

July 13, 2025 Sermon
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Reading from Esther 2:15-18, 3:1-4

As Ruth and Bethany have already indicated, last week Pastor Kate started our journey through the book of Esther, walking us through chapter one - the complicated beginning of this Old Testament book that begins with a Queen who stands up for her self-worth with a “holy no,” but instead of being rewarded for her courage, her husband hands down a royal proclamation that women must honor their husband’s wishes, and the Queen is stripped of her royal position. Kate passed the baton to me this week, to explore chapter two and three - and let me tell you, things don’t get much better. I was tempted to offer Kate a “holy no” of my own, but alas, here I am trying my best as we continue this journey together.

Moving on from the first chapter, here’s a quick overview overview of chapters two and three, expanding a bit from the scripture passage that Heidi read for us this morning...

Chapter 2 describes King Xerxes' search for a new queen after Vashti's dethronement. Young women are gathered from all provinces, including Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. Let us pause to remember that unmarried women of this time were considered the property of their fathers or the male head-of-house, and under biblical law - that’s right, biblical law! - could either be sold into slavery to pay off debt or married for a bride price. It’s telling how women were viewed by these Ancient Near Eastern cultures that Esther moves from orphan, to harem, to the king’s bed without any perspective on how she actually felt about these shifts in who owned her.

Esther is the favorite of the eunuch in charge of the women, and undergoes a year-long beauty training. When it's her turn to appear before the king, she pleases him more than all the other virgins, and while keeping her Jewish identity a secret, he makes her his new queen.

Esther Chapter 3 introduces readers to Haman, whom King Xerxes promotes to a position of great authority, requiring all royal officials to bow down to him. Mordecai, however, refuses to bow to Haman because he is a Jew. This enrages Haman, who, upon learning Mordecai's ethnicity, decides to seek revenge not only on Mordecai but on all Jews throughout the kingdom. Haman approaches King Xerxes with a proposal to annihilate this people group who do not obey the king's laws. Xerxes, without knowing the identity of the people, gives Haman his signet ring, granting him authority to carry out his plan. Haman dispatches edicts to all provinces, ordering the destruction, killing, and annihilation of all Jews—young and old, women and children—on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (Adar), and the confiscation of their property. The chapter concludes with the king and Haman sitting down to drink, while the city of Susa is bewildered.

Wild stuff, right?

This feels somewhat distant from my memories of the Veggie Tales telling of the Esther story (SLIDE). In that retelling, the focus is on a shy girl who struggles with confidence, but learns to do the right thing under pressure. Granted, harems of young virgins, ethnic cleansing, and a corrupt king is a tricky story to tell using animated vegetables, but still, I feel like something was lost in the effort.

Last weekend, wrestling with the messiness of Esther in my own head, I lamented to Meredith that it was hard to find any silver lining in this story (SLIDE). She wisely reminded me that sometimes that's how life goes. And isn't it fitting in this moment of global tension - where we find ourselves trying to find meaning amid natural disasters, political unrest, dehumanization of migrants and other underrepresented populations, and a tax bill that continues to prioritize those with the most wealth... in our context today it is also difficult at times to find the silver lining.

But it's what I long for. While working on my sermon message I kept wanting to step ahead, to look at how the story ends to make sense of the messiness of its beginning, or to zoom out to understand it in the larger biblical context, or the Jewish narrative.

As a side note, it is somewhat comforting that the Esther story is told in the Jewish tradition as a fable, and not a factual story. It is the basis for the Purim festival in Judaism (SLIDE), and this story is told during that season like a theatrical performance, with those in the participating audience encouraged to boo the villains, and cheer for the heroes.

I also uncovered this blurb from an old blog post from Rachel Held Evans. She writes, "At the end of the day, Esther is a story about Jewish identity and heritage. It's a story about what it means to be Jewish in the context of diaspora. It's a story about God's preservation and providence to a scattered people, God's presence in God's hiddenness."

But I want to caution us this morning from dismissing this Esther story too quickly as a made-up soap opera, or a fabrication meant to help people understand their place in history. Moving on too quickly makes us forget that there is something about being present in the chaos or tension of the moment we are also experiencing.

As we planned this worship service over Zoom this week, those of us gathered reflected on the fact that the narrative of Esther in our Bible presents a compelling example of hiding in plain sight (SLIDE), a strategy used for survival and, ultimately, (again, only something we realize if we skip ahead) for the salvation of her people.

Esther, again, a Jewish orphan, enters King Xerxes' court and, under Mordecai's instruction, conceals her ethnic identity. She lives within the highest echelons of Persian society, even

becoming queen, all while her true heritage remains a secret. This concealment is not just about personal safety; it's a strategic maneuver that allows her to navigate a dangerous environment. Her hiding is not a physical disappearance but a calculated overlooking of a crucial part of her identity, allowing her to gain influence and access.

It made me think of the moments where I've had to hide in plain sight. I thought about moments with friends when we've tried to sneak into better seats at a baseball game... trying to act as though we belonged in the pricey sections when really all we had in our pockets was a ticket stub for the upper deck. I thought about how fun it was to occasionally get a chance to be a seat-filler when we lived in Los Angeles County, showing up at red carpet events to fill in empty seats at a Hollywood movie premiere, or some other pre-taping segment for a late-night show. Every once in a while it was painfully obvious that my t-shirt and shorts did not match up with those dressed in ball gowns or tuxedos, but I tried my best to pretend that I belonged.

And then I thought about others who I knew who had to do their best to blend in. I thought about students when I was a youth pastor who weren't sure if they could openly identify as LGBT in their home congregation. I thought about the students at Penn State who I worked with who were first generation college students, or international students, trying to do their best to fit in and belong at a place where they quite often didn't understand the social or cultural expectations.

My mind also went to my migrant worker memories - the experience of picking sweet corn as a Canadian migrant worker, but working alongside those from central and South America. I found myself wondering what it would be like to do the same thing today, where immigration is once again a heightened political subject. It occurred to me that many migrant workers are trying to live like Esther, trying to "hide" in plain sight here in the USA. It echoes aspects of Esther's journey, albeit with vastly different stakes.

For undocumented migrant workers (SLIDE), hiding in plain sight often involves blending into the fabric of American society. Migrant workers show up in essential sectors, many in jobs that most Americans refuse to do. They live their lives avoiding any attention that might reveal their true immigration status. They live in our communities, contribute to the economy, and participate in daily life, yet carry the constant burden of potential discovery and deportation. This "hiding" is a performance of trying to appear as normal as possible. Unlike Esther, who hides an identity that could lead to her people's demise, migrant workers often hide a legal status that could lead to their own, and their families', disruption and displacement.

While Esther's concealment ultimately leads to her elevation and the salvation of her people through a divine plan, the hiding of migrant workers is often driven by immediate survival and the pursuit of a better life. They typically don't get the protective dynamic of the King's favor, however we do see modern examples of migrants with significant connections or wealth - actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Michael J. Fox, musicians like Shakira or Neil Young,

powerful CEOs like Elon Musk or Sergey Brin, even first lady Melania Trump. Their immigration status is rarely challenged, despite heightened urgency at the nation's highest levels to deport those who got here the wrong way, or don't have proper legal status.

Both Esther and the plight of the modern migrant worker highlight the profound human impulse to adapt and strategize for survival when faced with existential threats. Esther's story is one of a privileged secret, while the migrant worker's is one of a vulnerable one, but both underscore the complex relationship between identity, visibility, and safety in hostile environments.

Perhaps what we can draw from the Esther story this week is to remind ourselves of the many folks in our world who live their lives, hiding in plain sight (SLIDE). Beyond those living in a country other than their birth, we know that many of us live with mental health challenges that make daily living complicated and challenging - sometimes just functioning in the world is an effort to hide in plain sight. We know that physical health challenges that some of us carry mean that pain or mobility makes moving through the world a difficult or cautious task, hoping that we can hide in plain sight. We know that gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, education, and even religious identities create a variety of challenges for those who just want to fit in, and often these are things that are not publicly on display.

It strikes me that for a congregation like ours that likes to lend a helping hand, and show up for those in need, we typically lean into space where we can see the need. We think of the list that Jesus gave of "the least of these" - those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, or in need of clothing or housing. We know how to help in those spaces, because we have opportunities to serve our community with the systems that are set up. It's much harder to offer help to those who are hiding in plain sight, those who feel such a vulnerability that they must keep some of who they are hidden as they move about the world.

And so, in place of a silver lining sermon wrap up, I simply offer this today for us to hold together. Where are people hiding in plain sight, and what might we do to offer just a glimmer of our support and presence to those who move about the world in this way? Our sermon response hymn includes this verse...

Redeeming God, your arms embrace, all now oppressed for creed or race. Let peace, descending like a dove, make known on earth your healing love.

May we hold this together, as we seek to be people of God's peace.