

We Americans love our shopping malls, those temples of consumerism where every conceivable materialistic need can be satisfied. Personally, I only need a Macy's!

Did you know that not one of the ten largest malls on the planet is located in the United States? Not one! I was shocked! Instead, you'll find them in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur or Istanbul. The three largest in terms of space are in Quezon City (Philippines), Beijing and -- the largest -- in Dongguan (China). The Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, just missed the top 10 list. It boasts more than 40 million visitors a year, it hires 11,000 workers year around, and 13,000 during peak seasons. It's huge.

When you go to such a mall, one of the first things you look for is an IDEO marker, i.e., a sign that says YOU ARE HERE, with the floor plan of the mall.

But these signs can be anywhere -- like at an airport. I remember that one time Richard and I flew into the Miami airport to catch a connecting flight to the BVIs. The plane landed in Miami a little late so we had to quickly find the American Eagle terminal. If you know us, (my family will attest) you KNOW we ended up running through the airport. It's never pretty! But as soon as we got off the first plane, Richard immediately looked for a You Are Here sign. Problem was, once we looked, we knew where we were, but we still weren't clear on where we were going, and how to get there.

And that brings us to Esther. *If ever there was a person who wondered where she was going and why, it was Esther.* She had a vague sense of where she was: YOU ARE HERE, in the king's court. But that's about all she knew.

So what is the story of Esther really about? Why was it important enough to put it in the Bible? The story takes place in the 5th-century B.C. somewhere in the 470s or so. Xerxes I (he is a true historical person) is the king in Persia. You might call him "king of the world." His empire took in most of the known world at that time. To this day, he is known as Xerxes the Great. He was a monarch with absolute power and authority. Even today his legend is immortalized in Hollywood movies such as 300 that came out a few years ago.

So, one day Xerxes decides to throw a party. But his queen (Vashti) refuses to attend. We don't know exactly why, (Scripture doesn't tell us the real reason), but some Jewish Midrashes (stories about Scripture) say she had chicken pox! No self-respecting woman is going to show up at a party with red blotches on her face! But whatever the reason, her actions have the effect of publicly humiliating the king. And, of course, the king is infuriated.

Fortunately, he doesn't kill Vashti, but she is exiled immediately. He decides that he needs a new queen, someone who will be more attentive to his royal needs, someone who looks good on TV and YouTube!

He calls his media people in for a meeting. They toss some ideas around. They decide to produce a television show, sort of the Persian version of *The Bachelor*. Teenage girls from all over the country will vie for a chance to be queen. They fill out a preliminary questionnaire, go through a screening process and sit for interviews. His staff will be looking for beauty, poise, intelligence and so on, to see how the chemistry works. Did I mention that she's got to be drop-dead gorgeous? Absolutely!

So the edict went out. The country was in a state of excitement.

Meanwhile, out in a province somewhere, or perhaps a suburb of the capital city, Susa, there's a man named Mordecai who gets wind of this, and he thinks his young cousin, Esther, should give this *Bachelor* thing a try. She does, and suddenly, she's in the running. And what's more, she "pleases" the king. He sets her up in the harem. And there she enjoys 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC spa treatments for a year. She's lathered with the latest in oils and cosmetics. She has a raft of maids attending to her every need. Very cool. What's not to like?

In a sense, it's a "Cinderella" or "reversal-of-fortune" story. A few of these stories appear in the Bible—kind of a reversal of fortune because God has a plan.

If you remember David, for example. When we're introduced to the future king of Israel, we find a kid tending sheep, playing the guitar (okay, a little harp) and writing poetry. Through a series of events, he's anointed king. Shortly thereafter, he slays a giant Goliath and his legend is secured.

Or how about Joseph? He's a favorite of his father, but despised by his brothers. They sell him to a caravan of merchants. He becomes a slave and then is thrown into prison for something he didn't do. He has no future, no life. And then, suddenly, he's virtually the prime minister of Egypt! (Which allows him to save the lives of thousands of people, including his family.)

Remember Daniel? Here's a young man who rises in favor with the king. Then he's accused of treason and tossed to the lions. But they refuse to eat this godly man. Daniel is delivered, he gets back to the king's good graces, and his accusers get what's coming to them.

Scripture speaks to this story line many times in texts like: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6). Or, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

So, at the end of Chapter 2, we find Esther, who is, no doubt, just a teenager, as a girl who has been elevated in status and who *finds herself queen of the realm!* But here's the breath-taking reality of her situation: *She doesn't have a clue as to why this is happening.* Esther is clueless. She sees the YOU ARE HERE sign, but she doesn't know why.

Aren't we often in the same situation? We try to follow the will of God and do what's right. Our life journey has taken us here and there. We see the sign YOU ARE HERE. But honestly, we don't know why.

We're often confused as to why we are in our present situation, which we often refer to as "our predicament." Somehow, we often feel out of place. The world is swirling around us. So we ask ourselves, "Why am I in this job?" "Why am I living in this city?" "Why am I going to so many doctors' appointments? What's going on?"

Often, like Esther, we're clueless. But the good news is: *It's alright.*

Sometimes we don't need to know—at least not yet. One of the hard things about being a follower of Jesus is that, often, there's a sort of *built-in ambiguity*. We don't see the path ahead. God seems to be dealing with us on a "need-to-know basis." But it's okay.

Here's what Esther *does* know. As a person who believes in God, she knows that she is queen, not because Xerxes chose her, but because God chose her. Later, she will understand that perhaps she is where she is "for such a time as this" (4:14).

Remember that Joseph made a similar observation when he was reunited with his brothers: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God" (Genesis 45:8).

So how do we come to this "mature" faith, this trust in the providence of God, when circumstances around us don't seem very clear or wonderful?

Here are a couple of possibilities that you might want to think about:

1. *Have an attitude of openness.* Be open to where God is leading you. Esther's situation in the court soon became perilous. A wicked man named Haman decided to kill all the Jews in Susa. The king didn't know it, but Esther was Jewish. Her life—plus the lives of thousands of others—were in great danger. Her cousin wisely told her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to this royal position for just such a time as

this" (4:14). Mordecai saw that this situation had the potential for something great to happen. Who knows what God is going to accomplish in your situation?

2. *Be willing to take risks.* Esther evaluated the situation, and decided to risk her life. She told her cousin, "I will go to the king, though it is against the law; *and if I perish, I perish*" (4:16). The biblical stories of Joseph, David and Daniel that I already mentioned, all contained elements of risk.

Corrie ten Boom "was a Dutch Christian who, along with her father and other family members, helped many Jews escape the Nazi Holocaust during World War 2. She was eventually imprisoned for her actions. Her most famous book, *The Hiding Place*, describes the ordeal." So she knew what she was talking about when she said, "Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God."

When my son Stephen spent four tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, I carried the words of a little hymn in my wallet. One of the verses was: "Peace, perfect peace. The future all unknown. Jesus we know, and he is on the throne." It's hard to remember sometimes, but God is still in charge.

3. *Have an attitude of gratitude.* When we're facing uncertainty, we can moan and groan and say "Woe is me." Or we can say to God, "I don't know what you have in mind, but thank you for the opportunity." The apostle James puts it this way: "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). Try to cultivate an attitude of gratitude.
4. *Be a change agent. I believe that God intends for us to be agents of change.* If we model our behavior and choices on Esther, we know that, in some way that is blessed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can create change. Further, we know that this change occurs in a way that only we -- because each of us has unique gifts-- can accomplish.

Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers from his TV show, said, "What marvelous mysteries we're privileged to be part of! Slender threads weave this complex fabric of our life together."

And I love the way Corrie ten Boom put it, "Don't bother to give God instructions; just report for duty."

Make no mistake: There are things each of us can do—small or large—that can change the world.

We just need to make ourselves available to God.

This morning, we were privileged to watch our children and young people here in church. All of them are so young. They have their whole lives ahead of them. And the great part is that God knows all of them. God knew them before they were born. God has a special purpose for their lives, and God has a special purpose for each one of us. Make no mistake: God has called you for something special—maybe something spectacular—or maybe something small that has eternal meaning.

Yes, you are here. We are here. We may not know why. But God does. What else matters?

***Prayer List: Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Fred, Barbara, Doug, Larry, Charley, Kay, Michele, Marlise, Beth, Patricia, Allen, Wendy, Staci, Bobbi, Gloria and Nathan.***