



Profiles in Courage: Living and Leading in Dangerous Times

"Esther and Mordecai"

Wildwood Mennonite Church // May 3, 2020

Worship Leader: Matt W // Music Leader: Audrey MB // Sermon: Ken B

Welcome to Wildwood

Hello everyone! Welcome to Worship with the Wildwood Mennonite Church Community this morning! Today, we are reminded that our community and care for one another extends beyond those we see in person each week, or who can all fit on our computer screen. We invite you all to take some time today to reflect and remember who you all care for, and the others who care for you.

Music For Meditation // ["We Have Met to Worship"](#) // Hymnal Worship Book #8
a piano recording by Audrey

Call to Worship

Omniscient God, in this time of physical distance from one another, and from the WMC Building, it is easy to feel like what is out of sight is also out of mind and out of our hearts. Please help us to hold each other close in our thoughts and prayers, and help us to feel and accept your constant presence, support, and grace. Amen.

Song // [Will You Let Me Be Your Servant](#) // Hymnal Worship Book #307

Peace Candle

Today we pray for peace for our northern neighbours, who do not enjoy equal support and consideration from government authorities at the best of times. We pray that the communities of northern Saskatchewan receive the support they need, both in general, and in response to recent outbreaks of COVID-19. Amen.

Scripture // Esther 4:1-17 // *The Inclusive Bible* translation

When Mordecai heard about the decree, he ripped his tunic and put on sackcloth and ashes. Then, he paraded through the city, sounding loud and bitter shrieks, until he arrived at the front door of the Sovereign's Gate, though he was stopped there because no one was permitted to enter wearing sackcloth and ashes. The same thing happened in every province—no sooner had the imperial decree been read than every Jewish person in the province began mourning, fasting, weeping and wailing, and many of them put on sackcloth and ashes.

When Esther's attendants told her what was happening, she was overwhelmed with grief. She sent out clothes for Mordecai to wear instead of sackcloth, but he refused to wear them. Then Esther called Hathach, a eunuch assigned by the sovereign to attend

her. She ordered him to go to Mordecai and ask him why he was behaving in this manner.

Hathach went out to Mordecai, who was still in the public square in front of the Sovereign's Gate. Mordecai told him what happened to him, and about the bribe that Haman offered to the imperial treasury as payment for the destruction of the Jewish people. Mordecai also gave the eunuch a copy of the decree of extermination which was proclaimed in Susa, and asked him to show it to Esther so that she might know everything that had happened. He also asked the eunuch to tell Esther to go to the sovereign and plead the case of their people before him. ["Remember your humbler origins," he said, "when I provided you with all you needed. Since Haman, who holds the second place in the empire, has asked the sovereign to kill us, implore Yhwh to speak to the sovereign on our behalf and save us from destruction!"]

Hathach returned to Esther and told her what Mordecai had said. She returned the following message to Mordecai: "All of the emperor's attendants and people of the provinces know that anyone who approaches the sovereign in the inner court without being summoned faces one punishment— death—unless the sovereign spares her life by pointing the golden scepter toward her. I have not been summoned to the sovereign for the last thirty days."

When Mordecai heard Esther's reply, he wrote back the following response: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that, just because you are in the imperial palace, you will be the only Jewish person to escape. If you insist on remaining silent at this time, vindication and liberation will come to our people through another source, but both you and your family will surely die. Who's to say?—you may have come into the royal court for just this moment."

So Esther sent a message to Mordecai: "Bring together all the Jewish people in Susa now and fast for me. Do not eat or drink, day and night, for three days. After that, I will go to the sovereign in defiance of the law. If I die, I die."

Mordecai went and carried out all of Esther's instructions.

**Children's Story // [Click here for video storytime with Kara!](#)
The book is [But No Elephants](#) by Jerry Smath.**

Sermon // "For Such a Time as This" // Ken Bechtel

(If you'd rather watch than read, [click here for the video version on youtube](#))

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom and of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light and season of darkness, it was the Spring of hope, it was the Winter of despair, we had everything before us and we had nothing before us."





The Worst & Best of Times

Thus Charles Dickens began his classic historical novel, Tale of Two Cities, some 160 years ago (1859). His setting was the French Revolution, and its Reign of Terror, a period of violent bloody turmoil and social change that sent shivers throughout Europe and the Americas.

Our setting is a world well acquainted with war and bloodshed, genocide and racism, and now another pandemic, Covid-19. We know more than we wish we knew about foolishness, fear, darkness and despair. And we also see courage, patient wisdom, heroism and altruism!

“It was the worst of times, it was the best of times!” If 18th century John Wesley complained about so many amusements leading to the “dissipation of attention,” what would he think about that 3 oz shiny box with its capacity for 10’s of thousands of songs? Covid-19 has also given us myriad reminders of the gifts these devices offer.

It’s a New Game, for a New Church

It’s a new world out there, and within our churches. Almost two decades ago, Presbyterian Pastor and Alban writer, Jim Kitchens, observed that his church was oriented toward baby boomers but that the generations following were very different. It’s as if we started our ministries playing football in a football stadium, Kitchens writes. When we came out from the locker room at half time, the field had been rearranged for baseball. Will we go on with our game, tripping over those bases? Or will we learn to play the new game?[i]

Then along came Covid-19!

Some churches have insisted on playing the game the old way. We’ve heard about certain American prosperity gospel megachurches insisting on continuing to meet, and the resulting Covid-19 positives and deaths. It has been a challenge to learn the rules for this new game, and we are fortunate to have tech savvy members and leaders to help us navigate this new world we found when we left the locker rooms in mid March.

The jury is still out on how this will affect the church beyond 2020. Canadian church growth specialist Carey Nieuwhof recently wrote that “Half of all churches, regardless of church size—from very small churches (under 100) to megachurches—are experiencing growth during the pandemic. It’s remarkable that this is true if you have 75 people attending, 750 or 7500.” Two weeks ago, Australian Michael Frost, pondered these developments from his mission-shaped approach to being and doing church. His provocative piece is entitled “Coronavirus could set the church back 25 years.” Internet Monk Scott Lencke blogged recently that “as we all continue through this very challenging pandemic, may the Spirit be very real in leading our leaders and the church as a whole... We need wise discernment in these days.”

That's the future, but right now we are living in 2020 while a mysterious and deadly virus stalks our neighbourhoods and world. And one of the insidious features of this enemy is that you can't always tell from appearances where that virus may be lurking.

Beyond Appearances

I believe that the book of Esther, and especially Mordecai, Esther and their fellow Hebrews, offer us some hints as to how we might survive and even thrive in such times. I encourage you to sit down with a modern version like Good News and read Esther like a historical novel, complete with interesting twists and turns, and a bit more violence and male chauvinist sexism than you may wish.

At one level this is a story about appearances – a queen deposed for refusing her husband's drunken demands (such disobedience didn't look good!), a maiden chosen to be queen because of her beauty, palace guards who plot the king's assassination, a villain who feigns concern about the king's honour. It's also a story about seeing through those appearances, a heroine and hero who see with clear sighted eyes.

The story opens with King Ahasueris in the middle of his grand banquet, deep in his cups, "merry with wine" as my NRSV puts it. The drunken king demands that his wife, Vashti, appear in order to show off her beauty; Vashti refuses. His advisors urge the king to publicly depose her lest her example inspire other women to "look with contempt on their husbands."

The search was on for a replacement queen, sort of a 5th century BC beauty pageant. Esther was the one chosen. She was an orphan, raised by her cousin Mordecai who instructed her not to reveal her Jewish identity. When Mordecai later heard about two of the king's supposedly loyal guards plotting to kill the king, he told Queen Esther and the plot was foiled.

Enter Haman the Agagite, whom King Ahasueris promoted to "a seat above all the officials who were with him." Haman loved the way that all the king's servants bowed down to him, all that is except Mordecai the Jew. Infuriated, Haman persuaded the king to issue a decree ordering that all Jews be killed on a particular day chosen by lot, or Pur as in Purim.

Mordecai, clothed in sackcloth, appeared at the palace gates and refused the garments offered by Esther's servant Hathach. Instead he sent messages informing Esther of this plot. Mordecai now urges her to reveal her Jewish identity and to ask the king to repeal the order. Esther hesitates, saying that she could be put to death if she goes to the king without being summoned. Mordecai urges her to try. "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this." She agrees, on the condition that her Jewish people join her in fasting for the next three days.

The chapters after the portion we read tell more about her strategy. She goes to the king who welcomes her, offers her whatever she wants and accepts her invitation to a banquet. During the banquet, when the king asks for any request she might have, she asks the king to spare her



life and that of all of the Jews. The upshot of the story is that Haman's plot is foiled, Haman ends up on the noose he had prepared for Mordecai, and the Jewish people are able to defend themselves against the annihilation order. This story about the deliverance of their people is still celebrated annually by our Jewish friends, the Feast of Purim, earlier in April this year!

Clear Sighted Eyes

In Esther, this clarity of vision comes through the interplay between courtier and citizen, supported by her people's fasting, perhaps a parallel to our standing together by staying apart. Mordecai, Queen Esther's cousin, stands outside the court where he hears and sees important things, plots against the king and against his own people. Royal Esther at first responds to the sackcloth garbed wailer in the streets by sending out servant Hathach with draperies to cover over his sackcloth and ashes.

Mordecai's concerns, complete with the copy of the written decree, evoke the attention of the queen, and her royal household. Hopefully, our Mordecais will also refuse such papering over.

Jesus once said that "If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; but if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be in darkness." (Matt.6) One of the challenges for us as a 21st century church is that, for many reasons, "now we see through a glass darkly."

I believe there are four dimensions of sight essential for these best and worst of times. The first three of these - peripheral vision, focus and balcony oversight – have physical parallels. The fourth, hope filled vision, is more volitional and spiritual.


Those first three functions, physically speaking, can deteriorate with age. The fourth, hope filled vision, can erode if it relies only on its context rather than the Spirit.

Peripheral Vision is the ability to see the whole picture, including that which frames or surrounds the centre of our attention. It's the sort of vision that helps drivers avert danger, that helps Wayne Gretzky glimpse out of the corner of his eye the other players' next moves. There on the edges of our picture are those things jumping around, whether the poor or the young prophets or those many who join Esther in her fast. As our new world emerges, in the words of Jim Kitchens, "We are at a moment in the life of the church when what lies in our peripheral vision may well be far more important than what we see by looking straight ahead."

In times like these, we need to be able to glimpse out of the corner of our eyes the important things God is doing on the edges, at the periphery.

One of the good things about this time of social distancing is that the nightly news now more often looks for and shares good news stories about people finding unique ways of helping or encouraging others, stories too about yet other persons from the margins needing support. We need peripheral vision.





Focus is the second form of sight needed for these times. Somewhere between 40 and 50, many of us start needing bifocals. Our lenses lose elasticity with age, and we have trouble focusing on those items close at hand. This problem may be called presbyopia, but that doesn't mean it's only a Presbyterian problem.

According to the late social critic, Christopher Lasch, we suffer from it to the extent that we focus on nostalgia, an "idealising of a past irretrievably lost and frozen in perfection", rather than on "true memory which draws hope and comfort from the past to enrich the present and face what comes." [ii]


There's lots to learn from earlier pandemics such as the 1918 Spanish Flu, including the importance of this social distancing. In this book, Mordecai and Esther focus the issue and their options so that they develop into a plan of action.

The third form of sight, **big picture perspective, the Balcony View**, requires our ability to move away from the hustle bustle, to climb up into the balcony, and get a quick overview of what is happening. Harvard leadership guru, Ron Heifetz, who coined this image reminds us that as dancers on the floor, we really have no idea what is happening except for the few feet around us. Only by climbing up into the balcony can we see the entire floor. But, of course, staying on the balcony means missing out on the dance. In Esther, that balcony climbing happens through the movement back and forth between the court balcony and the street, between Esther and Mordecai.

We benefit from the bigger picture perspectives of those with better understanding of past pandemics and this current virus. A somewhat mysterious pandemic like Covid-19 does elicit conspiracy theorists and snake oil sellers galore. This week I read part way through a reputable Fact Checker list of over a hundred fake stories, often complete with pictures and supposed doctors. As Christians, we want like Mordecai to stay with the actual decrees rather than passing on false hope or fear. In the words of Dr. Cory Neudorf, epidemiologist at U of S, social distancing and isolation are "the blunt tools that we have until you get the appropriate therapies or prevention like vaccines." [iii] This bigger picture perspective avoids thousands of needless deaths and buttresses the current inconvenience with the future hope.

The fourth dimension of sight is sensed in an intriguing statement made by Mordecai - "vindication and liberation will come to our people through another source."

There's incredible faith and hope in those dozen words. There's no definition within these literal Hebrew words for exactly what that source might be, how that might happen. Later Greek translators, rabbis and church fathers all assumed he meant God, though this book nowhere explicitly states that, nowhere clearly defines God's ways. Even our most learned experts can offer only educated guesses on exactly when and how our deliverance from Covid-19 will happen.



Esther asks Mordecai to ““Bring together all the Jewish people in Susa now and fast for me. Do not eat or drink, day and night, for three days. After that, I will go to the sovereign in defiance of the law. If I die, I die.” The courage she needed, and the wiser outcome they sought, required their joint initiative. Remember those Lent services when Joe had us “fast” from our favourite songs? Well, now our much more challenging shared fast that started in Lent and goes well beyond involves standing together by staying apart!

The faith and hope behind these words about relief coming “from another source,” this choice between silence and risky action, moves this conversation between Mordecai and Esther a long ways past the survivalist mode where we church folk sometimes live. There’s hope, there’s deliverance. God is going to do something. The question is whether you and I will be a part of it.

Living in Hope

The Czech playwright, poet and politician, Vaclav Havel often described hope as “a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t. It is a dimension of the soul. It is not essentially dependent upon some particular observation of the world... (Hope) is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense.”

Hope is the certainty that something makes sense. In these, the best of times and the worst of times, may we share Mordecai’s confidence that deliverance will come. And we want to be in God’s quarter as that happens.

[i] Jim Kitchens, *The Postmodern Parish: New Ministry for a New Era* (Alban, 2003), p.27

[ii] Christopher Lasch, “Memory and Nostalgia, Gratitude and Pathos”, *Salmagundi* (Skidmore College), No. 85/86 (Winter-Spring 1990)

[iii] Geoff Leo, “‘Flat-out incorrect’: Scientists debunk Sask. biologist’s claims about COVID-19 spread and physical distancing,” CBC News, April 27, 2020


Song // [God Has Chosen Me](#) // Sing the Story #114

Sharing Time // ["Hey Wildwood..." online sharing](#)

Not hearing from one another in person through the Sharing Time is a significant loss for many of us. It’s not the same, but one way to express your grief, anxiety, prayer requests and gratitude is through the “Hey Wildwood” link above. If you’re able, join us for our Sunday Morning Zoom gatherings, or check your email for the sharing items from last Sunday. Or maybe now would be a good time to pause your reading to call someone from church or elsewhere that you haven’t heard from this week.

Congregational Prayer

Creator God, recognizing with gratitude that we have many signs of spring, the budding of trees, the tulips poking out of the ground, crocuses already in full bloom, the sound of the



meadowlark – we recognize that it took many long months of cold and dark to come to this place. And yet, God, we knew all along that Spring was coming. Even on those long winter nights, we knew Spring was around the corner. But now we just don't know, God, how long this time of isolation and desolation will last. We do not know how or where we will land in our new reality or what the "new normal" will look like. Like children, we ask incessantly, are we there yet?

O God, many of us are simply tired, and some of us are starting to unravel. We've had enough of being alone, of days without work, of weeks without routine. We've had enough of financial worries, of meetings or appointments that can't be held in person, of forever being cautious and even fearful, of living without handshakes and trying to survive without hugs.

We've also had enough of mistrust, of arrogance and pride, of injustice, of self-serving motivation. We have observed it in the world around us, and some of us are seeing it in ourselves. God of justice, how long before we see these clearly enough to effect change in our world? How long before we see these clearly enough to effect change in our own hearts?

In this space, which affects us on every level - mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual - we are bewildered and off balance. And so we turn to you, knowing that you can lead us to draw on resources, to ponder possibilities, and to open doors we may not have considered before. Show us, O God, how we can best be the church – your hands and feet and heart – within the community in which we live. May this time be a time that teaches us how to live with more of an awareness of your presence, how to live with more love, how to live with more purpose.

At this time we ask your presence to be very near to those who particularly need to feel you close beside them in this journey. For those experiencing health crises, we ask for healing. For those struggling with life-altering decisions, we ask your guidance. For those in risky situations, we ask that your protecting hand will cover them. Help us to find ways to reach out to those who need our support. Grant us, like Esther and Mordecai, the courage to be vulnerable, to face the hard times, and to take action as we recognize need around us.

Thank you, ever-faithful God, for your grace and mercy - and for the love which binds us to you and to each other. Amen.

Offering Prayer

God, we continue to thank-you for your many gifts. Please bless the offerings of money, time, and talent that our community has invested in your works. Amen.

Song // [Be Still, God Will Fight Your Battles](#) // Sing the Journey #75

Benediction

Go now in peace to love and serve the Lord, and feel the love of the Wildwood Mennonite Church family as you do so! Amen!