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**August 19, 2012**



## Permission to Rest

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### Esther 4:1-17

*When Mordecai had learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes and went through the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry; he went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. In every province, where the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.*

*When Esther's maids and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was greatly distressed; she sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he would not accept them. Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to*

*attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what was happening and why. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.*

*Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message for Mordecai, saying, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days." When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.*

## **John 15: 1-17**

*I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and*

*I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose You. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.*

I want to ask you a question this morning. When you think about your life, what is your greatest fear? I think it was the first psychology class that I took in college that said all children are born with an innate fear of falling. Many people fear snakes. I have a fear of frogs. I don't know why people are afraid of snakes, but it's obvious that people should be afraid of frogs. Sheryl liked to share with the boys when they were younger that I was afraid of frogs so I've had a variety of frogs in my bed and other places over the years.

I came across something as I was looking up information on this. These are the five questions that put fear into a man, based on our relationship with our girlfriends or wives. They are:

“What are you thinking about? “

“Do you love me?”

“Do I look fat?”

“Do you think she's prettier than me?”

“What would you do if I died?”

This article goes on to give us some help with the answers. For example, "What are you thinking about?" The proper answer is, "I'm sorry if I have been pensive, dear. I was just reflecting on what a warm, wonderful, thoughtful, intelligent, caring woman you are and how lucky I am to have met you." Things to avoid: baseball, football how fat you are, how much prettier she is than you, how you will spend the insurance money if she died. It goes on to provide all varieties of answers.

All of those are fears we might have: fear of speaking in public, fear of snakes, and fear of questions that might come to us. But there is really only one spiritually fatal fear. It is the fear of isolation or the fear of being totally alone and forgotten. That is the fear that dominates and controls much of our lives. It comes in a theological term as theologians throughout the Christian tradition have often said that the definition of hell itself is the place where you are left totally and completely alone, when you are abandoned of everything, even hope in your life, to be in a place of isolation. What happens for us as we struggle with this fear is that we spend a lot of time trying to work around it to create security and safety in our lives. We create places where we're with people and surrounded with noise because we are afraid of being totally alone. As we live we often know what that is, this feeling as if it is just us. The danger of that is that when we live that sort of isolated life, it starts to become self-centered. It starts to become something that feeds my own needs rather than a relationship.

Now why do I say that this is the one spiritually fatal fear? It is because I think it is what the Bible says and what Scripture says over and over. The Bible says we are a desert people. What I mean by that is that the Bible tells us that we are a people who, because of our own self-centeredness, are left alone. Sometimes it feels as if we've even been abandoned by God, not just for forty years as we wandered in the desert, but those times when we haven't followed and lived faithful lives of justice and righteousness. It feels as if God has left us to our own desires. We live in this tension as a people knowing that very often we are a desert people. We're people who

are often defeated and sent out and so it is, for example, in the fifth century before Christ. We've been defeated ; we're no longer a nation. The Babylonians have destroyed us and taken us out of Jerusalem and they have sent us out in that world we call the Babylonian captivity. That is their policy. The Babylonians are no longer in power. The Persians have ascended and control that portion of the known world. We are out there, not knowing if we will ever come back, not knowing what will happen to us.

There is a Persian king who goes by the name Xerxes. Xerxes the First is a king ruling over an empire that is in decline. We know that because empires which are in decline become ostentatious. The more you are struggling, the more you want to put on a show, so Xerxes has begun this presentation of the Persian Empire by putting on these incredible shows. He has a party that lasts for one hundred eighty days.

It is a party that we are told in the Bible is just flowing with food and the best wine available to everyone all the time. It is Xerxes' way of being able to impress people and to oppress people, to hold people down by what he has and bring that ostentatious kind of life. But after 180 days, even the wine gets tired. So Xerxes has to ramp it up a little bit. Xerxes decides he's going to pull out his "golden egg" which is his wife Vashti. She is a beautiful woman, a trophy wife. That is what Xerxes wants; he sees her as his possession. She's his beauty. He calls her, (she's having her own party by the way) and he says, "Vashti, come! I want to show you off, girl." Well, Vashti says the number one thing that all men fear. Vashti says, "Not tonight, honey. I have a headache." She says, "No." Xerxes has all these people around and after 180 days of partying, he needs to ramp it up and this woman says no. He has no idea what to do so he calls the sages together and asks them, "What am I going to do? This is a problem!" They said, "You need to get rid of her." So, he does. He banishes her and she never shows up again. Then the sages say, "Now let's get you a new wife."

They hold a beauty contest and they pull women from all 127 provinces in Persia, the most beautiful women they can get. They have the beauty contest. One of those women they call is not a Persian. She must have some kind of beautiful ethnic look, and they

aren't sure. She is an orphan. Her mother and father have died and she's being raised by her cousin. She is one of the contestants. They start preparing her. She spends one year getting ready for her day. The Bible says that for six months she sits in oil. Then for another six months she goes for cosmetic and perfume treatment. She spends a year getting ready for her date! It must have worked, because she becomes the queen. No one knows her background but she is beautiful. Esther carves out for herself this amazing oasis life. She is a Jew, an oppressed person in an oppressive land. She has everything she wants: attendants, food, clothing and everything she could imagine, but the story doesn't end there.

The king has a chief of staff, or vice president with power. This man's name is Haman. Haman can't stand Esther's cousin, Mordecai, who raised her. The reason Haman can't stand Mordecai is because he is a Jew and he refuses to bow down to him. It was customary to bow down to whoever was ruler and Haman was the Chief of Staff. But Mordecai won't bow down to him and Haman hates him for it. So much that he goes and bribes the king and the king agrees that all the Jews in the entire kingdom will be destroyed on one appointed day.

Mordecai understands what's happening and he realizes the only choice he has is to go to Esther the queen, a beautiful woman who's made this beautiful oasis for herself. It appears that Esther hasn't had any contact with Mordecai since then. She is in seclusion, but Mordecai sends word to her and tells her what is to happen. He says, "Esther it's only you. You are the only one." He actually said, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish." These are words that we have heard whether we know the Bible or not: "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

These are beautiful words, but Esther must think, I'm just a trophy wife. What do you want from me? And then she says, "He [King Xerxes] hasn't called for me in thirty days. You know the rules. If I go to the king unannounced, which is against the law, and he doesn't receive me, I die. He kills me, I'm put to death." She must be

overwhelmed by this fear of failure and responsibility. This is not what I spent twelve months preparing for, but Esther decides that she will try. Can't you imagine how tempted Esther is to play in to her beauty? It's what got her here in the first place. She may think I have to get the beauty treatment going, but that was for another time. This time would be a different approach. She sends word back to Mordecai, "Gather your people and fast for three days and I will gather those that I have and fast for three days. I will go even though it is against the law and if I perish, I perish."

No, here is the irony in the spiritual life, the irony of the desert. It is in the desert where we don't always feel the presence of God, where we feel alone and where we grow in our fears for ourselves and others. It is in the desert where we don't know what is going to happen, but it is also in the desert that God often leads us. Esther had to go it alone. She had to decide for herself in some way. She had to decide that the desert is going to be a place for her. It is not just this case for Esther. Think about it for a moment when I say we are a desert people.

You remember that as soon as Jesus was baptized, immediately he was led into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by Satan. Jesus' very beginning of ministry was that forty day time. Satan comes to him and tempts him in three ways that we know of. The first is, he says, "You're hungry. Take these stones and turn them into bread. You are the Son of God. You can do that. You don't need to be hungry." And then he takes him to the top of the temple in Jerusalem and he says "You are the Son of God. Throw yourself down. The angels will protect you. You don't need to go through the pain that you might think is going to happen." Then Satan takes him to the top of a mountain and says, "Look down and see everything. Every kingdom, all of it, I will give to you if you worship me right now and I will go away."

Those three temptations are the temptation to avoid things-- to find an easier way, to avoid pain and opposition. That is why chapters later in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew when Jesus starts to tell them, "I am going to be betrayed and die. This has to happen to the Son of Man.", one of the disciples who loved him says, "Lord, you don't have to do that. Don't go that hard way. That doesn't have to

happen." Jesus looks at Simon Peter and says, "Get behind me Satan!" because he is being tempted with the exact same thing. You can do it in a different way.

A few chapters later in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is out alone praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he says, "Lord, take this cup. Let this cup pass from me." Or in the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew when he is alone on the cross and people are looking at him and they say "Come down! He saved others and he can't save himself?" When Jesus finds who he is and what he is made of, even as the Son of God, it comes in these seasons of isolation and loneliness, seasons of the desert.

So Esther must have really been tempted by the desert of isolation in those three days of fasting. She must have been very lonely. Esther must have thought, "Where is there a way? What could I do that would be easier?" But that's not open to her so at the end of the three days, she goes to the King unannounced. If he receives her she lives, if not, she is put to death. She shows up after three days of fasting. She goes not with the accoutrements that got her there in the first place. Something amazing happens, even without the makeup and beauty treatment, she must still have it. King Xerxes looks at her and says, "Esther, what in the world do you want? It shall be given to you, even half of my kingdom." That is desire.

Then this amazing series and turn of events takes place. It is where Esther comes out in her brilliance. She is a brilliant political strategist. She plays this in a perfect way. She knows she shouldn't ask right now so she enters into what becomes a few days' conversation. "Come to one of my parties, she asks. Come and come again another day." (I encourage you to go and read the beautiful powerful book of Esther.) At the end of it all, Haman actually dies on the gallows he had built to kill Mordecai. Mordecai, whose life was to be ended, ends up riding up on a royal horse wearing a robe of the king and he is cheered and loved by all. It is an amazing thing to see what happens because Esther was willing to abide in that desert and to be open to another way.

In the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus was preparing his disciples for him to leave. He knows what is going to happen and his disciples don't quite get it and he is starting to teach them. He looks



at them and in the context of that teaching, it's as if he's saying, "You're going to go and I'm not going to be with you. You are not going to have me around. It is going to be so different, but I want to let you know I don't call you my servants any more, I call you my friends. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus was preparing his disciples for the desert when it doesn't appear that he is there and when it doesn't appear that what he said came to be, when it feels like he was a failure and he's being mocked and ridiculed. They might be sent into their own Babylonian captivity and all that is there but he is saying there is no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for his friends. The hope is that they'll have the memory that he laid his life down for them. This is what it means to be a people of God.

So today we are part of the same story. This is the thing that is so important to realize in our spiritual journey. We are part of the same story. Every one of you is an Esther or has the opportunity to be a Mordecai. We are part of our own story, the story of God, with an opportunity to escape our own deserts. Even in the nice safe oasis that we have created for ourselves, we're part of the story that says there is something bigger, to avoid the isolation of an unworthy self-centered life. You see when I'm trying to protect myself, and keep myself from being lonely and create my own reality over time, I just start to become absorbed with myself. Even when I'm doing good things to protect myself and be safe and secure, that self-centeredness creeps in.

You and I are given the privilege of a story that can be different. The truth is, without exception, the Bible tells us that God predestined us to be here today. The Bible tells us in Psalm 139 that before you were formed in your mother's womb, God knew you and called you and had a purpose for you. The Bible tells us that before the universe was formed, God knew that this day would be here. Let me be clear about this, though: we were predestined to be here, but that doesn't mean our lives were predetermined. God knew that you would be here today in this place at this time in your life, in your skin with whatever is going on in your life.

Now, that would be great if I could tell you where God is in that. Everybody wants that. Lord, just tell me what to do! Lord, let me see

your face, let me know what you want me to do. God tell me what you want me to do and I will do it. The problem is we don't always see him. We want to live these lives where we are so spiritual, but that's not my experience. There are times when I have known the mountain top experience.

But think about Esther: Esther is the only book of the entire Bible where God is never mentioned. All the things that happen in her story are the orchestration of God, but he is never mentioned. When you read the Book of Esther, you see God everywhere. He is in the midst of all of it. Even in the exile, God is present. In the manglers, in the deserts of temptation and Gethsemane, God is there. Here's the thing. You may say, Lord teach me how to pray so I can know what you are saying to me. You want to stay in that zone of prayer, but you know it doesn't always stay. Then I think I need a new way to pray or to read the Bible. All of that is meaningful. It is important to keep looking for new ways to pray and read the Bible, but it is also important to realize that sometimes there are just deserts. It doesn't mean that he's not there. It means that we don't feel it and sense it and see it. It is the time of desert life that our choices make eternal differences. It is in that desert life. On the mountain top it is easy to know what to do, easy to follow.

The choices you make when you don't hear from God clearly are the choices for eternity in our life, just as clearly as when you know what is going to happen. The amazing thing is the reality for us as believers of Christ is this: the choices we make matter to the Kingdom of God. I mean that it is easy to take the story of Esther and say, "Wow, drop dead gorgeous, one of the most brilliant political women on the face of the Earth, saved her people. Wow!" The Jews actually have Purim for a week every year to celebrate the story of Esther.

I used to think, What would I do if I'm in a setting and I need to save someone's life? Am I ready to make a stand and be a hero? We think about that, but here's the reality: we're not all called to be Esthers. We're not all called to be the heroes that come in and save the moment. Sometimes we just live ordinary lives but that doesn't mean that the choices I make in my ordinary life don't matter. They matter for the Kingdom.

How many seasons in your life were you in the desert and you didn't have hope or feel the presence of God but you found out later that someone was holding you up in prayer? C.S. Lewis said he wished he could pray with the intensity that his dog stared at a bone. If only I could pray with the intensity that mothers pray for their children. If only I could pray with the intensity of someone who, for whatever reason we don't understand, God has identified us within a world of healing and hope in their life. The reality is this Kingdom mystery: the choices that we make, the moral choices, are not just about me but are about the Kingdom.

Perhaps some of you are struggling today with something that has a hold on your life. Maybe it's an addiction, an overwhelming desire that seems to be unattained. Very often we think, Can I stay away from this for another twenty minutes or a day? It's about my sobriety or pain. Your living in that can actually absorb the pain of someone else. The way you can live and the discipline that you can develop in your own spiritual life is not just about you, it's about the Kingdom of God. The Bible tells us this over and over and over. Here's this amazing privilege that we have--to be able to live in such a way that even in what seems to be ordinary aspects of life, to start to make eternal differences for the Kingdom of God. So don't ever say to yourself, I have never been called to be an Esther or a Mordecai. It doesn't matter. It is about how you are living the day, how you are making it today and how you trust in something that is bigger than yourself.

Is it possible today that you have come to this very place for just such a time as this? What is isolating you? What feeds that isolation? What is the risk of that fatal fear? What are the oases that you have created for your life that are safe and good and yet you know there is desert all around? One that I create for my life and I'm seeing more and more in my life is the need to be right, especially when I am right, which is often. The need for humility is the next one. At what cost is the need to be right? Being right can be a really lonely place.

The word of God for you today is that it is never too late. There is never a place where we are so alone that God is not present. There is never a time or place where it is too late. Where are you being called

to be Esther? Where are you being called to go and confront and to speak a word of truth or be bold and follow God. Perhaps you are being called to be a Mordecai. Perhaps there is someone in your life you know you need to have that talk with. You know you need to develop some way to say "I love you, but what you are doing doesn't honor what God wants you to do in your life." Where are you? Whether you feel the overwhelming presence of God, whether you feel as if he is pushing you in the back or if you feel as if you are in the desert, if you trust whether you feel it or not, perhaps you have come to this very place, this very day for just such a time as this. Will you go and if it violates every law you have created for your life, will you go and say if I perish, I perish, but this is the right thing to do?

Pray with me. Father, I thank you. Thank you, Lord, for your voice. Sometimes it does come down like thunder and sometimes it seems so quiet, but you are in it all. I pray today that you would be with us and you would let us wrestle with the question: Who knows, perhaps we have come to the royal dignity of being the children of the king for just such a time as this. Lead us into the Promised Land. In the powerful name of Jesus we pray. Amen

