

**June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2026**

## **Esther 4: “Leaving the Palace”**

Good morning. It’s good to be back home after a week at camp. Once again, we had an amazing staff, including Graham and Connor as cabin counselors. I’m confident in saying that lives were changed for the good and that twenty youth went home with the challenge to make a difference in the lives of others, including their churches. So what are you doing back in the pulpit, pastor? Didn’t Katy Valentine always tell you to have someone preach the Sundy you got back from camp? After all, you shouldn’t be working on a sermon when you’re supposed to be taking care of campers. Well - back in April when we had our denomination’s annual regional gathering in Concord, I got to have the last word when I preached at the closing worship session.

That event was a lot to take in and gave us a lot to think about. We had opportunities to study scripture and worship together. We received inspiring words from a prophetic voices. We heard reports about some exciting and innovative ministries happening in the Region. In our business meeting, we discussed budgets, bylaws and staffing. We heard about churches that are stable and doing well and churches who are alive but struggling. We celebrated ministry that’s making a difference, but we were also honest about the challenges we face as a denomination. And somewhere in the middle of all that, there was a question we couldn’t shake: **“Where are we**

**right now in this moment, and what does faithfulness look like here and now?”**

And I’m not talking about the church in general. I’m not talking about Christians somewhere out there, but for *us* right here. In this region. In this moment. Because if we’re honest, this is not an easy time here or *anywhere*. Our Regional Minister, Toni Bynum, confessed that she spends too much time “doom scrolling” news feeds first thing in the morning. I had to confess that I’m guilty of “doom scrolling” too. In our region, we are all having to navigate change that we did not choose. We are holding together congregations that do not always agree. We are watching leaders retire and wondering who will come next. We are trying to sustain ministries with fewer people and fewer resources. Every day we’re confronted with things that are hard to see and even harder to carry, and it makes some of us want to shut down and hide just to get through it all. But all the while, we’re still trying to be faithful.

And that’s where I think this passage from Esther finds us. Esther is in the palace. She is safe. She is protected. She is removed. Whatever is happening out there in the streets hasn’t reached her yet. Until it does. Because Mordecai *is* out in the street. He is grieving, wailing, and refusing to be silent. And Esther hears about it. Her first response is *not* action. It’s distance. “Would someone *please* find this man some clothes. Just take care of it. Calm things down.” And I don’t mean to be harsh towards Esther, but I think this is an

important moment for us to consider. This might just be one of the most honest pictures of the church that we find in this story. Because we know what it's like to try to *manage* things instead of face them. We know what it's like to hope things just *settle down* instead of having to step in. We know what it's like to want to stay where it feels safe, even when something in us knows we can't stay there forever. Because when *everything* feels uncertain, our natural instinct is to hold on to what has carried us in the past. And that's not a failure of faith. That's just part of being human. The traditions we hold, the ways we've done things, the leaders who shaped us, *those things do matter*. Those things *have* carried us. But Esther discovers something that we need to hear: There comes a moment when the things that *have* carried us don't carry us the same way anymore. And in that moment, the question is no longer, "How do we hold on to this?" The question becomes, "What does faithfulness look like *now*?"

And that's when Mordecai speaks. He sends word back to Esther, and what he says is not gentle. It's not a motivational speech. It's not, "Hang in there kiddo! You've got this!" He's saying: "Do not think that because you are in the palace that you'll escape." In other words— Your position does not remove your responsibility. You don't get to stay untouched because of what your people are facing. And then he says something remarkable: "If you keep silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from *another place*."

Don't miss that. Mordecai is not panicking. He assumes that God is still at work. Even now. Even in this crisis. Even if *Esther* does nothing—God is *not* stuck. God is *not* limited. God *will* find a way. And then Mordecai says: “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” And we've heard this line before, right? It sounds inspiring. Sounds like something you'd put on a coffee mug or a motivational poster. But in this moment, it's not a compliment. It's a summons. It's not: “You were made for greatness.” It's: “You have a responsibility in this moment—will you step into it or not?”

And here's the truth we have to sit with. We are *not* in the same place we were 50 years ago. Or 20 years ago. Or 10 years ago. And we can either spend our time, effort and energy trying to get *back there* or we can ask a different question: What does faithfulness look like *now*? Because the real danger is *not* change. The real danger is staying where it feels safe when faithfulness is calling us somewhere else. There comes a time when you cannot stay in the palace and be faithful at the same time. And I wonder, if *this* might be one of those times.

Now hear me out - Leaving the palace does not mean abandoning who we are. It does not mean discarding our identity. It does not mean that everything we've done is wrong. The palace mattered. It protected Esther. It positioned her. It made her who she was in that moment. But it was

never meant to be the place where she stayed. And what carried us in one season may not be what faithfulness requires in the next.

So what does it look like for *us* to leave the palace? Not dramatically. Not recklessly. But faithfully. It might look like releasing control. Letting go of the assumption that the future has to look like the past. It might look like making space for new leadership, even when it feels unfamiliar. It might look like shared risk. Like trying things out that don't come with guarantees. It may look like being willing to adapt, to experiment, to learn. It might look like trusting God beyond our structures. Or ... believing that the future of the church does not depend on *our* ability to hold everything together exactly as it has been. Because God is not limited to what we can maintain. And let me say this, because it matters: *This is not easy*. Esther knows that. She says it plainly: "If I go, I could die." This is not safe. This is not comfortable. This is not predictable.

And then she says: "If I perish, I perish." Now ... this is *not* resignation. It's *faith*. It's the *kind* of faith that says: I don't know how this will play out, but I know who God is. And I will be faithful anyway. And Esther... she doesn't do it alone. She calls out to the community. "Fast with me. Pray with me. Stand with me." This is not individual courage. This is shared faithfulness. And maybe that's what we need to hear most.

We are not being asked to fix everything. We are not being asked to guarantee outcomes. We are not being asked to return to some version of the past. We are asked to be faithful. Together.

During the opening worship, Dr. Davina Jones, the conference minister for the Northern California conference of the United Church of Christ challenged us to use our power and privilege for good. She reminded us that the church is not dying. We are alive. We just need to figure out *how to be in one accord*.

The good news in this story is not that Esther saves the day. The good news is that God is already at work and Esther is invited to participate. And so are we. “For such a time as this” may not mean we were chosen for something great. It may mean we are being called to something faithful. And maybe leaving the palace is how we answer that call. So here’s what I want you to carry back home with you—

**Where might God be calling you ... to us ... to step out of what feels safe, and into what faithfulness requires?**