

“The Story” / Unit 5: “Out of the Ashes”

Sermon 3: Missions and Shadow Missions (Chapter 20: Esther)

February 15, 2015

Morning, I'm on a mission from God. How many of you guys know what I'm quoting? You guys are old! Actually, everybody, every human being on earth, could wear these. We are on a mission from God. We are all here for a reason, for a purpose. It is one of the great movies of all time. The Blues Brothers...

I don't listen to a lot of music, but I've got to tell you, that's a great movie, with some great music. And those two guys are driven: they are on a mission from God... kind a, sort a. And here's the deal: We all are! (2 Corinthians 5.9) All of us have this macro purpose from God. We are here to do life with God. We are here to please him. And all of us, from time to time, have some specific mission from God; he gives us specific jobs to do. Do you buy that?

And (this one is different) ... everybody has a shadow mission, which works against our mission from God. All of us tend to drift into the pursuit of something else, something unworthy and dark – we'll call it a shadow mission. And listen: if we do not pursue – intentionally -- the mission given us by God, we will find a substitute. We can't live without a mission, a purpose. So if we do not pursue his mission for us, we will by default pursue a shadow mission. We will find ourselves living for something unworthy, self-centered, and dark. It won't be easy to do life God's way. Pursuing our mission from God will be harder, but it will be worth it. Pursuing some shadow mission will be easier, but it will inevitably end in regret, and guilt.

Okay, that's kind of the big idea this morning. But since we are only about 3 minutes into the sermon, I guess I'll tell you a story that kind of illustrates the big idea. It's an epic story of missions and shadow missions. Every character in the story makes a choice between his mission, and his shadow mission. And as they make their choices, they are changed, and their world is changed. We are in chapter 20 of The Story, the story of Esther. Now the story of Esther has 5 main characters, and we're going to use these playing cards to help you keep the players straight.

Now the king of diamonds is this dude called Xerxes. He's the king of Persia, a massive empire that extends from India to Turkey, and even down into Africa. He is immensely powerful, insanely rich, and a self-centered twit. By the way, this is the Xerxes featured in the movie 300, so we have his picture... (sort of). And what we discover is that this Xerxes likes to party, and his parties are a bit more than we're used to. This party lasts 180 days! Six months! I mean, how many sausage balls and cheese sticks can you eat? And when that party was over, he throws a banquet that lasts another 7 days. And the one detail we have about the banquet was that there was lots of wine, royal wine (the good stuff), and each guest could drink as much as they wanted – which was apparently a lot.

On the 7th day, it says, when everyone is flat out drunk, Xerxes has this really bad idea. You've got to admit guys, after a 7 day bender, what comes next is probably going to be pretty stupid. Well the king of diamonds sends for his queen (the queen of diamonds) – his wife, Vashti. Because he wants to show her off. In fact some guys think that when Xerxes tells his wife to come out wearing her crown, that may have been all he wanted her to be wearing. What do you think he wants to show off? Her brains? "Vashti, my darling, why don't you come and entertain our guests by solving a few math problems." Her sense of humor? "Vashti, come on in and do your best stand-up routine." No, he wants her to show a bunch of drunks how beautiful her body is.

Now, how do you think that's going to go over with the queen of diamonds? It's one thing to sign up to do a super-bowl commercial in your underwear for millions of people to see – that's your choice. But if your husband orders you to be eye-candy for a bunch of drunks, it might not sit so well. And she tells him ... "No way!" Now I've got to tell you guys, back then that's dangerous. You didn't tell your husband no, especially if he was king, and especially especially if he was as crazy as this lunatic. If you saw the movie 300, you might remember that Xerxes thought he was a god. When he was fighting the Greeks, he killed some of his own soldiers to force the other guys to fight harder. And when he lost 20,000 men, he had 19,000 of their bodies thrown into the sea so the other soldiers wouldn't see what a beating they had taken from the Greeks when they marched on by. He was ruthless, he was prideful, and he felt disrespected by his wife.

Now, this may sound a little weird to you, but Xerxes had a mission from God. Guys, God gives every king, every ruler, every leader a mission. They are to use their position, their power, their resources to encourage good and to discourage evil. The Bible tells us that. Leaders are to use their authority and their power to protect the good, and to punish the evil. That was Xerxes' mission from God. But his shadow mission was to show off, to be admired, and to feed his dark side.

And Vashti, the queen of diamonds, wouldn't play along. She threatened his self-centered shadow missions of ego, and appearance, and pleasure. She made him look weak. And that was incredibly dangerous. She could have gone along and strutted her stuff. But she knew her true mission was not to parade naked in front of a bunch of drunks. She had higher goals than to be a trophy wife, a Playboy centerfold for the titillation of his friends. Ladies, when a drunk man asks you to take your clothes off, it's probably not going to end well. In fact, you might discover learning to say "no" from time to time is one of your missions from god.

So Xerxes, the king of diamonds – at this moment, a drunken fool -- consults his legal experts, and they are scared, but for reasons you might not expect. "You've got to fix it! Because if you don't, pretty soon our wives will disrespect us, pretty soon all the other women will be disrespecting their husbands. You've got to take care of this, Xerxes, or pretty soon all the women will be burning their bras, and demanding equal pay, and expecting us to do the dishes and vacuum. And then who knows what chaos will ensue!" So they pass this royal edict that all the women in the land will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest. Like a law can make that happen!

And then, in his drunken stupor, the king of diamonds banishes the queen of diamonds, which is probably the best thing that could have happened to Vashti. She disappears from the story with her dignity intact. And when Xerxes sobers up, he learns what a lot of people learn, that the decisions you make while drunk are often really stupid. He actually loved Vashti, but now she's gone, and what he did could not be undone. So he's lonely, and he's depressed. You see, even though he had a huge harem, even though he had plenty of sex, it's ironic that this pagan twit knew that sex was no substitute for love. He missed his wife. You see, when you pursue your shadow mission – and his was ego, and appearance, and

pleasure – when you pursue your shadow mission the end is inevitably regret, and guilt.

Well, as time went on Xerxes doesn't do too well. He's not sleeping; he's grumpy; he's kind of moping around, he misses his wife. So his "advisors" come up with another stupid idea. They said, "Let's have a beauty contest." (You can pretty much guess his advisors are all guys.) They said, "Let's get the prettiest girls from every province, put them through an extreme makeover, and find you the ultimate trophy wife." These guys are deep! So they kind of set up the original "Bachelor." I know that's kind of hard to believe, that there was once a culture so superficial that middle-aged men would try to impress other people by showing they had so much wealth and power that they could attract a wife who was young and beautiful. It's hard to believe that humans ever descended to such depths, isn't it?

Well, God can work even in the midst of our stupidities. There was a girl named Esther – were going to call her the queen of hearts. She was a Jewish girl, one of the Jews who had not gone back to Judah to rebuild their temple. Her parents were dead, so she was raised by her cousin Mordecai. Well, God had made her gorgeous ... for a reason ... like God made you the way you are, for a reason. God made her gorgeous because God had a mission for her, a mission that would require great beauty. So, they have this contest, and they collect all these beautiful women from every province. And Esther makes it through the preliminary rounds, and then she makes it to the finals. And all the people have their brackets, and do their bracketology, and people are betting on who would win.

Well, the finalists have to get her ready to go before the king. Ladies, how long did it take you to prep for a big date? Hair, face, dress, perfume? Ever get it done in 15 minutes? Ever spend hours? Did you ever spend more time prepping for the big date than you spent on the date itself? Did you ever have more fun getting ready for the date than you had on the date? How about a year? 12 months of beauty treatments to help you make your first impression! 6 months with oils; 6 months with cosmetics and perfumes. A year at the spa! Thankfully, liposuction and silicone weren't invented yet, or she'd have had them too. I'm telling you, if someone isn't attracted to you physically after a year of prep, it's probably

not going to happen. And this detail is kind of weird: Esther never tells anyone that she is Jewish. At the advice of Mordecai, she keeps that quiet. I don't know why – but God did. Well, Xerxes is smitten, Esther gets the rose, she is crowned Miss Persia, and she becomes the queen (of hearts). And it seems like her mission is to be arm candy for the most powerful man on earth. Happily ever after??

The next major player in this story is Xerxes' chief of staff, a guy named Haman. We're going to call him the joker. Now he's not the joker because he's funny; he's more like the Batman joker. He's smart, and he's full of himself, and he's mean. And he is hell-bent on a shadow mission. He hates Mordecai, Esther's cousin and guardian, because Mordecai refused to bow down to him, as Haman demanded, even though he was no king.

So Haman, the joker, goes to Xerxes and offers him an insanely enormous bribe – about as much money as all the countries ruled by Xerxes would be sending in at the time. And all Haman wants is to kill Mordecai, and every other Jew with him. This joker was a jerk: he hated the Jews as much as he loved himself – which was a lot! His shadow mission was all about power, and self-worship, and revenge. And Xerxes says, because he's an idiot, "okay." Because, when leaders have been seduced by a shadow mission, they are not likely to challenge anyone else's shadow mission, as long as it doesn't disturb their own agenda.

Well, this is Mordecai, God's ace in the hole – the ace of hearts. He's the queen's cousin, and her mentor, and he's a man of God, now with a specific mission from God. When Mordecai hears what the joker is doing, he realizes that there is one person in the empire in a position to intervene with the king on behalf of the Jews – his cousin, the queen of hearts. And so God reveals to Esther her specific "mission from God" through the words of Mordecai. He says, "You've got to go to the king."

And here's where the story gets interesting, to me. She doesn't want to go. Esther doesn't want to do it. Because sometimes being on a mission from God will make you uncomfortable; and sometimes it is flat out dangerous. Shadow missions are almost always easier than our mission from God. So here's what she tells Mordecai. She says, "Approaching the king without being summoned is a capital offense – they could kill me!" She says, "Even if he welcomes me by holding out his scepter, he's

probably not going to like it when I challenge what he is about to do to the Jews.” She says, “And don’t forget that he isn’t really good to people who challenge him publicly. Remember Vashti, the queen of diamonds?” “And don’t forget,” she says, “the king hasn’t summoned me for a month. He may not be happy with me right now. He’s not a devoted husband, and he’s got a full harem of beautiful women.”

She doesn’t want to do it. Think about it ... That happens a lot, doesn’t it? We sense there is something God wants us to do, and we don’t want to do it. In fact, we can make a pretty good case against God, when we want to. We’ll find a good reason why it isn’t smart, or convenient, or wise. And we’re tempted to drift towards our shadow mission instead – like Esther was – towards comfort, and convenience, and safety.

But Mordecai bears down. This is big; this is huge. God’s ace in the hole says these words to the queen of hearts ... and to us. He says, “Don’t think for a moment that because you’re in this palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed.” And listen guys, if that is what she was thinking, that’s awful. That’s all about me, isn’t it? Mordecai says, “If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place...” Did you hear that part? He says, “I’m not worried about God’s plan if you don’t fulfill your mission; I’m concerned about you if you don’t do it.” Guys, God’s going to get his stuff done whether we cooperate or not; but we’ll miss out on what we’re here for if we don’t. You are not the only tool God has. We have an immensely powerful and an infinitely creative God. He will get done what he needs done. It’s not that God needs you to get it done. It’s that this is your chance to be used by God. Don’t waste it. Don’t fail in your mission from God because you have drifted into some shadow mission. The Mordecai says, “Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this? Maybe this is your moment. Maybe this is what you’re here for. God made you beautiful; God made you the king’s wife – jerk that he is. Maybe this is your mission from God, today.”

Here’s the way John Ortberg words Mordecai’s challenge to the queen of hearts: “Esther, you have not been brought to this point in your life for the sake of accumulating an exquisite wardrobe, precious gems and exotic perfumes. You have not been brought to this point to become the most desirable, attractive, admired woman in the kingdom. You have not been

brought to this point in your life for any of the reasons that the king thinks you have. You have been brought to this point to work for justice and to rescue your people. You have been brought to this point to oppose a man who is vile and evil and supremely powerful. You have a mission, Esther, and your mission matters. You have been brought to this point in your life not for yourself, but to be a part of God's plan to redeem the world. So, Esther, do not let your success at filling society's shadow mission for women blind you to what God says your real mission from God is. Esther, get a clue."

And ... she does. This is powerful; this is brave. She says, "We're going fast for 3 days, because I really need God on this one. And then I'm going to go to the king. Whatever happens, so be it. If I die, and I might, so be it." Now that's courage, guys. Courage isn't "no fear," courage is doing the right thing even when it's scary. Courage is pushing away your shadow mission, so you can fulfill your mission from God.

Now I'm going to wrap up the story really, really fast. This might get a little confusing. That's okay – we've unpacked most of the big parts. After her fast the queen of hearts goes to see the king of diamonds. She is terrified! This is life and death – for her and a whole bunch of her people. When the king sees her, he reaches out his scepter – which means, come on in, you don't have to die today. And he says to her, "You are gorgeous! What do you want? I'll give you up to half my kingdom! Which is king talk for something like, "I'll let you hold the remote tonight."

Now Esther couldn't just come out and say, "I want you to undo what you did and spare my people, and take out your chief of staff." That wouldn't work. So she said, "I want to throw a party for you and Haman." Which is something these guys are all about. So they go to her party and he says again, "What do you want? Up to half my kingdom, it's yours." "I'll let you hold the remote two nights in a row! Tonight I might even put batteries in it." This is one smart lady. She's waiting for the perfect time. So she says, "I want to throw you another party, tomorrow night. Then I'll tell you what I want."

Well this is especially good for Haman – the joker. He doesn't know Esther is a Jew. What he does know is that he is living it up, with the king, two nights in a row. This is great! But, on his way home that night he sees

Mordecai sitting there, God's ace in the hole. And he hates Mordecai. And when Haman walks by, Mordecai just sits there. He doesn't stand up, he doesn't bow down, nothing – no fear at all. And Haman is ticked!

So when he gets home he calls his friends over, he brings out his wife. He starts bragging about how much money he had, and how much power he had. And how the queen of hearts had honored him above everyone else by inviting only him to a private party with the king – twice! And then he says – listen: “All this gives me no satisfaction as long as I see that Jew Mordecai sitting at the king's gate.” You see, Haman is obsessed with his shadow mission: more wealth, more power, more applause, more honor. And a shadow mission will never satisfy a man.

Well apparently Haman's wife is a twit too. She says, “Why don't you set up a pole 75' high – so everyone can see it. And why don't you sharpen the top, and ask the king to let you impale Mordecai on that pole tomorrow. Kind of gruesome! But he does it.

Well, that same night the king of diamonds can't sleep, so he asks his servants to read to him from the annals of the king. In other words, he says to his servants, “Come and read me that book about me.” He really is a self-centered twit! Well, they read to him the story of how a man named Mordecai once saved his life. We passed over that little detail. And when the king asks what reward Mordecai had received for his good deed, his servants said, “Nothing, yet.”

Well it's at that moment – it's funny how God works these things out – it's at that moment that Haman arrives to ask the king to let him impale this Mordecai. But before he can get it out, Xerxes says, “What do you think I should do for them man I want to honor?” Now Haman gets pumped. He figures, the king wants to honor me. So he says, “I'd dress him in a royal robe, and I'd put him on a royal horse with a royal crown, and I'd have him led around by some royal official so everybody could give him the ... respect he deserves.” And the king says, that's a great idea! Now, go do it for Mordecai, the Jew. Go on, do it!” It's actually pretty funny.

From here on out it is all downhill for Haman. Esther holds another banquet. She tells the king that she is going to be executed, and her people are going to be destroyed. The king is absolutely furious. “Where

is the jerk who would do such a thing?” he asks. And she says, “The jerk is the joker, this twit Haman!”

One more little detail, which is really funny. Xerxes stomps out of the room in a rage. And Haman goes over to Esther and begs for his life. And as the king is coming back into the room apparently Haman trips over a Persian rug or something and he falls into Esther’s lap. So when they king enters the room, Haman is lying there on top of Esther. Which looks really... bad! And Haman ends up impaled on the pole he had prepared for Mordecai; and the Jews were saved. That’s the story of Esther.

It’s a weird story! The king of diamonds is a jerk with power, who never does accept his mission from God. His first wife, the queen of diamonds, is a woman of some integrity, who refused to drift into her shadow mission – and it cost her. His second wife, the queen of hearts, was tempted to drift into her shadow mission, but she had an ace in the hole, a man who challenged her to carry out her mission from God, no matter how tough it was, no matter what the cost. And she did, with courage, and honor. And then there was the joker, a man who was destroyed by his shadow mission.

And there is God. Did you know that even though God is never mentioned, by name, in the book, his fingerprints are all over the story? How is it that, of all the women in the empire, a young Jewish woman named Esther becomes queen? How is it that, of all the people in the empire, Mordecai should be the one who saves the king from an assassination plot? How is it that the king should have insomnia on the very night that Haman builds a gallows for this Mordecai, and that of all the stories, the one read to the king was the one of Mordecai saving his life? How is it that Haman, the scheming murderer, becomes the victim of his own schemes, and Mordecai, his intended victim, becomes instead his replacement? Guys, we serve a big God, a powerful God, an infinitely creative God.

Let’s go back to where we started. We are all on a mission from God. We all have the same macro mission: we were put here to do life with God, and to serve him. We were put here to love him back. Your life will never be right until you are on mission. And from time to time, God gives every one of us something specific to do for him. If you don’t get it done, God

will still work his will – because he’s God, and he is infinitely powerful and infinitely creative. But if you don’t get it done, you’ll miss out on the great adventure – being used by God.

And the temptation for all of us is to drift into some shadow mission – something dark, something self-centered, something unworthy. I don’t know what your shadow mission might be.

- Maybe a big 401k.
- Maybe a big, beautiful house.
- Maybe some hidden addiction.
- Maybe a beautiful body.
- Maybe it’s sex, or some other physical pleasure.
- Maybe it’s your reputation, or being respected, or being thought important.
- Maybe it’s some cause, some obsession that pulls you away from God.

I don’t know. What do you live for, that is unworthy. It may be good in itself, but it’s not as good as doing life with God, and for God. We’ve all got them, these shadow missions. What pulls you away from first things? Guys, embracing your mission from God won’t be easy. It might be scary; it might be costly; it might be dangerous even. But it will be worth it.

Whom shall I fear?
I know who goes before me,
I know who stands behind.
The one who reigns forever,
He is a friend of mine.
The God of angel armies
is always by my side... Isn’t that cool!