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Midway Presbyterian Church
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Runaway Bride

Scripture: Esther 2:1–18

Esther 2:1 After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. **2** Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. **3** And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. **4** And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

Esther 2:5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, **6** who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. **7** He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. **8** So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. **9** And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. **10** Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. **11** And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Esther 2:12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women— **13** when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. **14** In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

Esther 2:15 When the turn came for Esther [e]the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. **16** And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month,

which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, **17** the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. **18** Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Introduction

You might not exactly sense it upon first reading, but Esther chapter 2 is a very dark, very sad story.

J.R.R. Tolkien coined the word *eucatastrophe* when he was discussing a fundamental component to his work in mythology. It means a sudden, joyous turn of events for the better in a story where it seemed like only defeat or tragedy was absolute. He creates this word by simply taking the Greek word for "good," *eu*, and placing it in front of a word we know all too well [*catastrophe*], and he describes it as the quality that pierces you with a joy that brings tears.

In chapter 2 of Esther, the story is pleading for this kind of turn of events. It deals with tragedy and plight, as we'll dig into, in a way that is perhaps more detailed, and it looks at these things in the face more than any other portion of Esther. It's just asking for a eucatastrophe, for a turn for the better, even as it seems like all hope for change and redemption is extinguished.

The darkness descends in at least three very heavy and sober ways in this chapter, because the narrator is presenting the people of God as those who are facing a wicked world. As they do so, they sense that they are far from God, and also that they are too weak to change, too weak to make a difference. That's the situation here. They're facing wicked people, and yet they feel like they're far from their good God, and they are helpless, almost hopeless, to do anything about it.

1. Facing a Wicked World

At first, we find the people, as I mentioned, facing wickedness. They're facing evil in the Persian Empire, as it's especially personified in the reign of this wicked and cruel man, Ahasuerus.

If you look back to verse 1, it says, "After these things." We're reminded of what we considered last week, the turn of events where Ahasuerus, in a display of his own pomp and glory, puts on a feast for his generals and then the whole nation, and the crowning moment of entertainment is when he asks his wife, Queen Vashti, to come and parade herself in front of all who are present. But she refuses, and she humiliates him in front of really the whole nation. That is what verse 1 refers to: "after these things," after that happened. Well, finally Ahasuerus's anger had abated.

But we're reminded of this tragedy: this young, beautiful woman who had her whole life ahead of her, but she gets on the king's bad side and is banished. And we feel her pain in these opening verses, because she comes to the king's mind, and it seems to be in a positive way.

I think verse 1 of chapter 2 probably takes place about three years after the conclusion of chapter 1. There's been a great span of time. Persia has gone to war during that period against the Greeks. They come back with their tails between their legs. It's about three years later. Ahasuerus is pouting. He's trying to think of what he could do to possibly cheer himself up. And what does he remember? He remembers the beautiful Queen Vashti. And then he also remembers what she had done. And he

remembers the decree he had made, the decree that was given in the order of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be revoked or changed. So she is gone completely. Which reminds us something of the wickedness and the tyranny of a world that is trapped in sin. You're disposable to them. You're forgettable. You're replaceable.

And even the king seems to be suffering under his own arrogant use of power, as he would perhaps delight to have another evening with Vashti. But he made a decree that says she can no longer come into his presence. And the tragedy moves beyond just Vashti now to the whole region, and all the young, beautiful virgins in the capital, because the king's advisers don't want him to sit around and be upset and dejected. He needs to look like he has things under control. They want to cheer him up. He needs to rule, and that means, to rule well, you must have a queen. And so we read that the king appointed officials in all 127 provinces to gather together the beautiful young women and for those to be brought forward before him.

What's described in the following verses is not some sort of beauty pageant that some young girls might actually enjoy participating in. This is rather, and we need to say it for what it is, young women being ripped from their homes, taken from their families, and being forced to march to the beat of the king's drum.

In one sense, every little girl, every young woman that is chosen has already lost, or maybe I should say, they've already won. It depends from whose perspective you're looking at it. From the king's perspective, they've already won. From these women's perspective, they've already lost. Even if they are not selected to be the queen, that doesn't mean they get to go back home. Doesn't mean that life returns to normal. No. Now they stay in a harem as one of the concubines. They are still now property, slaves to the king's sensual lusts. That's what we have here.

Considering there were hundreds of women brought forward, maybe you were only brought out to play with the king every few years. One scholar said that what had just happened to these women was much closer to widowhood than marriage. Essentially what we have here is the king acting on a whim, destroying the lives of nearly all the capital's young women. And it's not just the women. The young boys are taken in the same way to become eunuchs and to serve in the court of the king the rest of their lives. They never have a say.

You see the wickedness of the world. You see the tyranny, the cruelty, the capriciousness of a world that is lost and deluded in sin. The world tramples over people and makes victims, and in the world there's ultimately no voice for the victims. For any one of these girls who are selected, or these boys who are taken, there's no hope for change. There's no appeal process. There's no hope, it would seem, for justice. They're just stuck with their burdens, their cares, their nightmares, which have now become their life. That's life in this fallen world. The world makes victims, and there's often very little we can do about that.

Sure, we might see a small sense or reflection of justice now and then, when the bad guys actually get caught, when they actually go to prison. But let's be honest. Does a fine or a prison sentence, even one to the fullest extent of the law, actually heal and remedy the hurt of, say, a victim of rape? Does that actually satisfy and soothe the mother who lost her son when he was struck by a drunk driver? There are just wrongs in this world that cannot be righted.

But we can have, and we ought to seek, justice in the world. But the justice we get in this world, we call proximate justice. Proximate justice. But it's not the full thing. We don't have proximate sin. We don't have proximate suffering. It's real sin. It's full suffering. But the release from it, and the freedom from it, and the justice that we long for from it, that can only come in another world entirely. The world is insufficient for those sorts of things. In fact, the world only exacerbates these things, as we see here through the fickle nature of King Ahasuerus.

2. Far from God

And so the people of God are under the rule of a wicked man at this time, and they're also portrayed as being far from God during this period. We learn that from the introduction of the two main characters. If you look at verse 5, where Mordecai and Esther are introduced, they're cousins to one another. What I want to point out at this stage is simply the way the narrator reminds us of the state of the whole covenant community: that they are in exile. We mentioned it last time, that they're in exile under the Persian Empire right now. But look how the narrator puts it in verse 5. There was a Jew in Susa the citadel. His name was Mordecai. And then verse 6 says, "who had been carried away from Jerusalem."

The word for *exile* in Hebrew is the same as this word that's translated "carried away." In fact, the word *exile* is the participle of the verb *carried away*. So exiles are the carried-away ones. It doesn't quite come out in the English, but in verse 6 that word is repeated over and over, the word for exile. So it would read something like this: it talks about Mordecai, who had been exiled away from Jerusalem among the exiles who were exiled with Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had exiled. Do you get the point? They're not at home. Exile has become their identity.

And truly, even Mordecai's name proves that - it's not a Jewish name. Mordecai is not a Jewish name. Rather, it's taken from a Babylonian god, meaning a worshiper of Marduk. And so that's why he's introduced as Mordecai the Jew, because Mordecai is not a Jewish name. The same thing with Esther. Her name is derived from the Babylonian Ishtar, who was the goddess equivalent to the Roman goddess Venus.

We could think of Daniel and his three friends under Nebuchadnezzar. They're taken into captivity, and their names are taken with them. Daniel means "God is my judge," but his name is changed to Belteshazzar, meaning "Bel protects my life." Can you imagine something more disorienting than that? I mean, it's one thing that you're in a new land and you're learning a new language, but now you have your name even taken away from you. Your identity is stripped away from you. And it's not just that you don't have an identity; this wicked world has bestowed an identity upon these people.

So the people of God are not meant to feel at home in Persia or in Babylon. We're not meant to feel at home here in this world. And, friend, if you are claiming to be a Christian tonight, but you can say, "I feel quite at home in this world," well, then you need to question your priorities and ask where your citizenship truly lies.

The name that the world seeks to give you, does it fit for you? Are you desperate to receive a label that the world wants to bestow upon you? Or are you crushed by the name that the world has given you? In either case, we need to recognize that you're forgetting, right? God is the one who named you. God is the one who claims you. God is the one to whom you belong, and you belong to him in another world entirely.

And even as we said, if you were here this morning, that the Christian is to recognize that life here on earth is an opportunity to serve our God and to know our Savior and to commune with him. And so we love life in that sense. We are meant to live it also with what I call a sort of sanctified discontentedness, that we're just not happy ultimately here because we're not made for this place and we're longing. We're yearning for something truer, something more pure, something better.

And we can struggle with that because the world, well, it's in front of our faces all the time, and it's hard to remember that it's not our true home. It becomes almost second nature, rather than our regenerate self, the new man, becoming second nature. And sometimes we revert back to the old nature, and we're just happy to go along with the way things are in the world. And we need to remember that if I am in Christ, my future is not bound up with the future of this place, of this world. My identity cannot be given to me by my career, by my family even. My identity does not come from my failures or even my successes. My identity comes from Christ.

The apostle Peter seeks to place distance between the believer and the hold that society would want to place on them. Do you remember in 1 Peter chapter 1 how he refers to Christians? He calls them "elect exiles." That's us. That's who we are.

And so from that perspective, Esther, and the situation of the people of God, shouldn't feel all that foreign to us, because this is where we are too. In this sense we feel like we are far from God, far from our true home. And when we have to face a wicked world, and we have that sense that we are far from God, don't you often feel weak too?

3. Too Weak to Change

That's the third thing we see in this chapter that makes it so bleak. It's this undeniable weakness, not only of God's people as a whole, but especially of Esther. Let's think about what happens to her in this chapter. She's already lost her home. She's lost her parents. She's being raised by an older cousin, Mordecai. Now she's taken even from him. And she's subjected to this grueling preparatory process. You can look at verses 12–14, where it talks about how this will take one year. The beautifying procedure takes 12 months, and this is not akin to a year at the spa. This is being poked and prodded and fumigated. It's no vacation. It's humiliation.

These women very likely hated their new lives, hated being treated like mannequins, being stuck in this prison palace of the king. And they're doing all of this so that they can maybe, just maybe, spend one night with the king. It's disgusting. It's dehumanizing. What we're told here is that these women go through a year of preparation for a lifetime of neglect.

And yet, as they're strutted about the king's runway, so to speak, there is one who stands out, and it's Esther. She stands out from the very beginning. In verse 9, Hegai, who's in charge of all this, she finds favor in his eyes. And then verse 15 says that she goes in to the king, and that she's winning favor in the eyes of everyone, all who saw her. But then, most importantly, the king. Verses 16–17: "When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into the royal palace in the tenth month, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti."

And so here's the quintessential queen that Vashti was supposed to be. Beautiful. She's compliant. She wears the very crown that Vashti refused to wear in chapter 1, verse 11. And so Vashti is rejected because she runs away from the king's edict and summons. But Esther is chosen because of the exact opposite. She is chosen because she walks down the runway at his bidding. It's perfect. She's perfect.

But at what cost does she receive this evaluation from the king?

And we think about Daniel and his friends in exile. Remember, they would stand up to the king. They would stand up to the rules of the land. Esther does not. She does not protest the way she's being treated. She does not protest the dietary laws or object to the beautifying procedure. She does not object to marrying a pagan. Now, of course, Ahasuerus did not know that she was a Jew, because Mordecai said, "Don't tell him." We'll get to that in a moment. But Esther knew that he was a pagan.

We have our main character here complying with some less-than-godly things. And you know, some commentators take Esther to task for this and criticize her. They say that perhaps she was using her body in order to get an advantageous position in the kingdom, or that she should have been more principled and should have put her foot down and should have refused.

I think David Strain is right when he says this. "The truth is, Esther has been manipulated and abused, emotionally and psychologically broken. She is a victim. We don't need to clean the text up, nor should we scold Esther as though she were an ambitious modern starlet trying to sleep her way to a position of influence. Rather, we need to read these words with grief and with empathy, recognizing in this story a tale that has been and continues to be repeated all over the world, in every culture, and in every age." She's powerless. She's a victim.

Have you ever felt powerless to the wickedness of the world? Have you ever felt small and incapable of bringing any sort of change for good? Have you perhaps been the victim of the abuse of someone else's position or power or strength? Is that you tonight?

If that's been your experience, I want to say first, I'm sorry. But I want to say second that, although the world doesn't care, as we clearly see from Esther chapter 2, and although it would seem that victims have no voice, this story is included in our Bibles to show us that God cares. God notices, and God gives a voice to victims that the world would otherwise run right over.

If you've been hurt or abused or victimized, God is saying to you through this chapter, I know what's happening. I know what's going on. My people have been through this before. And Psalm 56:8 has this beautiful picture. Do you know that verse, where it talks about the tears we face in this life? And it says God's keeping each one of our tears in a bottle. Why would he do that? It's this beautiful picture for us so that we can know He remembers. It says that He writes down our tossings in His book. It's like He has this journal of the things that we go through. Why? Not just to keep a list, not just so that He knows and is aware, but so that one day He will do something about it, and every wrong will be righted. You don't get that in the world, but you get it from God. And He keeps our tears and our sorrows and our suffering. He keeps them recorded. He keeps our tears in a bottle so that we can know that God is saying, "I'm aware, and I will fix it."

4. Don't Believe It: The Myrtle among the Thorns

But then we ask, okay, where's the fix? Well, even in Esther 2, we could say, "Where's the fix?" It's this dark story. It's this sad story, the abuse of power, the helplessness of innocent people. It's the story of the church in many ways. And what do we do as we face the wickedness of this world? As we sense we are at times far from God, when we feel like we're helpless to do anything about it, what do we do?

Don't believe it.

Don't believe that evil will win, or that God is not near, or that you are in fact helpless. Don't believe it. This isn't the whole story. And though it seems like the odds are stacked against the people of God, that's just to make the twist that's soon to come all the more magnificent. Although we're walking through a valley now, friends, there is a reversal coming where God will even use our enemies for our benefit, and He'll use the weaknesses that we feel to bring about our deliverance.

Think about the wicked men in this chapter, in Esther chapter 2. It's verse 2. The king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king." It is these wicked advisers who say, "Let's go and abuse all the young women throughout 127 provinces." It is that wicked decision that elevates Esther to a place of prominence in the kingdom. She feels so small. She feels so helpless. She feels so weak. And yet, we know she will be used. She will be used to redeem God's people.

Now, is there a way that we see that in our story before we turn to the end? Is there a way it's even hinted at here? Well, I think we see God is planting seeds that are going to come to full bloom later on in the story. Like the fact, as I've mentioned, that Esther does not tell [Ahasuerus] that she's a Jew. And this is important because Ahasuerus legally was only to marry within the royal, pure Persian line. But since he doesn't ask, and since Esther doesn't tell, he assumes that she belongs to this lineage, and therefore the marriage is legitimate. If he would have known, there's no way he would have married Esther. And if he didn't marry Esther, then she would not have been able to say, as she does later on in the story, when he sets out to destroy the entire Jewish people, for her to say, "I'm a Jew. Wait, I'm a Jew," and thereby to save her people.

And I think we also see the hidden hand of God's providence that turns even the most grim and the darkest situations into that which can be filled with the light. We see that, I think, even in Esther's name. I think her name is prophetic of this. No, not her Persian name. But her real name. Look there again in verse 7. We're told her Jewish name. It says that Mordecai was bringing up Hadassah. Hadassah is a Hebrew word that means myrtle. Myrtle. Myrtle, as you know, is a species of plant. The leaves are evergreen. The flowers are smooth. They are closely related to eucalyptus and guava. It represents peace and serenity. Myrtle shows up several times in the Bible, like Isaiah chapter 55. Would you turn there with me? Isaiah 55 as we close this evening.

Isaiah 55 is a wonderful chapter. There's so much here. We heard a portion of it in the anthem this morning from the choir, but I want to look at the very last two verses, where the great reversal that God is going to bring about for His people is portrayed. Right now they're disheartened. They're discouraged. But God says there's a day coming where that will change. Look at verse 12. He says, "For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the

cypress. Instead of the brier shall come up Hadassah, the myrtle, and it shall make a name for the Lord, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

Look at what it says there in verse 13. Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. *Instead* means that something is expected. What's expected is the thorns and the needles and the briars. But instead of that awful thorny stuff, there's going to be the sweet-smelling flowers, and the myrtle will be an everlasting sign that God will not abandon His people.

And isn't that what we see in Esther? Even in the person of Esther, that amidst the horror of this pagan regime, amidst this thorny story of wickedness and abuse and all kinds of awfulness, there's this myrtle coming up in the person of Esther, through whom God will continue His everlasting covenant with His people, showing to them they can never be cut off. He's always with them. Even when it feels like He's far, He is very near in His mysterious providence, working all things for their salvation, their preservation. His people can never perish.

5. The Greatest Plot Twist of All Time

And friends, that's a promise that's true for you and me today. God will never cut off the covenant He made with His people. And you might be looking around you, and it might read a lot like Esther 2. All I see is wickedness. All I feel is far from God. All I am is helpless to do anything about it. You need to know tonight, friends, that you are living in the greatest plot twist of all time. World history is unfolding. This great drama, a great drama with a surprise ending that nobody could guess. The world is on a trajectory for a eucatastrophe. And if you are a Christian, you get to be part of that story. It is your story. You get to be part of that happy ending that pierces you with joy that brings tears, as Tolkien said.

And we need reminding of that, because so often the trials we're in, they're just so heavy and they're so right in front of us that it can make it seem like there is no way a happy ending could come about. But the gospel, the good news tonight, is that even when it seems like nothing other than curse can be found, the Lord will turn it into blessing.

The thorns of Genesis 3 that enter the scene because of sin, the very ones that Isaiah says will give way to myrtle, those thorns of sin and suffering and the curse of God did their very worst when they crowned the head of the Son of God. He redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. And that man who was rejected by His own, trampled on and abused by a wicked world, who experienced not just feeling far from God, but truly was, in this mysterious way that we can hardly wrap our minds around, at the cross, in that moment of darkness, forsaken by God, who felt the full weight of the curse of God, He is the one who is bringing forth blessings for God's people.

And that's why we sing, "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found." Jesus did that. He's done that for us. And who would have thought it on Good Friday that that's where the story was headed? Oh, isn't it beautiful the way God uses the most unlikely of characters, the most unlikely of heroes? Isn't it beautiful how out of darkness, God loves to bring light?

And so Esther 2 should be a reminder to us, when all those things seem dark and dreary and even hopeless, when it seems that the world and culture have got their way and that all that's left is for us to run and hide before they get us and abuse us and oppress us and neglect us, aren't we reminded here of

the great plot twist that is soon to be revealed? Friends, our tragedy will be turned into sweet tranquility, our suffering into serenity.

Esther 2 gives us a glimpse into the reversals that God is in the business of making. Through Esther, God preserved His people so that He could make a way through the brambles for the one who would wear the thorns Himself, the ultimate Rescuer, the ultimate Savior. That's providence for you. You were reading Esther, and you'd be forgiven to read these chapters and go, "What in the world is going on here?" Providence, that's what's going on. And in providence, God is preparing for His people.

Remember that as you face the briars and thorns of this life: what the world means for evil, God means for your good and His glory. If you have placed your faith in that great and grand plot twist of Calvary, the cross turned empty tomb of the gospel, if you've placed your hope in that, then know that God is working a reversal in your life as well. So that through your suffering there will become, somehow, someway, a happy ending.

Which means that the things in life that we think will crush us, or perhaps the things that appear so weak as to do us no good, may just be how the Lord saves us.