

ESTHER SERMON
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How many of you have ever played with dice? (**IMAGE OF DICE**)

Maybe you've gambled, or maybe you have played Yahtzee the classic game of dice
Or perhaps you've thrown dice to try to figure out how many spaces you can move your little piece on a game board

The thing about dice is, you just never know what is going to come up next
If I were to ask you to predict what the number is going to be when I throw these down
You would be at a loss to say
Because it's random, and unpredictable. No one can know what's next. (Throw dice down)

Sometimes people think that life is like that
Just a random, unpredictable series of events that have no meaning or purpose
What's going to happen is going to happen

Sometimes people think that the universe came into being by chance
Like the throw of the dice, with no intelligent design behind it
Yet as science continues to unravel the mystery of the universe more and more is being discovered about all the necessary conditions that must be in place for life to exist...

And here we are not only existing, but talking about existence as well.

Three months ago (Dec. 2014) the Wall Street Journal (not Christianity Today but the WSJ) published an article by Erik Metaxis who wrote that **the idea that the universe just randomly came into being, would be like tossing a coin and having it come up heads 10 quintillion times in a row.**

Theoretical physicist Paul Davies has said that "the appearance of design is overwhelming" and Oxford professor Dr. John Lennox has said **"the more we get to know about our universe, the more the hypothesis that there is a Creator . . . gains in credibility as the best explanation of why we are here."**

Fred Hoyle, the astronomer who coined the term "big bang," said that his atheism was "greatly shaken" at these (new) developments.

So back to Esther.

The message of Esther is that there is a purpose, a plan, a Divine Being who not only orchestrates and plans the universe, but orchestrates and plans our lives as well.

One of the most characteristic things about the book of Esther is that **God is never mentioned**, and yet his plan is implied all through the book.

The fact that God is never mentioned says to me that God is involved in the ordinary events of our human lives on a day to day basis, even if we don't recognize it.

God's hand is in there, orchestrating, planning, creating...that's what the book of Esther tells us

Our job is to recognize it, respond to it, and follow through on what God is calling us to do.

Esther was a Jew, and queen in the Persian Empire. She saved her people –the Israelites - in this book from massive slaughter.

She did this because she followed through on what God was calling her to do, even though it took tremendous courage.

The most famous line in the book of Esther, is stated by Esther's adoptive father Mordecai, who tells Esther, **"And who knows but that you have come to this royal position for such a time as this."**

In other words Esther...you aren't on the throne because of a random throw of the dice. You are on the throne because God put you there at this time for a specific purpose.

How many of you are in situations that seem to be simply circumstantial coincidences, that you take for granted?

How many of you are in situations that are hum drum, and there doesn't seem to be much of a plan – you are just kind of going along?

How many of you might be in situations of change or transition that you wish you were not in, and you want to go back to the way used to be?

If that is the case, try asking yourself the following question: **"What if God has put me in this situation for such a time as this?"** And what if you began to pray, "Lord, show me your calling here...show me what you are doing and why I am in the current life space that I am in."

Because I believe that **nothing happens to God's people by random accident.**

I believe that there is a plan, there is a design, there is a purpose to everything that we go through...Our job is to discern what it is...and then act on it.

So with that life application sort of up front, and the awareness of God's intentional orchestration and plan not only in the creation of the universe but also in our personal lives
Let's look a little bit closer at the book of Esther...

Esther occurs in the middle of the book of Ezra probably between chapter 6 & 7.

Just know first off that it is amazing that we have the books of Ruth and Esther in OT because they are about women who were faithful, but women just weren't so important back then. So the very fact that we have this book, named after a woman in the Bible, is amazing.

The book of Esther probably happens in between the 6th&7th chapter in Ezra because some of the Israelites – about 50,000 of them - have already returned to Jerusalem, their home, under Ezra who was helping them reclaim the Torah/the law as their own...and establish the nation of Israel again as a nation belonging to Yahweh. They have rebuilt the temple and altars of worship.

However, not all of the Israelites from Babylon have returned to Jerusalem yet...some are still in Babylon. And during this time Persia conquers Babylon, and those Jews who were still in Babylon were now under Persian rule.

So in Esther we find that King Xerxes is the King of Persia (Baghdad)

Esther was an orphan. Her mom and Dad died – not sure how. So Mordecai her cousin adopts her. Esther is an adopted child, and she is very beautiful. She turns heads.

The book of Esther opens when the queen of Persia, queen Vashti refuses to come out when King Xerxes summons her.

It is a big banquet lasting 7 days and everyone is allowed to drink as much as they wanted...so everyone was drunk. And on the 7th day, Xerxes summons queen Vashti to come before him wearing her crown; *Biblical scholars tell us that he wants her to come out wearing only her crown and nothing else.*

Vashti refuses, probably aware of what might happen to her if she paraded herself naked in front of a bunch of drunken men...and so King Xerxes has her banished as queen.

All through the book of Esther you have Xerxes depicted as a very moody guy. Sometimes he's up, sometimes he's down...you just never know what kind of mood you'll find him in from one day to the next.

Sometimes we have relatives like that – or people we know where you have to walk around on eggshells with them because you are never sure what is going to tick them off.

That was the way King Xerxes was

After banishing the queen, Xerxes goes off to war for 4 years, comes back and wants a woman again.

So there's a big beauty contest,

and a year of spa treatments where all the most beautiful women in the kingdom who made the cut, get beautified even more to get ready to come before the king.

And of course after all these treatments, **Esther wins the king's favor more than any of the other women.**

Xerxes puts a crown on her head and makes Esther queen.

This is part of God's plan. Not a random throw of the dice.

We get the sense that these women were initially "taken" by the king's orders, and did not necessarily volunteer themselves for this role to be in a contest to be queen.

So it could well be that Esther was there as queen under duress

Which tells us again that ***even when we are in circumstances that we don't particularly like, God is still working a plan, and we need to wake up to what that plan is, or we may miss it altogether.***

Esther is a Jew, who is queen of Persia – she probably did not want to rule a pagan land. So she is probably feeling pretty uncomfortable in her new role, wife of a very moody erratic king.

And wise old Mordecai (her adopted father) warns her...**Don't tell them you are Jewish.**

It could mean your life. So Esther keeps it quiet. No one knows her identity.

Meanwhile Mordecai hangs around the gates of the king's court where business was usually done.

He hangs there because he wants to stay as close to Esther as he can, to get any news of her that might be helpful; and also because he probably was involved somehow in financial matters, or legal matters of importance in the city that gave him the right to be there.

On one of these occasions he hears a plot being formed to murder the king. Mordecai reports the conspiracy to Esther and the king's life is saved.

Esther tells the king it is because of Mordecai.

And this is written down in the king's annals...like session minutes...an accounting of what people have done throughout the kingdom. (big book of them)

This is very important...not just a random coincidence... Mordecai hearing of the plot to kill the king - this was a part of Gods plan. **Not just a random throw of the dice.**

Enter Haman. Haman is second in command to the King, and he is an arrogant self serving psychopath. Since he is convinced that he is the best thing going; he wants everyone to bow down to him when he passes by. Guess who refuses? Mordecai.

Mordecai's absolute resistance to bow down, makes Haman furious.

We aren't sure why Mordecai refuses but here's a theory. Jewish tradition holds that Haman was a descendant of Agag the king. King Saul way back was supposed to kill Agag, the king of the Amalakites. You can find the story in 1 Samuel chapter 15.

But Saul did not kill the king. That was one of his acts of disobedience to God and eventually Samuel has to do it. But because of Saul's delay, other descendants of Agag may have survived and escaped to Persia.

One of those survivors, Biblical scholars think, was an ancestor of Haman who now is seeking to kill all the Jews in the Persian Empire to get even.

Haman, descended from royalty, now in a position of power, hates the Jews and more specifically, hates the Jew Mordecai. Mordecai hates Haman because he probably is well aware of all of this history.

So Haman comes up with this plan to kill all the Jews, and the king not really giving it all that much thought, approves it.

Esther 3:10 says, "So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews."

Mordecai hears of Haman's plan to execute a mass murder of all the Jews. And he mourns and weeps and puts on sackcloth and ashes, crying out and wailing to God.

And he tells Esther, you better do something girl. And Esther responds back it's been 30 days since the king last called for me. If I go before the king without him first calling for me I could die!

Remember...we have an erratic moody king in king Xerxes! Never know if he is going to be up or down.

But Mordecai says to Esther...they aren't going to spare you either if they follow through with this plan. And that's when he says those famous words "**And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?**"

You may not have wanted this
You may not have sought this position out
You didn't choose to be so beautiful
And being Jewish and ruling a pagan land is hard
But God put you right where you are Esther
Wake up to the call and do something.

This is God's plan. Not a random throw of the dice.

Esther thinks about it for three days and then sends word back to Mordecai

“Even though it is against the law, I will go before the King. And if I perish, I perish.”

I will try to stop this from happening.

But Mordecai, Esther says...Please have all the Jews in the region fast and pray for me for three days.

Essentially Esther acknowledges that “My faith and my fate lie in God’s hand, not the kings.”

So after three days, Esther breaks the law and comes before the moody King not knowing if she would live another day.

But the King holds out to her his royal scepter and beckons Esther to him

He tells Esther she can have anything she wants from him, up to half his kingdom

So Esther invites Haman and the King to a banquet...that night in her quarters

And they come...and she invites them back the next night too

Why didn’t she just tell them both at the first banquet?

Maybe she was scared...but God had his hand in that too. God can even work through our fear. Something very important happens between these two banquets that sets up this story in such way that it orchestrates God’s purpose beautifully...

This first banquet done...it has just fed Hamans already bloated ego to the max

He goes home and tells his wife how great he is. He was invited to a private banquet with queen and king of Persia! And he gets to go back and do it all over again tomorrow! It can’t get any better than that.

Of course on the way home to tell his wife all this, he passes by Mordecai, who still stubbornly refuses to bow down to wicked Haman when he passes by. So when he gets home he tells his servants to build a gallows 80 feet high so that when he dines with the queen and king tomorrow he can request to have Mordecai hung there.

Also that night, the night between the two banquets, King Xerxes can’t sleep. So he asks someone to read him the annals, the session meeting minutes, of the kingdom. Maybe he thought they would put him to sleep – I don’t know.

Anyway, they are reading the annals to the King and in there it is recorded that Mordecai had saved the Kings life.

And the King asks his courtiers – **What was ever done for Mordecai to reward him for saving my life?** And they tell him nothing really.

Right then, Haman, who has just come back from building this huge gallows on which to hang Mordecai, enters the room. And the King asks Haman...

“What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?”

And of course Haman thinks, who else would the king want to honor but ME?

So he goes into this elaborate description, thinking all the time he would be the recipient of this. Here it is from scripture – get the irony...a very common characteristic in Jewish literature...

“For the man the king delights to honor, 8 have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. 9 Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king’s

most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

10 "Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

Wow. Irony of ironies.

So of course Haman is mortified, but carries it all out, parades Mordecai around town and then goes back and tells his wife and his advisors what has happened.

Already we see Haman's plans coming apart because he can't possibly hang on the gallows the man who the king has just honored.

While Haman is stewing in his juices at home the king's servants show up to take Haman to the meal with the King and Queen.

While they are eating Xerxes asks Esther again, "What is it that you want Esther. I will give you anything...even up to half my kingdom."

And then Esther reveals the truth. She answers the Kings questions. Lets look at it in her own words.

"If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated... King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is he—the man who has dared to do such a thing?" Esther said, "An adversary and enemy! This vile Haman!"

The King gets up in a rage – he is about to blow a gasket - and he walks into the garden. Haman is petrified, and throws himself down in front of Esther to plead for his life. Somehow he trips and falls on top of Esther so when the King re-enters the room, it looks like Haman is making advances on the queen, which enrages the King even more.

He has Haman hung on Mordecai's gallows. The final irony for Haman.

Then the King announces that in the month of Adar 13 the Jews can defend themselves against those who would try to kill them (since the original law could not be changed). Adar is around February or March.

Is it the roll of the dice or is it God's doing that the month of Adar was the same month that the Jews first celebrated Passover and escaped from Egypt?

King Xerxes puts Mordecai in Haman's position. Mordecai rewrites the law so that the Jews are saved as the King had stated.

He also writes that every Jewish person for that day forward should celebrate this great rescue every year.

Jews still celebrate it today.

Do you know what it is called? It is the **Feast of Purim**.

The word Purim comes from the Hebrew word for dice which is PUR. Purim is the plural of pur.

Haman cast lots or dice to determine what day he would carry out the execution of all the Jews – but actually ***it turned out to be the day that they were saved.***

It tells us, doesn't it, that fate, chance, coincidence never succeeds when it comes to God's people.

God is in the most ordinary events to bring about his purpose for our lives. That's what the Jews celebrate at Purim.

Not chance, but Gods plan trumping chance; God's salvation winning out, God's story being an intentional intelligent story given to us to rescue us.

Believe that for you. Know that for you. Be aware that in the most ordinary events in your life God is there, working his purposes out – with great irony, justice and finesse. Be awake to that, and answer his call.

Because when you follow Christ, nothing is an accident. Who knows but that you were put in your exact circumstances, **"For such a time as this"**.

Let us pray: As we approach the table this morning we are aware that you Lord celebrated the first Passover meal with your disciples also in the month of Adar – the month of rescue from Egypt, and the month of rescue for Esthers people. We know that it is not by the roll of the dice, but it is by your plan that we are saved from our sins today, led out of spiritual bondage and awakened this day to your call and purpose for our lives. May we take these elements with an awareness that you have given them to us today **"For such a time as this"** that we might lead others to your salvation.

Forgive us for believing in chance and fate more than in your faithful intentional plan for us. Help us to trust you and take these elements remembering that you intentionally and purposefully died to give them to us, to once again set us free. We do not take these elements because of a roll of the dice. We take them because your love is purposeful and real. May partake with gratitude today...Amen