

Esther & Mordecai

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 26, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Esther 4](#)

Copyright © 2026 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

I love the story of Esther. An orphaned foreign girl marries the king and saves her people from extermination. It's a thriller filled with drama. There are subplots that point out sexism, objectification, and antisemitism even before the words were invented. It has a great cast of characters: a queen who is exiled because she shouldn't allow piggish men treat her as an object, the orphaned girl who risks her life to save her people, her loving uncle who is a hero in his own right, the villain with no redeeming qualities who you love to hate, the greedy king who thinks he's smarter than he really is.

The story begins and I'm immediately rooting for the underdogs. The same thing happened with the World Cup, where I found myself paying enough attention to root for Cape Verde – at least until they were eliminated. I start out wanting to see myself as Queen Vashti, and then I want even to see myself as Esther. And if I can't be the shero in the story, I want to be Mordecai, the hero behind the shero.

Theologian Erna Kim Hackett warns me (and all white American Christians) away from what she has termed "Disney Princess Theology." "As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story," she says. "They are Esther, never Xerxes or Haman. They are Peter, never Judas. They are the woman anointing Jesus, never the Pharisee. They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt.

"For citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel not Egypt when studying Scripture, is a perfect example of Disney Princess Theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in society – and it has made them blind and utterly ill-equipped to engage issues of power and injustice. It is some very weak Bible work."¹

I feel convicted by that. I look at the war we're fighting with Iran and it's clear: the United States is much more like Egypt than the Hebrews. The United States is much more like Rome than first century Palestine.

Mordecai words to Esther, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," have a different meaning for her than they do for me. Mordecai was asking Esther to risk death on behalf her own oppressed people. When I hear those words as a white, educated, upper-middle class American, I have to realize that I have not "come to royal dignity." Instead, I was born into privilege in our culture, and that makes standing up against the oppression being done by our version of King Xerxes and Haman much less risky than it is for people of color and people without other forms of political power.

¹ Erna Kim Hackett, quoted by Naomi King Walker, <https://naomikingwalker.com/02104-disney-princess-theology/> (accessed 25 July 2026).

If I'm going to do some strong Bible work, I have to see that my social location is different than it is for Esther and Mordecai. Today, it's not Haman's evil plot to exterminate the Jews in Persia. Today, it's Stephen Miller's deeply racist evil plot to rid the United States of immigrants of color.² Today, it's agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement gunning down and killing Lorenzo Salgado Araujo and Joan Sebastian Guerrero with impunity.³

Perhaps you and I can leverage our positions in our culture for just such a time as this. I'm not sure what that will look like for anyone – even for me. I suspect that what it looks like will change as circumstances change. Right now, it might look like me attending a vigil and being in community as we grieve and as we call for justice. The day after tomorrow, it might look like lobbying my Senators and U.S. Representative (once one is elected) to hold the Department of Homeland Security accountable by defunding ICE and closing the torturous detention centers. In the not-too-distant future, it might mean taking to the streets, whistles in hand, if word comes of an ICE enforcement action in our area. It might mean being part of a human corridor to protect children of color from government harassment as they enter or leave their schools. It might mean bringing food to families who are scared to go out of their homes. It might mean carrying messages like the eunuch Hathach.

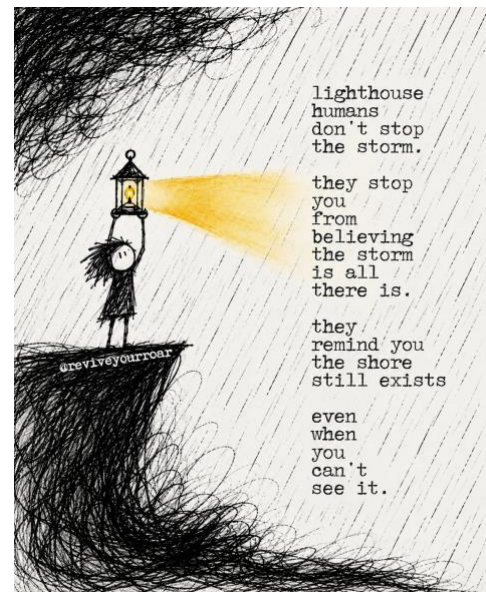
What I know for sure is that we need each other. We will find the grounding we need for such a time as this in the connections with have with each other.

A digital creator named Whit Smith recently posted this picture in social media. Let me read it to you.

“lighthouse humans don't stop the storm. they stop you from believing the storm is all there is. they remind you the shore still exists even when you can't see it.”⁴

In such a time as this, we need to be lighthouse humans for each other. And that draws me back to the characters in the story.

In addition to the good guys – Esther and Mordecai – and the bad guys – Xerxes and Haman, there is another named character in the story: the eunuch Hathach. He is easily overlooked in the story, and I had a hard time finding an artistic depiction of him. He had an ability that neither Esther nor Mordecai had. He was able to move between



² See, for instance, Anthony Orrico & Myriam Toua, “Stephen Miller launches into unhinged immigration rant and rewrites history,” *MSN.com*, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/opinion/stephen-miller-launches-into-unhinged-immigration-rant-and-rewrites-history/ar-AA1Ta2bz> (posted 28 December 2025; accessed 25 July 2026).

³ Jeffrey Spencer, “ICE killings must be stopped,” *Jeff's Substack*, <https://revjss.substack.com/p/ice-killings-must-be-stopped> (posted and accessed 14 July 2026).

⁴ Whit Smith, *Revive Your Roar*, <https://substack.com/@reviveyourroar/note/c-300566639> (posted and accessed 23 July 2026).

the world outside the castle and the place inside where Esther and the rest of Xerxes' harem lived. He was the means of communication between Esther and her uncle Mordecai. Esther's story wouldn't have happened with him!

And then there's a whole group that goes unnamed, a group that is, nonetheless, vital to the story: the Jews as a community. When Mordecai learns that Xerxes has adopted Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews, he tore his clothing and put on sackcloth and ashes – signs that he was in mourning. It wasn't just Mordecai. "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." The community was in grief.

I've been thinking about collective grief these past few days. I've been wondering when groups in America would have appropriately put on sackcloth and ashes. I think it might have been that way for the Black community when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I think it might have been that way for the anti-war community when Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I think it was that way in greater Los Angeles in January 2025 when wildfires destroy entire towns, and in Paradise in November 2018 when the entire ridge was destroyed. And maybe this is what it's like right now for Haitian immigrants who have suddenly lost their Temporary Protected Status.

People who study grief have found, not surprisingly, that collective trauma (like the LA and Paradise wildfires) disrupts communities, creating lasting emotional distress.⁵ This is because, at least in part, the grief during major tragedies is shared by more than individuals. The community itself grieves as if the community was its own person.

And the people who study grief have found that grieving together can be a way to reconnect with the sense of community that has been lost. When loss is widespread – like the loss of a neighborhood or city to wildfire or the loss of security the Jews felt in the story of Esther because of Xerxes' genocidal decree – the need for connection with others is all the more important. It is also much harder – because the place for making those connections may have been lost, or the danger of gathering in community may suddenly heighten.

We know what people who are grieving need: emotional support, general social connection, connection with people who have experienced similar losses, practical support, rituals to honor the loss, and space to find purpose after the loss.⁶ People who are grieving need ways to be grounded in connection. Pastor and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes recently shared a poem he'd written that speaks to this.⁷

⁵ Edy Nather, "Grieving in Community," *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/tales-of-grief/202501/grieving-in-community> (posted 17 January 2025; accessed 25 July 2026).

⁶ "Why We Need Community After Loss," *Together We Heal Community*, <https://www.togetherwehealcommunity.org/news/2025/4/2/why-we-need-community-after-loss> (posted 2 April 2025; accessed 25 July 2026).

⁷ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Unheld," *Unfolding Light*, <https://unfoldinglight.net/2026/07/20/unheld/> (posted 20 July 2026; accessed 25 July 2026).

*When you fell and skinned your knee
and your mommy kissed it and made it better
it really did make it better.*

*How much of your agony is not the hurt
but the need for someone to hold you?*

Friend, we live in a crowd unheld.

*You have been given the heart
to kiss the world better,
to seek the hurting
one child at a time,
and hold them and their hurt.*

*Do so, and even at a distance, with strangers,
as in any good embrace,
you find yourself miraculously
held.*

When Esther decides she's going to risk her life by going to and petitioning King Xerxes on behalf of her people, she asks Mordecai to organize the Jews in Susa. "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. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish."

Esther was the right person to petition King Xerxes. Mordecai was the right person to actively encourage her. Hathach was the right person to make their communication possible. And all the other Jews were the right people to gather to fast and pray to give Esther the spiritual strength to risk her own life for the sake of their community.

We are grounded in connection.

Amen.