though the king offers to grant whatever Esther might request, Esther is wise enough to know that Haman is the king's closest confidante and the king is prone to unpredictable mood changes. So, Esther is cautious and careful. Remember that Haman made his case to the king based on half-truths and lies. Esther does not. Her goal is life, not death. She utilizes what resources she has in hopes of saving her people.

Application: Mordecai wants Esther to see that God's providence has placed her in this special role – for such a time as this. But is Esther in control of her plans? Is she developing the plan or did God? Only in retrospect will it be clear how much providence has been at work. When have you looked back only to see what you could not see when you were in the moment?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for all you are doing in this world. Not only did you set this world in motion at the beginning of time, but you have been at work up to this very moment. Even when I do not see all that is happening around me, you do. I give my life to you, resting in your providential care. Amen.

Thursday, June 29

Scripture: Esther 5:9-14

That day Haman left Esther's place happy, his spirits high, but then he saw Mordecai in the King's Gate. Mordecai neither stood up nor seemed the least bit nervous around him, so Haman suddenly felt great rage toward Mordecai. But Haman held himself back and went on home. He sent word that his friends and his wife Zeresh should join him there. Haman boasted to them about his great wealth and his many sons. He told all about how the king had honored him by promoting him over the officials and high royal workers. "Best of all," Haman said, "Queen Esther has invited no one else but me to join the king for food and drinks that she has prepared. In fact, I've been called to join the king at her place tomorrow! But all this loses its meaning every time I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the King's Gate." So his wife Zeresh and all his friends told him: "Have people prepare a pointed pole seventy-five feet high. In the morning, tell the king to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then you can go with the king to the feast in a happy mood." Haman liked the idea and had the pole prepared.

Observation: Mordecai's simple act of refusing to honor Haman holds great power. Haman is the second most powerful man in the world, but Mordecai has gotten under his skin. Instead of waiting twelve months to execute Mordecai (along with all of the other Jews), Haman decides (upon his wife's advice) to move up the time by eleven months. He authorizes a 75 foot pole be constructed to impale Mordecai.

Application: The irony in this scene is that Mordecai is already a condemned man. All Haman has to do is to wait for the edict to take effect. But patience is not one of Haman's virtues (if he has any). "Pride comes before disaster, and arrogance before a fall" Proverbs 16:18. How does pride become Haman's undoing? When has pride gotten you into trouble?

Prayer: Gracious God, you know me. You know my attitude. You know all my ways. Grant me a humble heart so that I will see what you see. Grant me the patience to grow closer and closer to your will and ways. Amen.

Friday, June 30

Scripture: Esther 6:1-13

That same night, the king simply couldn't sleep. He had the official royal records brought in, and his young male servants began reading them to the king. They came to the report about Mordecai informing on Bigthan and Teresh. (They were the two royal eunuchs among the guards protecting the king's doorway, who secretly planned to kill King Ahasuerus.) "What was done to honor and reward Mordecai for this?" the king asked. His young male servants replied, "Nothing was done for him, sir." "Who is that out in the courtyard?" the king asked. (Haman had just entered the outer courtyard of the palace. He had come to tell the king to impale Mordecai on the pole that he had set up for him.) The king's servants answered, "That's Haman standing out in the courtyard, sir." So the king said, "Have him come in." When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man whom the king really wants to honor?" Haman thought to himself, Whom would the king really want to honor more than me? So Haman said to the king, "Here's what should be done for the man the king really wants to honor. Have servants bring out a royal robe that the king himself has worn and a horse on which the king himself has ridden. It should have a royal crest on its head. Then hand over the robe and the horse to another man, one of the king's officials. Have him personally robe the man whom the king really wants to honor and lead him on the horse through the city square. As he goes, have him shout, 'This is what the king does for the man he really wants to honor!'" Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the robe and the horse just as you've said and do exactly that for Mordecai the Jew, who works at the King's Gate. Don't leave out a single thing you've said!" So Haman took the robe and the horse and put the robe on Mordecai. He led him on horseback through the city square, shouting as he went, "This is what the king does for the man he really wants to honor!" Afterward, Mordecai returned to the King's Gate, while Haman hurried home feeling great shame, his head covered. Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Both his friends and his wife said to him, "You've already begun to lose out to Mordecai. If he is of Jewish birth, you'll not be able to win against him. You are surely going to lose out to him."

Observation: A series of providential coincidences run through this chapter. Haman has accelerated the timing of Mordecai's execution, which Esther would not have known. Then during the night, the king cannot sleep. So, he asks a servant to read to him from the annals of his own biography, realizing he never rewarded the man who saved his life. As Haman arrives to speak to the king about Mordecai's execution, the king consults Haman about a reward for Mordecai.

Application: What are the chances? Albert Einstein is credited with this saying: "Coincidences are God's way of remaining anonymous." God is not trying to be anonymous, but what we see in the moment as a coincidence may not be coincidental at all. How has God been at work in your life? What is occurring at this time in your life? Could God be there – in the details?

Prayer: God, you are here. You are as near to me as the next breath that I take. Thank you for your faithfulness. Even when I cannot see you or hear your voice, you are with me. Help me to lean into your providential care with trust and hope. Amen.

Saturday, July 1

Scripture: Esther 6:14-7:10

They were still discussing this with him when several royal eunuchs arrived. They quickly hurried Haman off to the feast that Esther had prepared.

When the king and Haman came in for the banquet with Queen Esther, the king said to her, "This is the second day we've met for wine. What is your wish, Queen Esther? I'll give it to you. And what do you want? I'll do anything—even give you half the kingdom." Queen Esther answered, "If I please the king, and if the king wishes, give me my life—that's my wish—and the lives of my people too. That's my desire. We have been sold—I and my people—to be wiped out, killed, and destroyed. If we simply had been sold as male and female slaves, I would have said nothing. But no enemy can compensate the king for this kind of damage." King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is this person, and where is he? Who would dare do such a thing?" Esther replied, "A man who hates, an enemy—this wicked Haman!" Haman was overcome with terror in the presence of the king and queen. Furious, the king got up and left the banquet for the palace garden. But Haman stood up to beg Queen Esther for his life. He saw clearly that the king's mood meant a bad end for him. The king returned from the palace garden to the banquet room just as Haman was kneeling on the couch where Esther was reclining. "Will you even molest the queen while I am in the house?" the king said. The words had barely left the king's mouth before covering Haman's face with dread. Harbona, one of the eunuchs serving the king, said, "Sir, look! There's the stake that Haman made for Mordecai, the man who spoke up and did something good for the king. It's standing at Haman's house—seventy-five feet high." "Impale him on it!" the king ordered. So they impaled Haman on the very pole that he had set up for Mordecai, and the king's anger went away.

Observation: Esther's character is so strong by the end of chapter 7 that one almost feels sorry for Haman. He has fallen into a trap, mostly of his own making. Esther is patient in implementing her plan and brilliant in her analysis of her enemy's methods. What makes this story all the more remarkable is that it comes out of patriarchal culture. Esther is presented as strong and virtuous. Her wise and courageous actions will save the Jews.

Application: Esther is successful because she leaves her comfort zone to become someone else's blessing. Success is built on her selflessness. She acts for her people's sake. You can also experience success like Esther's when you are motivated by helping others. God has given you friends, family and a voice for this time. What will you do?

Prayer: Loving God, as you acted through Esther's readiness to put others before herself, be the force within me to step out of my comfort zone to act for others. Give me an open heart, a wise mind, an enthused spirit, and hands ready to serve you and your purposes in this world. Amen.