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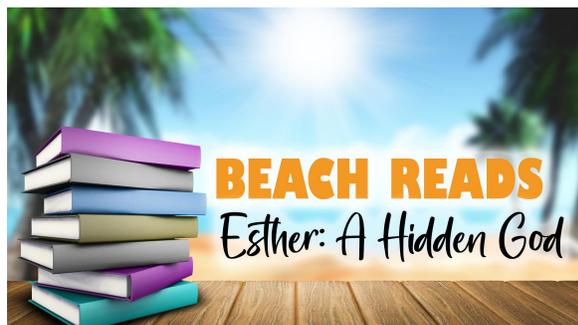
**Title:** Beach Reads—Esther: A Hidden God

**Preaching:** Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

**Text:** [Esther 7:1-7](#)

**Email:** [Ryan Hazen](#)

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Today, we begin our annual *Beach Reads* sermon series. *Beach Reads* predates my tenure as lead pastor and was started to focus on stories in the Bible that would be both educational but also a bit like reading your best beach read—a little bit of intrigue, mystery, and suspense. A few months ago, when I began thinking about a good story for *Beach Reads*, I thought the Old Testament book of Esther checked all of those boxes.

As I began to do more research a couple of weeks ago, the first commentary I opened began with these words: “Preaching from the book of Esther is not for the faint-hearted. The book offers some challenges to the preacher. There is a lot of killing at the end of the book. And there’s the little matter of the way in which Esther becomes queen, a process which, despite the *Veggie Tales* rendition of the tale, shouldn’t be discussed in the presence of young children. Still, despite these difficulties, the book of Esther is a good story, it has a strong female protagonist (not common in the Bible), it tells us something about God’s character and action, and it is part of scripture, so it deserves our attention.”<sup>1</sup>

For this series, I’ve taken an “R”-rated story and made it rated “G”—or maybe “PG.” If you want the whole story, it’s a quick read tucked there between Nehemiah and Job. Rather than take a couple of chapters a week and leave you hanging until the end, I’ve decided to take a topic from Esther each week that we might be able to apply to our lives, which means we’ll bounce around a little bit. That also means that each sermon will stand on its own rather than building on one another. To do that, though, I’ll need to acquaint you, or reacquaint you, with the story.

The story is set 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites from their land; that would be about 480 B.C. or so. And while some Jews like Ezra and Nehemiah did return to Jerusalem, many did not. The

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<sup>1</sup> Commentary on Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, Professor and Elva B. Lovell Chair of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, MN. September 27, 2015. Found at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-esther-71-6-9-10-920-22-4>.

book of Esther is about a Jewish community living in Susa, the capital city of the ancient Persian Empire. First, let's get a handle on the main characters in the story. We've put them in the bulletin, and you'll see them on the screen. First are two Jews, Mordecai and his cousin, Esther. Esther's mother and father died when she was young, and she was raised by cousin Mordecai.

There's the king of Persia, Ahasuerus. Some of your Bibles name him as Xerxes; they are one in the same person. He's something of a drunken pushover in this story. His wife, the queen (at least to begin the story) is Vashti. And then there's the Persian official, Haman, the cunning villain. Those are the people to keep straight. The book opens with the king of Persia throwing two elaborate banquet feasts—the first for his government officials that lasts 180 days and a second one for all the people that lasts seven days. It was a 187-day feast; that's quite the party! There are lots of details in chapter one about the banquets, including the color of the curtains (white cotton), the wall hangings (blue tied with cords of fine linen), and even the kinds of golden wine goblets. "Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired" (Esther 1:8). At the same time, Queen Vashti is throwing a similar banquet for the women.

On the last day of the party, Ahasuerus is inebriated and demands that his wife, Vashti, appear at his party. She refuses and he promptly strips Vashti of her queenship. That means, however, that he needs to find a new queen. It's here that we're introduced to Esther and Mordecai. Esther hides her Jewish identity and the king becomes so obsessed with Esther that he elevates her to become the new queen of Persia. Shortly after this, Esther's cousin Mordecai just happens to overhear two Royal Guards plotting to murder the king. Mordecai informs Esther of the plot, who in turn informs the king and Mordecai gets credit for saving the king's life.

Next, you need to know about Haman. He's the villain. If this were an interactive sermon—IT'S NOT—every time I said the name "Haman," you would boo. The king elevates Haman to the highest position in the kingdom, and he demands that everybody kneel before Haman. When Mordecai sees Haman, he refuses to kneel, which fills Haman with rage. When he finds out that Mordecai is Jewish, Haman successfully persuades the king to enact a crazy decree to destroy all the Jewish people. In order to pick a date of the Jews' annihilation, Haman rolls the dice. A die is called *pur* in Hebrew. Tuck that away for later.

The date is set. Eleven months later, on the thirteenth of Adar, all the Jews will die. Haman and the king then have a drinking banquet to celebrate their horrible decision. The focus turns to Mordecai and Esther, who are the only hope for the Jewish people. They make a plan that Esther will reveal her Jewish identity to the king and ask him to reverse the decree. But approaching the king without a royal request is, according to Persian law, an act worthy of death.

Esther responds with bravery and says these amazing words, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). That's when all of Haman's evil plans start to unravel. Esther hosts the king and Haman at a banquet and says she wants to make a special request of both of them at an exclusive banquet the following day. Haman leaves the banquet inebriated, and he sees Mordecai in the street. He fumes with anger. He orders that

gallows be built so that Mordecai can be put to death in the morning. It seems like things can't get any worse for the Jews and for Mordecai. But all of a sudden, the story pivots.

That night, the king can't sleep. He has the royal chronicles—his life story—read to him for good bedtime reading. And he just happens to hear about how Mordecai had saved his life. He had totally forgotten. In the morning, Haman enters to request Mordecai's execution. The king, in a dramatic twist, instead orders Haman to honor Mordecai publicly for saving his life. Now Haman must lead Mordecai around the city on a royal horse telling everyone to praise him. This is the moment of Haman's downfall and Mordecai's rise to power.

The next day is Esther's second banquet. The king and Haman arrive. Esther informs the king of two things. First of all, she's Jewish (surprise). Secondly, Haman has enacted a decree to murder her, and to murder Mordecai, who saved his life, and to murder all of the Jews. This was today's scripture reading. The king has had a lot to drink, so when he hears this news, he goes into yet one more drunken rage. And he orders that Haman be hanged on the very gallows he made for Mordecai. Haman's execution, however, doesn't solve the problem of the decree to kill all of the Jews. They discover that the king can't revoke a decree that he's already made.

The king commissions Mordecai to issue a counter decree. On the appointed day that all of the Jews were supposed to be killed, the 13th of Adar, the Jews are now ordered to defend themselves and to destroy any who plotted to kill them. Then Mordecai, Esther, and Jews everywhere hold banquets and feasts to celebrate this new decree. Mordecai is elevated to a seat beside the king. Eventually the decree day comes, and the Jews triumph over their enemies. They destroy Haman's family and any other Persian officials who had joined in Haman's plot. The story then tells about how Esther and Mordecai established, by decree, an annual two-day feast of Purim to commemorate their deliverance from destruction. And the name of the feast comes from Haman's dice. Remember *pur*? The feast of Purim is still celebrated to this day; the next one is March 6-7, 2023.

I've subtitled this first *Beach Read* "A Hidden God." God is never mentioned in the entire book of Esther. Go look; you won't find it. So why would there be a book in the Bible that doesn't mention God? God's not mentioned, and none of the characters can be held up as moral examples. There's a lot of drinking and anger and sex and murder, of which Mordecai and Esther take part. They violate, on occasion after occasion, many commands in the Torah, like marrying Gentiles or eating impure foods, and it's done without mention or any remorse.

Not mentioning God and not making the characters take the moral high ground is a brilliant technique by the author, who is anonymous by the way. It's an invitation by the author to read this story and look for God without the author having to explicitly say, "See, this is God working here." If you've read Esther or even just heard the overview that I gave, did you see God's presence? Did you hear God's presence? There are signs of it everywhere. The story is full of very odd, ironic reversals. Some people might call them "coincidences," and each one forces you to see God's purpose.

The message of this book seems to ask this question: “When God seems absent, when God’s people are in exile, when they’re unfaithful to the Torah and don’t follow the laws, does this mean that God is done with Israel? Has God abandoned his promises? Is God done with us?” The book of Esther says a resounding, “ABSOLUTELY NOT!” It invites us to see that God can and does work in the real mess and moral stench of human history, and God uses the faithfulness of even morally compromised people to accomplish purposes.

This week, I read a book called *Lynn’s Story* with a subtitle, *A Journey of Searing Pain, Inspiring Growth and Ultimate Healing*. It is the true story of Lynn Kampffer. Lynn had it all—a nice home in an exclusive suburb; a caring, successful husband; two smart industrious children until—until—after 30 years of marriage, she discovered it had all been a façade when her husband was caught stealing over \$1 million from trusted friends and family. He was sent to prison. There was a divorce, but he challenged it. After prison, he moved back to the neighborhood to date a neighbor and harass Lynn.

I want to read the first paragraph of the book and the last paragraph of the book. The first paragraph reads:

“God, where are You? It's cold. It's bleak. It's Sunday at 6:30 a.m. on a January morning and I'm just sitting here in my car. Am I crazy? I've never felt so despondent. And what has happened to my life? A few years ago, I was soaring and couldn't understand why I was so blessed; now my life is gone. I hate it! And I am so ashamed. How did I get here? How did I sink so low so quickly? My God, it's cold in this car.”

The last paragraph reads:

“This story chronicles my journey of coming into relationship with God. Yours will be perfectly planned for you. Making a tapestry is a process; one that has taken much longer than I thought it would and will continue for my lifetime. But I wouldn't trade any of it. Always know that you are never alone, even though it may feel like it at times. Reach out to God and to others when life takes a difficult and unexpected turn. God wants to guide and help you, comfort you, and most of all to love you. All you have to do is ask - and then get ready for quite a ride!”<sup>2</sup>

The book of Esther asks us to be willing to trust God, even when we can't see God working and to hope that no matter how bad things get, God is committed to redeeming us and the world. The book is named *Esther*, but if it were named after the main character, it would have been named *GOD*. God is the main character of Esther even though God’s name is not uttered once.

Whether you realize it or not, God is the main character in your story, too. God has been weaving the stories of your life together for such a time as this. Maybe God is not mentioned in this book because

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<sup>2</sup> Kampffer, Lynn. *Lynn’s Story: A journey of searing pain, inspiring growth and ultimate healing*. Self-published, copyright 2017. ISBN 9781543013801.

God is in it so obviously. The same is true in your life; I'm willing to say that God has been present when you had no idea that God was there—your lowest points, your highest points. Think about it. Remember those times. Or if this is one of those times, take heart, God may be hidden but God is not absent.