

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 20, 2026

The Call for Esther

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 20, 2026

Intro

Last week, we began a little series on Vocation. In our Presbyterian tradition, we often interchange vocation with the term, “calling.”

We all are called by God in different ways.

We all have vocations to live out in the world.

And maybe it is your gainful employment, but just as likely, it is not. And maybe it has been a clear, steady drumbeat throughout your life, but maybe not.

Sometimes your calling has little to do with the plans you’ve made or the good life you’ve dreamed of. Sometimes it is simply responding as faithfully as you can to circumstances beyond your control.

And it’s in hindsight that you can see the path God led you on to be where you needed to be when you needed to be there. But I don’t want to get ahead of myself.

This morning the story of Esther will guide us in our understanding of vocation.

Let’s pray as we prepare our hearts and minds to hear a word of God from Esther this morning.

Prayer for Illumination

God with us,
Quiet in us all the chatter that we might discern your voice.
Open our ears to hear more than sound,
and our hearts to receive more than information.

Speak, Lord, for your people are listening.
And once we have heard, give us courage to act.
Amen.

Scripture Esther 3:8-11; 4:13-17

⁸Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. ⁹If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries." ¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. ¹¹The king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, and the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you."

...

¹³Mordecai 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. ¹⁴For 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. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." ¹⁵Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ¹⁶"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." ¹⁷Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Winter Retreat Pt 2

After a full day of skillfully shredding down a mountain on a snowboard, I passed by some college guy sitting on the bunny hill, looking like he just had a revelation.

This only makes sense if you were at 9:30 or 11 last week, but I couldn't resist.

Last Sunday, Jason began our journey into vocation by telling a bit of his own story. Please go back and listen to that sermon this week if you haven't heard it. But his story took place on a winter retreat with a bunch of teenagers at Hidden Valley. A retreat that I went on from 7th-12th grade. A fun fact about Pastor J and I is that we've known each other a long time, but we realized last Sunday that our paths crossed earlier than we knew. I would have been a sophomore in high school at Hidden Valley with a different church when J sat on that bunny hill hearing God's call to him.

It is fiction to say that I was shredding my way down the mountain. But I was proficient enough to not totally fall down it. At the end of a long day of skiing and snowboarding, we would head back to the retreat center for food, games, worship, and—the thing I dreaded most every year—20 minutes of silence.

This was, once again, a *winter* retreat. And every Saturday night of this retreat, dozens of teenagers would be sent out into the cold night to spend 20 minutes of silence with God...or in my case, my own thoughts about how cold I was, how bored I was, how I would do anything to just talk to another person right now, how stupid this was, how many bruises I'm now realizing I have from snowboarding, if that

boy was making eye contact during worship or not and what that means...but eventually, my brain quieted.

I have never been able to tell a clear, concise call story. But there are trail markers throughout my life for how God led me to where I am. And a particularly cold, hard rock at Laurelville over the course of six winters is one of those.

In the silence of those winter retreats, God quietly spoke: I was a child of God. I was a follower of Jesus.

Whatever I would do, God was calling me to live from that core identity.

Esther's Vocation

I believe the writer of Esther would have loved youth retreats, with their interwoven silliness and profound revelations. That is what Esther is all about.

Let's attempt a TLDR in 5 minutes or less of Esther's story: Once upon a time, in an undefined era of Persia, there was a foolish king named Ahasuerus. One Jewish scholar sums it up the beginning of the story, "Esther begins with a huge frat party...the king hosts all the nobles and governors of his vast kingdom for a 6-month kegger with a no limit rule for drinking."¹ During this party, he commands his wife, Queen Vashti, to come parable before all these drunk, powerful men to show off her beauty. She says, "No thank you." And the king banishes her.

¹ Rachel S. Mikva, "For Such a Time as This" - with Apologies to Esther, accessed September 17, 2026, <https://vocationmatters.org/2019/03/12/for-such-a-time-as-this/>

Soon he begins his search for a new wife, who will be both beautiful and obedient. How they go about this is not for all ages, but the King does the ancient equivalent of swiping right or left on a series of eligible women.

One of these young women is a Jewish orphan named, Hadassah, who is cared for by her cousin, Mordecai. When she is taken to the palace, Mordecai advises her to use a less Jewish sounding name, going instead by Esther. Our friend, Ahasuerus, is smitten with Esther and she soon becomes queen.

Ahasuerus continues to use his power in increasingly foolish and corrupt ways by appointing a wealthy man named, Haman (if this were the Jewish celebration of Purim, we'd all get to boo and make noise to drown out the name of Haman).

Haman gets his post in part by offering to make a generous donation to the state treasury. And once appointed, he demands all the courtiers bow before him, including Mordecai. But Mordecai is Jewish and so refuses to bow down to any man or idol for the sake of his faith.

Haman is not into that pluralistic, PC stuff, and immediately orders not only Haman killed but all the Jews in the realm. He gets the ear of the king and easily convinces him that the Jewish people are not like "our people," their customs and loyalties are different, and they cannot be trusted. Amidst this growing crisis, Esther remains blissfully unaware in the palace. A messenger comes to her and reports that Mordecai is outside in sackcloth and ashes. And in her own, "Let them eat cake" moment, Esther offers him new clothes. She eventually gets the real message: Her husband is allowing Haman to kill all the Jews in their kingdom. Mordecai begs her

to intercede. But she knows that if she goes to the king uninvited, if she speaks to him without being spoken to, if she, God-forbid, tells him something he doesn't want to hear, she will be killed.

Yet, Mordecai tells her, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."

Esther's core vocation comes to the surface.

It is not that she is called to be Queen.

It is not that she is called to be Ahasuerus wife.

It is not that she is called to listen to Mordecai.

It is not that is to be as a woman is expected to be within an oppressive, patriarchal society.

It is that she, before all things, at the foundation of all things, is a child of God.

She is one of God's people. And she is called to act like it where she is, in the time and circumstances she finds herself in.

Perhaps you are where you are so you can be precisely who you are in that position, in that place, in that situation and make a difference. Perhaps, even as God is never named in Esther, God doesn't need to be named as much as shown. Perhaps, God is present, but what looks like is your hands and feet, your voice and action.

“Their” Problem is My Problem

The week that Dolly Parton passed away, I went down quite a few bunny trails about her life and legacy. And wow, are there bunny trails to go down when it comes to Dolly Parton. I came across a few interviews that she did and the questions that came up about her faith.

In one of those, she spoke about an older woman in her church telling her as a child that she was, “Anointed.” Now, Dolly had heard about anointings in the Old Testament in Sunday School, and she thought it had something to do with olive oil getting poured on your head. She wasn’t too interested in that.

But she asked her mom later what the woman meant. Her mom told her that it meant God had His hand on her, and that she may do something special. Dolly carried that into adulthood. She put it in the most charming way, “I never let go of that. I always felt responsible to God that I was supposed to be doing something for God. I still feel like that, and I’m still doing it, trying to. Sinning all the way, but trying my best, and asking forgiveness seventy times seven.”

At the Bridge, one of our youngest members asked for prayer after Dolly Parton’s death because Dolly gave her books every month. Dolly called her “Imagination Library” her greatest legacy. The writer of “I Will Always Love You,” looked at getting books in the hands of children as the best thing she left behind. Over three million books go to children every month because when Dolly Parton found herself with fame, fortune, and the complicated power that comes with that, she rooted herself in her core identity. She was a child of God. Here to do something good for God.

What was she uniquely positioned to do?

As a girl, Dolly grew up in poverty in Tennessee. She never forgot what it was like to live that precariously. She never forgot the inherent dignity of her family and neighbors, who were so much more than a poverty statistic. The Imagination Library came from a desire to honor her father, who was brilliant but never learned to read. Dollywood came about from a desire to create job opportunities, college scholarships, and economic prosperity for her hometown. The list can go on with her: Funding for children's hospitals in rural areas, funding for vaccines for the most vulnerable, rebuilding efforts after wildfires throughout southern Appalachia.

"Whatever you have done for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done for me," said Jesus.

Wherever "their" problem becomes my calling, God is there.

Tear Down the Fortress

On the flip side, I've been reading a book for my Doctorate of Ministry program that's a little book with a bold title: Autopsy of a Deceased Church. The subtitle is a little less bleak—anything would be less bleak—"12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive."

The author analyzed dozens of churches that closed their doors to figure out why. What do they have in common? What can others learn to keep their ministries vibrant?

One of the "autopsy" results for these churches is what I would call Death by Fortress. It is when a church becomes more for the people inside than for the people outside. When a church places its priority on keeping members comfortable, on keeping to the preferences of those in the pews. Some of you might be thinking, what's so bad about that? Slowly but surely these now deceased church communities moved their

focus away from the great commission, away from serving their neighbors, away from showing hospitality to strangers, and created for themselves a fortress. No one in; no one out. But at least the music was what they liked.

I am happy to say I don't see Westminster reflected in much of the "autopsy" results. Phew.

But, still, are we not sometimes tempted by fortressing? Isn't it easier to turn inward? To say, "not my problem" or "what's in it for us?"

But God calls us out of our comfort, our preferences, our nostalgia for the golden years.

The realities of this world colliding with who we are as children of God call us out our comfort.

Who are we? And how will we respond with faith?

We are called to respond to this world, this time, this place from who we are. Children of God. A church called together by God with all the gifts, skills, stories, resources of those who are a part of it.

We are called to take risks worthy of love.

At Such a Time as This

And we are. You are.

Many in our congregation are discerning the times we are in—the needs of our neighbors, the harshness of our rhetoric, the distrust of our institutions—and risking their time, energy,

money, and sometimes, bodies. You are already children of God acting with love for our neighbors.

And I could end there. I hope you listen for the stories around here.

But, I believe, there are plenty more opportunities before us to be a beacon rather than a fortress.

So, I'd like to assign you all homework.

Find your own metaphorically cold rock and sit awhile in the quiet:

Where do you see people taking risks for the sake of love?
Who are you? Where are you positioned?

What might you be called to do at such a time as this?

Then come back. Come back together because vocation is a team sport. Esther's whole community prayed and fasted with her. I didn't stay out on a rock...I rejoined the group, and we talked about what was stirring in us.

Come back so can keep asking together:

What is our call in such a time as this?

May our neighbor's problems become our calling. And may we be a beacon and not a fortress.

And all God's children said, Amen.



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