

Good morning, church. It's good to see you all here this Sunday—looks like everyone's made it through Stampede relatively unscathed. We are glad that you could be here with us today. I know it's not always easy to make it to church—Dan talked last week about the sometimes lame excuses that we might use to get out of doing things—like an elaborate business trip to Idaho to get out of household chores? Well, sometimes we do make excuses to get out of things we don't want to do. But sometimes, life just hits us hard. You might not want to come to church if you've just found out you lost your job, or that a family member has taken ill. You might not feel like getting up in the morning if you suffer from depression, if you deal with abuse, or if your significant other is leaving you. Sometimes the broken fragments of our lives seem insurmountable, unmanageable, and entirely hopeless.

Brokenness is something that everyone encounters in life. That doesn't necessarily make it easier to deal with, but that's the truth of our current condition. It has been the truth since that pivotal day in The Garden, when Adam and Eve were tempted into what we recognize as Original Sin. Our Scripture today comes from the book of Esther, where we can see a good example of a broken beginning that God uses and transforms into something greater. Before I go any further, let us pray as we enter into the Word of the Lord.

Heavenly Father,

We come to you this morning in different places emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. We have all experienced seasons of brokenness, and for many of us today, we find ourselves currently struggling with the pain and hopelessness that comes with that brokenness. We pray to you, Lord, that you would meet us here today in grace, in peace, with abundant comfort and healing. May Your Word speak to us today, Father. May we receive from this message exactly what it is we need to make it through the trials that we currently face, and may we be filled with your Spirit of peace as we learn to accept our brokenness and trust you in the process of mending. Your will is greater than we could ever know, Lord, and we thank you that you are faithful and trustworthy. We commit this time to you, in the strong & powerful name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our first reading today is Esther 2:8-17. If you have your Bibles with you, I invite you to turn there with me now. Otherwise, the Scripture will be up on the screen.

Esther 2:8-17 New International Version (NIV)

8 When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. 9 She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

10 Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. 11 Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

12 Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. 13 And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

15 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. 16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17 Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Now, in case anyone is unfamiliar with the story of Esther—perhaps you didn't make it out to the breakfast theater in November—let me explain a bit of what's going on. Esther is a young Israelite, an orphan who was raised by her cousin, who is living in an era of exile—Jews are no longer living in the promised land. They are not held captive, but instead, are spread out throughout different lands in a diaspora. Now, the Jewish tradition was established in a way that relied heavily on their land—their rituals, traditions, worship... everything revolved around the Temple.

Since the Jewish people no longer had the same access to the Temple, that means that Esther is already living with a broken understanding and practice of her traditional Jewish faith. Compromises to traditions and rituals will have been made. This means that the Jewish identity is fragmented. We also know that Esther and her people are looked down upon because of their heritage—Israelite's, the Jewish people, "God's chosen ones" have never been exceptionally well-liked.

Then, to further fracture her sense of self, Esther is told by her uncle, Mordecai, that she is to be taken with what was likely hundreds, if not thousands, of other young virgins to be enlisted in

what was virtually a year-long beauty pageant to see if she can become the next Queen. In compliance, Esther obeys. For a year she is prepared—bathed in perfumes and oils that are to make her pleasing to the King. The catch? To be in the running, she has been required to conceal her Jewish heritage entirely. She can make no mention of it—meaning she cannot partake in Jewish ritual and tradition, perhaps not even prayer and fasting. All of this for one night with the King—one night to impress him so entirely that he chooses her to be Queen. But what an unlikely thing to happen! She is one face in a large crowd. And if she fails, she would very likely have to spend the rest of her days as nothing more than a concubine to the King. Then, in another act of compliance, on the night she is to be with King Xerxes, she takes nothing with her but what Hegai—the man in charge of her harem—had suggested.

In all of this, we see that Esther is not a character with a very strong sense of self. Our only description of her as readers is that she is very beautiful. We also know that Esther's Hebrew name is Hadasseh. Not a lot to go off of. What's interesting about this lack of description, but the mention of her two names is that she is the only one in the entire book who is given two names. Leland Ryker suggests that this stands as a representation for us of her trying to live in 2 different worlds. And that's basically all we know about this young woman. She is an obedient orphan with a failing sense of her Jewish heritage, who is living in 2 worlds, and who is engaged in fierce competition for the throne.

Talk about a broken beginning. It's hard to imagine having such a fractured sense of identity and belonging. But I think we have all been in similar states—whether we are unsure of who we are, or where we are going in life, we all have those moments of “what am I doing here, and how am I going to move past this brokenness?”

I have a special kind of empathy towards Esther in this story... And since I'm fairly new here, I don't feel that I have had a chance to really get to know everyone very well, and I know that I haven't often been able to share my story either. So, since I'm speaking today, I wanted to take a moment to let everyone here get to know me a little bit better, and get to understand for a moment where I am coming from when I speak about brokenness in this series.

I've gone through many difficult times, as we all do, but I want to share the story of how I ended up here in Calgary, studying ministry... Because when I was in high school, I had no plans whatsoever of furthering my education. I didn't really have much of a plan for my life. I loved theater—acting, singing, dancing, writing scripts... That consumed pretty much all of my time. My mom, brother, and I were all Christians, but we had stopped going to church some years earlier for a number of different reasons. I was strong in my faith, in that I talked about it openly and felt it was a key part of my identity. But I was not overly committed to growing spiritually, and I didn't understand that there was any need for it.

I was also dating a young man who was decidedly not Christian. He told me he believed in God, and he respected me for my beliefs, but it wasn't something he was very invested in. We dated on and off for 4 years throughout high school, and after. When I was 17 and in Grade 11, he gave me a promise ring. Right around the same time, my world was shaken when my Mom's dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I saw my mom broken. I saw my aunts and uncles, cousins, and grandma broken. It was a scary and heartbreaking time for all of us. But he fought it. And time passed, and life went on. It was always a truth that was there under the surface, but after two years,

it didn't seem so incomprehensible or heavy. It was like "yeah, he has cancer, but it's been years..." I don't know if I really expected him to die.

In October of 2012, my boyfriend Kyle proposed to me. We started to plan our wedding for the following August, and even though our relationship was never easy, and we fought a lot, I thought things were good. My parents were cautious of the situation, and warned me against it, but allowed me to make my own choices.

In December, my Grandpa died. And my family was broken. This was the first death that felt really close to home—the first one that felt like a true upset in my life. And because of the brokenness of the months before his passing, my mom and I decided to return to church. It was by far the best decision that I had ever made. I loved being in worship with other believers, I loved to learn about the Bible. I felt comfort and peace when I was there. It was exactly what my aching heart needed at the time.

But in May of 2013, it became too much. The man I was going to marry decided that he was not okay with the "God thing" after all. He came to church with me on Sunday the 5th, and afterwards told me that I could not love him and God at the same time. We were months away from being married, and I had moved my stuff into the place he was living so that I could move in after the wedding. That Sunday, he told me we were done, and I needed to get everything out of the house. I had no sense of what to do next—all of my life plans were unravelled in a matter of moments, and I was broken beyond all belief.

When I think of brokenness I often think of Jesus—our Lord in the flesh, kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, sweating blood and crying out to the Father in desperation, in total and utter brokenness. Matthew 26:39 says "Going a little farther, [Jesus] fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

And when that cup of suffering was not taken from him, he marched faithfully on. He faced mockery, humiliation, torture... He was beaten, bruised, bloodied... And they nailed him to that cross and hoisted him up to die between two thieves. Although this is not the beginning of Christ's story in the Bible, it is a beginning. It is the place where the God's plan for forgiveness, redemption, and salvation begin. With the brutal death of our Savior—a broken beginning.

Now, we know that God doesn't orchestrate our lives without a plan. He doesn't leave our stories in fragments. He doesn't leave us in the midst of the insurmountable, the unmanageable, or the hopeless. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 reminds us that God is "the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles."

We opened in worship today with a song called "Beautiful Things" by Gungor; this is a song that always helps to remind me that God promises comfort and mending to us in our hardest times. The lyrics to the chorus says this: "You make beautiful things out of the dust, you make beautiful things out of us." What a picture of God's grace, and healing power. The image this evokes reminds me of a particular form of Japanese art—Kintsukuroi, where if a piece of pottery breaks, into fragments and dust... The owner will mend it by filling the cracks with gold. This mends the broken

pottery in a way that is more beautiful and valuable than the original piece ever was. Instead of a “silver lining,” it’s more like a “Golden Mending.”

In Esther 4:8- 5:3 we can read a good, if not totally obvious, example of a Golden Mending.

8 He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to instruct her to go into the king’s presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.

9 Hathak went back and reported to Esther what Mordecai had said. 10 Then she instructed him to say to Mordecai, 11 “All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king.”

12 When Esther’s words were reported to Mordecai, 13 he sent back this answer: “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. 14 For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”

15 Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: 16 “Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

17 So Mordecai went away and carried out all of Esther’s instructions.

Esther’s Request to the King

5 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king’s hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. 2 When he saw Queen Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

3 Then the king asked, “What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you.”

Here we see that Esther faces a dire situation. Her two identities are colliding, and she must make a choice—her own choice!—as to whether she wants to stand up for her Jewish heritage and people, or if she wants to obscure that to try and save her own life. She is prompted by Mordecai, who tells her that maybe, just maybe, this is the exact reason she was born. Maybe this is the reason she was made Queen. And though Mordecai doesn't say so, I think it's safe to look at this and see that maybe, in this choice, God is offering a path of mending to Esther. If she goes forward for her people, she can reclaim her identity in power and authority. It is dangerous, it might not look like a hopeful situation, but this is the path to healing.

We see that when we read about how Esther goes forward, passing through the King's chambers without permission. She is dressed royally—thus claiming her identity as Queen of these lands, and wife of the King—and she does so after days of fasting, and very likely prayer. She has opened herself to Jewish tradition, and in faith, moves to where God has called her. This shows the reconciliation of her two identities, and the mending work that God is doing in Esther's life.

This period of healing, this Golden Mending, is something that we are each able to look forward to in the midst of our broken situations. For me, after everything with my ex-fiance and my Grandpa's passing, it looked like a grand call. In the exact moment that my fiancé told me our relationship was over, I heard God. I felt His presence over me, a prompting in my heart directed by the Holy Spirit. The Lord told me this: "I was to continue to get more involved in the church, I was to get baptised, and I was to go on a missions trip."

I was 19. I was losing all of my plans, hopes, and dreams for my future and God was calling me into things I had never considered, never longed for, and certainly wouldn't have chosen for myself. I was afraid to get involved in the church—though I had wanted to be on the worship team for a while, it was really daunting to think about asking a pastor how to start. I had always heard about baptism and I loved the idea of it... But to speak in front of a congregation of 500 people while they watched me get dunked? That was really scary to me, so I thought I'd just avoid that. And a missions trip? Ha! I took a bus trip with my family when I was 10 to go to Disneyland, and that was the most I had ever travelled. I had never even been on a plane. There was no way I would go somewhere with virtual strangers to a place I had never been before without my family! It all seemed impossible.

And yet, in a number of weeks, I was on the worship team as a vocalist. I was in discussion with the pastor who was going to marry me not only about baptism but about prospects for my future—yes, I was at an Alliance church, and this is where I first learned about Ambrose! One week before I would have been married, I was baptised. On August 18, 2013—which, ironically, was the same day that my now husband, Daniel, was baptized! And I was also pretty certain I wanted to go to school to learn more about my faith. Then, in September there was a notice for an upcoming missions trip to Cambodia. I didn't know where in the globe Cambodia was, but I grabbed an application almost without thinking about it. I started to fill it out, and when I thought "there's no way I am a good enough Christian to be a part of this team," and I set that application aside, I got an email from the senior pastor—who I barely even knew!—saying he had been praying over the team and I was one of the people God had put on his heart to ask to apply. So, I did.

In all of this, I was experiencing a slow healing. I was learning to love the Lord more, seek Him more, and trust Him more. And his plans for me were good—full of promise, full of Golden Mending.

Even in the story of Jesus' death, there was a Golden Mending. The resurrection. God's plan for the salvation of his people began when Christ came and died, and the mending happened three days later when Christ rose again. In this mending period Christ was able to restore hope and faith in his Lordship. The disciples were able to see him, feel him, talk with him. He proved his identity as the risen Lord, the Son of God, and therefore initiated a new phase of God's great plan.

Through all of this mending, we are able to see how God works to bring his plan to completion. Philippians 1:6 says "And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." A Kingdom conclusion ultimately is the triumph of the Lord over every situation—in our brokenness, and in our mending. There is a quote that says "Everything will be okay in the end; if it's not okay, it's not end." As Christians we can embrace that truth because we know that God is working behind the scenes to bring healing, reconciliation, salvation, and hope to every circumstance. A Kingdom Conclusion is the total and complete triumph of God's plan, His purpose.

For Esther, this begins with her standing in the royal chambers. And unbelievably, King Xerxes welcomes her gladly! He extends his golden scepter to her in an act of mercy and grace. The golden scepter here is the first step of God's salvation plan for the Jewish people—God's extension of mercy and grace! Without the grace extended by King Xerxes in receiving Esther, there would have been no banquets that led to the edicts that saved all of the Jewish people and enabled—even encouraged—them to fight back and defend themselves. The courage that Esther had in going before the King was the first step in her mending. But as her two identities collide and are reconciled to one another, she is able to move forward with a momentum that ultimately changes the fate of the Jewish people as a whole! By this time, when you take a step back and look at the story of Esther as a whole, it doesn't look all that broken anymore. In fact, it looks better than it ever did and ever could have before we embrace the broken reality of Esther. Without that aspect of brokenness, God wouldn't have needed to step in and mend the story. Much like the art I mentioned earlier, without the break, the pottery is not as valuable or as beautiful.

And I know that my story would be very different if I hadn't experienced life at my most broken. If my relationship had continued I would have been in an abusive situation for life. I would have lost my family, friends, and faith. I would have been unhappily married, bitter and depressed. I have no doubts that I would not have gone on to further my education. Instead, God has turned my broken beginning into a masterpiece beyond my wildest imagination.

So what is the point of the Kingdom Conclusion? Why spend all of this time talking about brokenness, and mending? Because this is the Biblical narrative that we have spent so much time talking about—the biblical narrative that should be the lens through which we see our lives. We need to frame our limited human perspectives through the reality of this narrative.

What are the 4 points? (Creation. Fall. Redemption. New Creation.) Right! And that's what today, and this series, is about. We are born into the created world that is affected entirely by the Fall—we are all broken. God weaves a Golden Mending into our stories as he brings about redemption. And finally, we experience the greatest Kingdom Conclusion! Christ came, died, rose again, and what? He ascended! In the glorious promise that he will return one day to make all things new. Isaiah 65:17 speaks to this promise, as it is said, "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind."

We learned last week that we need to relinquish control to God—like Moses cast aside his shepherds staff—so that God can do his great work and make sense of our broken pieces for us. Phil also mentioned last week a passage from Isaiah 43: that no storm will overcome us when we trust and hope in the Lord. No broken bit we face today can overcome, overwhelm, or undo us—no matter how hopeless things may seem, remember that God is working something of value—a little bit of gold—into your story.

So what is he doing in you today, Church? Where do you need to relinquish control so that God can begin his mending work in you? How can you, like Esther, walk in courage into the throne room where your Kingdom Conclusion begins?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your faithfulness Lord. As we have heard today, you never leave us, you never fail nor forsake us. You are with us in the midst of our most broken and desperate times. That the God of the universe cares intimately for each of us is a wonder in itself, and we praise your holy name for that. I pray now God, as we close today, that you would bless us. Work some mending into our lives, be our comforter and healer, and enable us to move forward boldly, trusting in you with our every step. We know that we are not promised an easy life, but that you will be with us in every instance of pain and suffering. I pray Lord that we would all learn to cling to that promise, even when things are at their darkest.

May you bless each person as we go from here today, Lord. Bless us with joy, with peace, and with a newfound sense of hope.

We trust this to you, in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

“Be blessed this week, Church.”