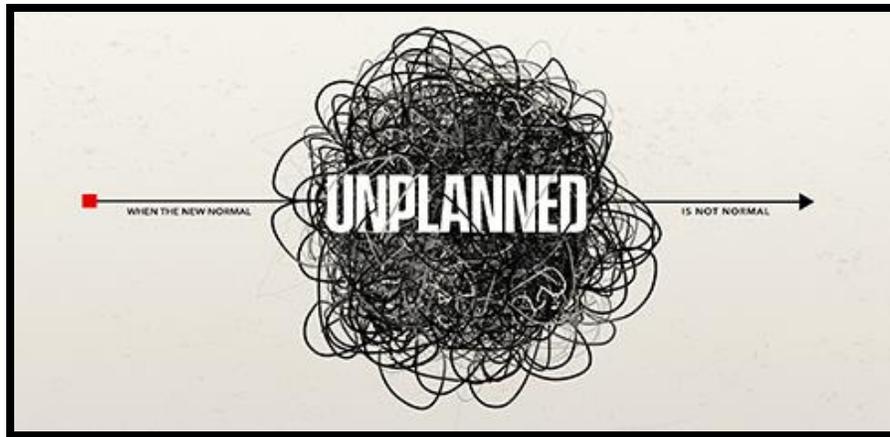


Unplanned: When the New Normal Is Not Normal “For Such a Time as This”

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We are in our worship series, Unplanned: When the New Normal Is Not Normal. We are living in unprecedented times in our lifetime. This could apply in so many ways. I am thinking of technology here. It's not so long ago that it would have been impossible for us to do worship this way, online, via a video platform, especially with equipment that many Americans have readily available to them, like a cell phone... even if we never used them that way before. When you add the simultaneous global pandemic and civil unrest (part of which may be as a result of prolonged isolation and sheltering in our homes), a contentious political election season. Wow!

These *particular* changes and simultaneous occurrences may be unique in our lifetimes, but huge earth shattering changes themselves are not unique or even rare in the history of the world. They are not rare throughout the course of human history, and they are not rare in the Bible. We have been spending the last several weeks looking how people of God responded when faced with their “new normals.” How did God help them through it?

The last couple of weeks we have been looking at a time when the Babylonian Exile was ending. Judeans were returning to Judah to rebuild their capital city Jerusalem and the Temple. Neither were in the condition remembered by their parents and grandparents. People had moved into the area, who were not eager to see the Judeans return. They tried to block progress in every way that they could. But, God encouraged the Judeans to keep moving forward, to imagine what it would be like when the crisis was past.

This week we are still generally in the same time period ... soon after the Judeans were given permission to return to Judah ... but we are not in the same location. The main people in this text are Judeans who decided to stay in Persia. We are in the Book of Esther.

It takes place in one of the four capital cities of Persia, the city of Susa. It was located in modern-day Iran about 100 miles north of the Persian Gulf. It is the time of King Xerxes, who reigned after Darius, who renewed the rebuilding effort in Jerusalem. Many Judeans remained in Persia because their families had obeyed what the Prophet Jeremiah said, to settle and build their lives in this new land where they had been taken. Persia was what they knew. That is where their life, family, and livelihood were, so they preferred to stay.

The Persian Empire had its share of political intrigue. There was a misunderstanding that resulted in extreme embarrassment for King Xerxes, at a banquet for all his nobles and officials. This resulted in his first queen, Vashti, being banished and the crown taken from her. After several years, the court held a beauty contest, something like the Ultimate Bachelor TV show, to choose a new queen. The most beautiful ladies of the empire were chosen to compete. One of these was a Jewish young lady known as Esther. While she was beautiful, she won over all those around her both men and women. Against what seems like insurmountable odds, Esther won the contest when Xerxes fell in love with her. He crowned her as his new queen. All the while her adopted father, Mordecai, told Esther to keep her Jewish background a secret.

Five years later, a new man has made his way to high position in Xerxes' Court, Haman the Agagite. As it happened, the Agagite people were a long time enemy of the Jewish people. When Haman found out that Mordecai didn't bow to him as the king ordered, Haman planned revenge not only against Mordecai, but to wipe out all of the Jewish people in the empire. Without specifically naming Mordecai or the Jewish people, Haman persuaded the king that a "certain people" were not following the laws of the king and should be destroyed. The king agreed, and word was sent out that this was to take place in about 11 months.

The people of Susa were shocked by the news, all the people, not just the Judeans. While inside the palace, the king and Haman had drinks. As you can imagine, this made Mordecai sick with grief. He covered himself with ashes and wailed in his grief at the king's gate. Queen Esther was inside the palace blissfully unaware of what had happened. That is about to change, when she sends one of her male servants, Hathak, to speak bring Mordecai. This is where our text begins today in the book of Esther chapter 4:6-17. Hear the Word of the Lord:

6 So Hathak went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. 7 Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. 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.

**The Word of Life.
Thanks be to God!**

Talk about Unplanned! No one plans for their lives to be turned upside down and inside out in that way ... all in a moment. Her new normal was certainly not normal.

If you are familiar with Esther or not, you may have heard the most famous verse in the whole book. "Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (vs 14c) It is the turning point of the book.

Up to this point, Queen Esther had learned the lesson by what had happened to her predecessor, Vashti. She stayed out of politics and palace intrigue. She was the beautiful bird living in her gilded cage. After being married for five years, she seemed to have her own life away from the king. She didn't cause trouble, and she didn't rock the boat. However, she still worried about her future because the king was not calling for her like he used to. And yet, we see that those five years weren't wasted.

Though she resisted at first (as do many who are called by God), once she decided to take up this mission, she was decisive. She didn't do it just the way that Mordecai asked. She didn't drop everything and go and beg the king to save her and her people. No, she prepares, and she asks for the help of those people. They are to fast for three days and nights. Fasting is a spiritual discipline talked about throughout the Bible as a way to draw closer to God through sacrifice. Whether the Judeans in Susa took their religion seriously before or not, they seem to be trying to hit the reset button, keep their complete focus on God as Esther prepares to try to save them all. When we find ourselves in these situations where there seem to be no good options, whether by our choice or not, the wisest thing that we can do is go to God.

During those three days, Esther used what she had learned in the palace to decide how to approach King Xerxes. For some, Mordecai's plan to go straight to the king and beg for mercy would have been the right thing to do, but people are different. What works well with one person, does not necessarily work with another. We've already learned that Xerxes did not like to be put on the spot like he was with Queen Vashti. Esther learned that it would be much better to approach him privately. Barging into the throne room and begging Xerxes to reverse his decision, easily could have meant her instant death, and the Jewish people would be no better off. This fear was no exaggeration. According to some historians, including Josephus, this was no ordinary death. Men with axes surrounded the throne that could immediately carry out the execution. She had to figure out what to do in this new situation.

Both Mordecai and Esther had their new normals to work through.

Mordecai's new normal apart from being under a death sentence is that this young lady that he adopted after her parents died is no longer the pliable young person who obeyed his every command without question. He persuaded, yes, persuaded her to take on this mission. Now, he is under *her* orders. She was now his queen, and he did her bidding to make the plan a success.

Esther's new normal is being presented with the responsibility that accompanied her title, queen. She is no longer the pretty bird in a gilded cage. She transforming what she has learned in the last five years, putting her life on the line to save her people, not only the Jewish people but all the people of Persia who have been put in the terrible position to have to carry out this annihilation order. One wrong move could mean the death of thousands, the first of which, if not herself would be her father Mordecai.

If you are looking for a parallel to our world today, you have it right here. Living in the time of pandemic has become our new normal. It's easy to become complacent and forget about the risk ... not to ourselves, but to our loved ones, our family and friends. Thus far, Wallowa County has missed the worst of the COVID spikes, but it is easy to find rural areas all over the country that thought they had no risk who found themselves in the middle of a hotspot. North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, all thought that they dodged a bullet. Now, their numbers are skyrocketing and are among the worst in the country. ("Places with highest daily reported cases per capita", Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/national/coronavirus-us-cases-deaths/>, accessed 09/01/2020.) In our new normal, complacency can be life threatening to someone we know and love or even a stranger who lives nearby. Keep moving forward. Live your lives, but remember that your choices make a difference. Keep loving your neighbor, by continuing to take recommended precautions.

The good news is that Queen Esther used her accumulated knowledge to approach King Xerxes in just the right way to save her people and remove the threat of Haman. However, she was only in the position to do that because God placed her there. There were so many variables to put Esther in that place at that time. God was in the details of her life. One of the interesting things about the Book of Esther is that God is not mentioned anywhere in it, and yet its most important theme is that God is working behind the scenes throughout.

God is in the details of our lives too, even at such a time as this. Proverbs 16:9 says, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." This theme is throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. This can give us give us confidence when we are having to deal with a new normal that is not normal. We can trust that God knows where we are and what we need -- also how we can be of service -- even when the circumstances are brand new to us.

Have you ever heard the cliché that hindsight is 20/20? We can see so clearly after the fact. That is especially true when we are talking about how God has been at work in our lives. Think about your life the things you feel best about and even the parts that were not so great. The job we got. The people we've met. Sometimes they helped us. Other times we may have helped them. Being in the right place at the right time. What were the events and the people that brought you to this particular place at this particular time? If we can see those God moments, some people call them

coincidences, it can help us in the now. We can have faith now that God is still there and still actively involved in our lives, now and in the future. We can't see into the future, but God can.

In the fullness of time, we will see the importance of what is happening to us now. Do you think that the disciples saw the importance of Jesus' death and resurrection when it was happening? The narrative of the Gospel accounts paint a picture of some very confused people. They had some trouble adjusting to their new normal that definitely was not normal.

Once they had the Holy Spirit, their grasp on things seemed to improve, but it took years before they wrote it down in the Gospel accounts. The earliest estimates think it was about 20 years later. Even the earliest of the Apostle Paul's letters were only a few years before that. When they looked back, they could see so clearly, but in the heat of the moment, they were lost and baffled.

As we adjust to our new normal, we need to cut ourselves some slack. It is going to take some time, especially as the change is ongoing. We can be brave and wise in our new normal, much like Esther, by following the leading of God and taking time to make good decisions. You are God's child. God loves you, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Let me pray for you: *God, you bless us with your love, and we are grateful. Help us adjust to this new normal and guide us in what we should do. Help us to lean on you and not depend on our own understanding. Help us to feel your protective embrace and remember that no matter what is going on around us that you continue to hold us in the palm of your hand. Help us to let go of our selfish desires and make good decisions full of love for you and our neighbor. We thank you for your love. Amen.*

Next week we will finish up our worship series, and we are leaving the time of the Babylonian Exile by jumping to the New Testament and look at how the Apostle Philip responded to *his* new normal.