

Grounded in Remembering
(Summer Worship Series)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,

Settle our hearts.

Still our minds.

And stir our imaginations,

That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Esther 4

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, he 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 could enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. In every province, wherever 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 deeply 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 to 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: "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: 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 silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Grounded in Remembering

I don’t know what middle school was like for you, but mine was filled with a lot of anxiety. Like most middle schools, mine had a strict social hierarchy and I was never at the top of it. I never had quite the right clothes or participated in the right after-school activities. I remember my dad frequently telling me that I couldn’t care what other people thought, that I had to live my own life, wear what I liked, be friends with people I liked.

I remember thinking my dad had no clue.

It’s possible I’ve become my father. These days I find myself telling my children things I hope will one day sink in, even though right now they just roll their eyes at me. I’m beginning to suspect that much of parenting is simply the stubborn hope that the words we speak may one day become part of who our children grow up to become.

If you had asked me at 13, I would have told you that I loved my dad, but he didn’t always get it. Somewhere along the way, though, his words sank in. They stopped sounding like his and started sounding like my own. Not because I stopped caring about other people, but because his words gave me a different story about myself than the one I was hearing everywhere else. And over time, that story became part of who I understand myself to be and who I want to become.

Esther didn’t have parents telling her the story of who she was. Orphaned when she was young, Esther was raised by her cousin Mordecai until she was taken into the king’s palace as part of his search for a new queen. Jewish by birth, entering the palace meant entering a world in which her Jewish identity had to remain hidden. Separated from her people and enclosed within the palace walls, Esther was trained to survive in a court governed by the king’s desires. And by all appearances, she adapted. She found favor with those around her. She learned the customs of the palace. Eventually, she was chosen as queen.

And then word reaches her that her cousin is sitting outside the palace gates clothed in sackcloth and ashes, crying out in grief. Distressed by her cousin’s appearance and behavior, Esther sends fresh garments. But Mordecai refuses to change.

My inner middle schooler sympathizes with Esther.

Mordecai is causing a scene on the steps of her new home. But in fairness, Mordecai has cause. The king's chief advisor has convinced the king to wipe out all the Jews.

Upon hearing the decree, Jews in every province begin fasting and weeping, adorning themselves in sackcloth and ashes. But Esther, sheltered within the palace walls, knows nothing of what is happening until Mordecai manages to get word to her, sending her a copy of the decree and telling her she must go to the king to advocate for her people and plead for mercy.

But Esther sends word back explaining what Mordecai is certain to already know: no one approaches the king without being summoned. To do so is to risk death. Esther may be queen, but her power is limited. She lives in the palace at the pleasure of a king who has already discarded one queen for disobeying him. Her position is as precarious as it is prestigious. To do as Mordecai has asked is to both reveal her Jewish identity to a king who has just decreed the death of all Jews, and to risk death simply by approaching the king without a summons.

But Mordecai's reply doesn't soften. If anything, it sharpens: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. Who knows?" Mordecai writes, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

"Just such a time as this." It's a phrase we needlepoint on pillows and offer one another as encouragement—a reminder that perhaps we have been placed where we are for a reason.

I'm not sure Esther would have heard it that way.

For Esther, it would have been pressure—a reminder that while she may live behind different walls and wear different clothes, she is still a part of this people—that their danger is her danger, their story her story. The palace may have separated Esther from her people, but Mordecai is refusing to let that separation become the truth of who she is.

And Esther responds.

Her response isn't to go to the king, at least, not yet. Instead, Esther tells Mordecai to gather the people together, to ask them to fast on her behalf. The community that Mordecai has called Esther back to becomes the community she turns to before taking her next step.

Life has a way of separating us from the people and stories that once told us who we were. It doesn't happen all at once—we grow up; we become busy; we adapt. We learn how to survive in the rooms we have entered. We attend to what is directly in front of us until the walls of our lives become all that we see.

And it becomes all too easy to forget that we are more than what we accomplish, what we own, or how well we fit in. All too easy for grief to convince us that we are nothing but our loss, for failure to claim that we are nothing but what we've done wrong, or for anxiety to insist that fear is the truest thing about us.

But faith tells us a different story to tell about ourselves—a story we remember and tell together.

And so we show up here, week after week, because none of us can be the Body of Christ alone. We need one another to remember, to remind, and to be re-membered into the body of Christ.

So we come and we sing hymns—both for ourselves and for the person next to us or across the aisle from us who may not be able to sing that morning. We pray for people whose suffering we might never see. We hear a story large enough to interrupt our own smaller stories. We show up for ourselves, and we show up for the person across the sanctuary who needs to be reminded that they are not alone. We show up and together we make the body of Christ visible.

The name of God never appears in the book of Esther. There is no voice from heaven telling Esther what to do. No prophet delivers a word from the Lord. No miracle promises that everything will turn out all right. There are only people: grieving, fasting, sending messages back and forth, refusing to allow one another to forget.

We sometimes imagine that faith means hearing God's voice clearly enough to know what to do. But more often, faith sounds like someone singing when we cannot, someone praying when we cannot find words, someone telling the story when grief or fear has made it impossible for us to remember how it ends.

In a story where God is never named, people become the reminders of God's presence.

After three days, Esther will walk into the king's court. She will go by herself, but she will not go alone. She will go carrying the story Mordecai has returned to her, carried by the people among whom she has been re-membered.

On any given Sunday, one of us will have forgotten. Forgotten that we are loved. Forgotten that we belong. Forgotten that fear is not the truest thing about us or that our lives are bound up with lives beyond our own.

And so we gather.

We gather and we remember for those who cannot remember, trusting that when our own memories fail, someone else will do the same for us.
Thanks be to God.