

## August 15, 2021 | Summer Worship Service

TEXT: [Esther 2:5–10, 16–23](#)

### TITLE: A Tale of Three Banquets – Esther | Part 2

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I will start with a short quote from Toni Morrison, which I want you to remember and which we'll come back to at the end of this sermon. Morrison once said, *The function of freedom is to free someone else*. We may think of freedom as someone we possess, when in fact the purpose and value of freedom comes when we use our freedom to free someone else, someone who is captive, oppressed, or afraid. *The function of freedom is to free someone else*.

The first banquet in the book of Esther was described in chapter 1. It was a gluttonous feast overseen by a drunken king who tried to force his wife, Queen Vashti, to parade her royal self for the amusement of the partygoers. She refused and lost her crown, although not her dignity and self-respect. Chapter 2 ends with a second banquet, but before those festivities, a replacement queen had to be found. We once again encounter the powerful king Ahasuerus on his throne. But we also meet a Jewish exile living in the Persian capital city, a man by the name of Mordecai. He was a Jewish descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, and since it notes he lived in the citadel—the central fortress of the city—he likely held a minor government position. In addition to Mordecai, we meet a young Jewish girl named Hadassah—whose Persian, non-Jewish name was Esther. Esther is an orphan, a relative of Mordecai who has been raised by him as if she were his own child.

As I said earlier, the king needed a new queen. Esther was fair and beautiful, and so she was taken into the king's court as a possible candidate. She became part of his harem, was dressed up, primped and perfumed, and eventually chosen by Ahasuerus as his new wife. Now, an entire sermon could be given on the flawed power dynamics here—the misogyny and abuse of women who exist in a man's royal harem. We might wish that the behavior of 2,500 years ago no longer exists, but we know that things like child marriages and honor killings still happen today. But for the sake of today's message, there's a different detail I want to highlight. Twice the scripture says Esther told no one that she was a Jew; she kept her ethnicity, her core identity a secret. This plays an important role in the story and it's a detail worth exploring.

What is a secret? Usually we think of secrets as involving a deception we hide from others. When I was a kid, my sister and I were racing from the bus stop back to our house. We were neck and neck when we reached the back door and slammed into it, shattering the storm glass panel in the screen door. We panicked. We picked up all the glass and removed the panel from the door frame, leaving only the screen in place. We never told our parents and forgot about our misdeed until late October rolled around and the weather was getting colder, and we suddenly heard our Dad shout, "Hey, what happened to the glass panel in the screen door?" Busted!

That was a secret with a relatively short life cycle: we decided to hide something from our parents; we forgot about our misdeed; our sin was discovered; we faced the consequences and then moved on. But other secrets can last for years. Some carry around secrets about their past—perhaps a struggle with addiction or a criminal record. Some carry around secrets about their identity—afraid to tell their family and friends about their sexual orientation or that they truly understand themselves to be non-binary or transsexual. These are hard secrets to keep. You have to watch everything you say; you have to be constantly vigilant and do the exhausting work of self-monitoring even in casual conversations with friends.

Studies have shown that secrecy can lead to lower well-being, worse health, and less satisfying relationships. Interestingly, the psychic damage doesn't come so much from keeping the secret as it does from constantly thinking about the secret. It is tiring to have a secret keep coming to mind—to think over and over again “They might not like me if they really knew me;” “I can't say what I really feel because then my true identity will be revealed.” It's exhausting! That's why being able to share a secret can be so healing. There is the catharsis of getting a burden off your heart. But even more important, there is usually a conversation that follows the secret-telling—hopefully words of emotional support and advice that help you deal with your long-kept secret. Once someone else knows the secret, the psychic weight of secrecy is eased. Even just one conversation like this can lead to healthier self-images and more positive outlooks.<sup>1</sup> One of the recent LGBTQ campaigns encouraged people to be open about their sexual identity, using the tagline “It Gets Better.” Science has proven the truth of this slogan.

Esther had a big secret she carried with her inside the palace – she was a Jewish maiden, part of the oppressed exile community despite her Gentile name. Mordecai knew her secret and he could offer her advice and support, but once the crown was placed on her head and a royal banquet was held in her honor—Queen Esther—the weight of the secret was heavy upon her shoulders.

Now, if you remember the story of Esther, you know that one of the king's advisers is a petty, jealous man named Haman who becomes angry that Mordecai won't bow down to him and ends up plotting to destroy the entire Jewish population in the land. This will make Esther's secret even harder to bear. Esther will use her wisdom and cleverness to save her people, which we'll hear about next week. But before that twist comes in the story, one of her first acts as queen is to speak up for justice and to protect her husband the king. Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king, and when he passed on this information to Esther, she wisely warned Ahasuerus and thwarted the assassination attempt. Rather than stay quiet, Esther (despite her big secret) stepped into the spotlight and did what was right for someone else.

Put yourself in Esther's shoes for a moment. Esther's life has not been easy. She has lost both her parents and lives as a Jewish girl in a foreign land. Her beauty likely makes her a target for exploitation, and even though her time in the harem culminated with a crown on her head, there is no denying the fundamental power imbalance here and that she is still at the mercy of the men around her. All sorts of things seem to

conspire against her to put her in harm's way: history, the biases of human society, politics, and fate. How often have we too listed off the things that seem to be working against us—history, society, bad luck, bad finances, bad bosses, injustice and racism due to our gender or ethnic identity. When things aren't going well—when relationships fail, when our health turns sour, when life is hard—we list off all that is working against us. That can lead us to pull back from the world. That can prompt us to keep our head down and our mouth shut, so that things don't get worse—and to make sure our shortcomings and secrets don't become known.

Esther could have chosen that path. She could have said, "Thank you for the crown, but can I be excused? I have nothing to say, nothing to offer; I'd prefer just to be left alone." Yes, there are things that seem to be working against all of us—history, society, politics, injustice, bad luck. I don't deny that. But those are not the only things in this world. By faith, we believe there are other things, wonderful things, working on our behalf from a loving God and saving Christ: things like grace, compassion, truth, patience, hope. If other things conspire against us, an even greater power is at work to sustain us, to lift us up, to help us keep on keepin' on. And all of this is the Lord's doing, to encourage us to hold on, to keep our heads up, to care about what's happening in our world, and to speak up and do what's right. Not to be Hadassah, the maiden thrust into the palace politics, hoping to keep her head down and her secret safe. No, but to be Queen Esther, the woman who walks in the hallways of royalty, who looks the world in the eye, who speaks up for what is just and fair, and who saves her husband's life by breaking her silence.

Now recall the quote from Toni Morrison: *The function of freedom is to free someone else.* You are free. You may still have struggles; you may still carry secrets; you may be unsure about tomorrow—but as a child of God, you are free. As a child of God, you know there are great things all around you working to sustain you, guide you, protect and keep you safe. In Christ, your fullest identity is known; your sins are forgiven and your potential is celebrated. You are called beloved. Like it says in Romans 8, *no power or rulers, no things present or yet to come, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Now share that good news with others. Welcome others in. Use your freedom to free someone else—so that they too may know that, yes, it does get better; that tears and sadness may last for a day, but joy comes in the morning; and that they (with you, with Queen Esther, with the church universal) may hold onto the good news that in life and in death we belong to God.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Slepian, "Why the Secrets You Keep Are Hurting You," *Psychology Today*, Feb 5, 2019