

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, July 12, 2026

As we continue in worship this day and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy in your pews and let's take a couple deep breaths together. Let's maybe take our prayer posture, close our eyes even, and let's take a deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly.

Another deep breath in.

And breathe it out slowly.

And breathe in God's mercies

and breathe out God's mercies to others.

And breathe in God's mercies.

And breathe out God's mercies to others.

Gracious spirit, you are as close to us as our very next breath. So we pray that you would dwell within us and around us in these moments. that by your power you would quiet any voice within us but your own. That we might hear your word for us this day and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

All right, friends. We continue in our Tell Me a Story sermon series that'll last to the end of July, the end of this month. We spend this morning with Esther. This is an interesting book for us. Esther did not become a part of the Jewish cannon until the 3rd century. It actually depicts a different sort of biblical story for us this day. Historical fiction probably isn't the right way to describe it, but it's something akin to that, which is not to say that it is an unserious book of scripture. It is... many scholars, biblical scholars describe it as a kind of historical biblical novella. And so that is the way in which we will hear the story this day. But you need some context, because we enter into Esther in the fourth chapter, and much has happened in her story and the story of her people by this point in the story. We enter in the middle, but before that much has happened. There's a king who has deposed his queen. The queen of this king is unwilling to be paraded around in front of the king's court. She objects. He removes her from her royal position. Into the vacuum of that power and influence, Esther moves, stepping in, keeping her Jewish identity secret at the encouragement of Mordecai.

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Mordecai is a trusted companion of Esther, and he'll be a part of the text that we'll read in just a moment. What you need to know is that Mordecai in the early part of the book of Esther refuses to bow to one of the king's court, to Haman. And in response to this offense, Haman decides to kill Mordecai. But not just Mordecai. Haman wants all Jews to be killed. That is where we join the story this morning. Esther, in her role as queen secretively holding her identity as a Jew, discussing with Mordecai what it is they might do or she might do in response. So, beginning in the first verse of the fourth chapter of Esther:

When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai 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 might 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.

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 into 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 into the king for 30 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. But 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, and 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 grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

A bit more explanation of the text that we have just read. There is a temptation when we are in places of privilege to think that we are exempt from that which befalls the most vulnerable. It's where Esther finds herself this morning in the midst of the tension, between defending her people, the Jews, and defending her place in the place of privilege within the castle, within the social order and hierarchy of things. Mordecai warns her, though, "Don't think that you are any different than any of the rest of us."

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And in response, Esther with prayer and fasting and the spirit of the living God decides that she will be courageous. She's already been so throughout the story to this point. But entering the king's court is a different level altogether. Mordecai says to her in the center of the story, the place on which the entire story of Esther turns, he says to her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

If Mordecai imagined that Esther was going to enter the king's court and demand that change be made, that the Jews be pardoned or relieved of this burden that was going to befall them, that is not what she did. Political scientist Joseph Nye describes the difference between a hard power and soft power. I invite you to go home this afternoon and read the entirety of Esther. And if you do, you will see that she enters into the inner sanctuary of the king. And she doesn't plead with him, not immediately. Instead, she says, "Come to a banquet that I'm throwing." And he does, and he enjoys himself. And at the end of that banquet, when the time is ripe for her to ask of him the pardon of her people, she doesn't. She says, "I'm going to throw another party. Come to that one as well." He leaves simply having enjoyed himself. The king does. He comes back a second time. He enjoys himself once again. It is at that point that she makes the request of the king that her people be pardoned.

You can imagine her hearing the echoes of Mordecai in her head. "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place."

She knows because she believes in God that God is going to deliver her people. But because she chooses to leverage her place of privilege in the social structure, she gets to become a participant in the deliverance of her people. God is going to save them one way or another. But because she chooses to risk her own place of privilege, she gets to be the instrument that God uses to help in the deliverance of God's people. Relief was coming, but she used her privilege to be a part of it. Not just to save her people, but also Mordecai. Haman wants to kill him as well. She reminds the king, "Remember king? Not too long ago, Mordecai, he found out about a plan to kill you and we came to you, and we let you know what was happening. That was him. That was Mordecai that saved your life." And the king says, "I remember. We'll pardon him as well. In fact, Haman is the one on which I will focus my energy." At the end of Esther, Mordecai says that...Mordecai says that this story needs to be written down and sent to all Jews in all places so that they might remember the day when they gained release from their enemies. In fact, this moment, this historical novella, it's used throughout the Jewish canon to help to inaugurate the feast of Purim. This is the story every year when the feast gathers that is told over and over, the story of Esther, the story of one who was placed by God in a particular privileged position at a particular time in

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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the history of God's people to leverage that position to help deliver the people of God. It was for just such a time as that that Esther was called. Esther is the story that the people of God needed to hear. Esther reminds them and reminds us that faithfulness begins with recognizing the moment before us and then asking how God might be calling us to use our lives, our voices, our privileged positions for the sake of others.

We're not simply to look back and venerate Esther. We are to use her as an example for how our lives take shape here and now. So the story begs at least two questions of the listener this day.

What is this time? What is happening here and now in 2026?

What is this time? What is the...what is the current that is moving throughout our time right now? And the second question is how have you...how have we been uniquely prepared for this particular moment in the history of God's world and God's people.

This is not just a story about a Jewish woman turned queen. It is a story that is to call us to deeper and richer faithfulness right now.

It is an opportunity for us to understand what faith looks like both in public life and in personal life. That's how the story of Esther is supposed to shape us. Because some of you spend your time each week in courtrooms, and others of you spend your time in boardrooms. Some of you spend your time each week in classrooms, and others on playing fields. Some of you have platforms in our community to speak to power, and others of you have the ear of those who have privilege and power in this community.

And so then the question becomes, what is this time and how have you been uniquely prepared for it? For Esther, it was a time when the vulnerable in her community, those whom she was bound to, were in danger. It was a time when, quite literally, lives were at stake for a minority community.

And I wonder what is this time in which we find ourselves in 2026.

What is this time that is marked by so much division, so much intimidation, especially for those most vulnerable in our community, for minorities, for immigrants? What is this particular time? And how have you been uniquely equipped and positioned to be of service to the kingdom of God here and now in those courtrooms and those boardrooms, in those classrooms and on those playing fields? Whether you have the ear of the powerful in this community or whether you are

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, July 12, 2026

one of them, how are you to be using your voice to live out your faith in public life? Because this story is most certainly about that. It might not be, though, that you barge into the courtroom or the boardroom or the classroom and you stand on a chair and you proclaim the work of God in the world. It might be more deeply relational than that. It was for Esther. It was the slow work of relationship that helped to change the heart of the king.

Not only is this story about faith in public life, it is about faith in personal life as well. Because if you don't think this story is deeply personal to Esther, you don't know the story.

There's a dimension of this preparation that is also for you and you alone to wrestle with in your personal life. Because some of you have worked the first couple steps of AA, and you have a friend who needs you to walk alongside them in addiction right now. Some of you have parented through the most difficult, divisive times within a family. And there is someone in your orbit who feels that they are the only ones whose families are falling apart or whose kids can't get a footing like they hoped they would. Some of you have lived through that. Others of you have parented your parents, and there's someone real close by you that is in the throes of that right now, trying to figure out what it means to have advanced directives and what it means to...to advocate for someone in the hospital. Some of you work in those environments. Some of you have walked through them.

And Esther is certainly a call to faith in public life, but Esther is also a call to practicing our faith in our personal lives. Some of you have done therapy. You've done the hard work. So you're prepared to have the difficult conversations with a loved one or a friend. The question not just for public life but personal life is what time is it now for you, in the year of our Lord 2026. What unique position and preparation have you been given to be a friend, a companion, a spouse, a partner, a child or a parent? Both in public and personal life, the truth of the Esther story is that you are equipped with everything you need to be of use to God.

But God's help is coming whether or not you decide to participate. It doesn't all rest on your shoulders. But if you choose to leverage how you have been prepared at this particular moment, whether in public life or personal life, you will have the privilege of participating in the healing work of the living God.

Esther is the story that the people of God need to hear every year as they gather for the festival. But those of us who call on the name of Jesus, we understand a dimension of the good news of the gospel that tells us that we are not left to do the difficult public and personal work on our own. The spirit of the living God, the ruach that Jesus breathed upon his disciples dwells within

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Sunday, July 12, 2026

each of you this very day. The good news of the gospel is that you are empowered by the living God. You are empowered to not only have the wisdom to recognize the moment that you find yourself in and that we collectively as a community find ourselves in, but to respond with courage and with faith.

If the story of Esther is the story that the people needed to hear, then Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, the savior that each of us needs, not just each of us, but indeed the whole world.

So, I invite you to spend some time this afternoon reading through Esther. It won't take you long. Maybe grab a notepad or a journal and spend some time reflecting on the time that we find ourselves in right now, both communally and personally, both publicly and personally.

What is it that gives tenor and energy to this particular time, July 12th, 2026? And how have you been prepared by the living God to be of service, to leverage your position and your preparation for the freedom and the deliverance of God's people?

Let us pray together. Gracious and loving God, you come to us in story. You give us people like Esther that show us what it means to be courageous, but courageous in her particular way of being courageous.

Your deliverance is coming. We know it. You are at work bringing healing and freedom. We know that. And yet we want to participate in it with you here. We want to be your faithful partners in that work here. And so we pray, Lord, that you would give us the wisdom and the courage to recognize the very time that we are in right now. And that you might help us to know more clearly how you are calling us to live out our faith in public and personal life right now. Grant us wisdom and courage for these days, oh God. As you did to Esther so many years ago, grant them to us once again. Help us to know and appreciate that the spirit of the living God is at work within us and around us and that we too can be participants in that work this day. For we ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.