

For Such a Time as This: Prayer and Reflection

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Last week we began a short series on the Book of Esther. We talked about how in this story there had been a decree to kill all of the Jewish people in Susa. Mordecai saw that Esther was in a unique position to potentially save the Jews. Esther herself was Jewish, but she had withheld this information from the King to whom she was married. She, perhaps more than anyone else, could help the King to reverse this decision. Mordecai came to Esther and pointed this out, saying, “perhaps you came to royal dignity for just such a time as this.”

After the exchange between Mordecai and Esther, there is Esther’s prayer which is only found in the apocrypha. (The apocrypha includes writings that were not included in the canon of scripture). You can hear her anxiety and fear. You can hear that she knows what she needs to do and is bracing herself for it:

Esther’s Prayer

14 Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. ² She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. ³ She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: “O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, ⁴ for my danger is in my hand. ⁵ Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. ⁶ And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies ⁷ because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord! ⁸ And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery, but they have covenanted with their idols ⁹ to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance, to stop the mouths of those who praise you and to quench your altar and the glory of your house, ¹⁰ to open the mouths of the nations for the praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king.

¹¹ “O Lord, do not surrender your scepter to what has no being; and do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us. ¹² Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! ¹³ Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. ¹⁴ But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord. ¹⁵ You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. ¹⁶ You know my necessity—that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on

days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. ¹⁷ And your servant has not eaten at Haman's table, and I have not honored the king's feast or drunk the wine of libations. ¹⁸ Your servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord God of Abraham. ¹⁹ O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evildoers. And save me from my fear!"

What do you think about when you wake up in the middle of the night? I'd like to suggest that whatever that is, is prayer.

When a person says to you, "I'm worried about you." That is prayer.

Anne Lamott says that the only words we need for prayer are Help, Thanks, and Wow. It doesn't have to be fancy. She writes, "Let's not get bogged down on whom or what we pray to. let's just say prayer is a communication from our hearts to the great mystery, or Goodness, or Howard; to the animating energy of love we are sometimes bold enough to believe in; to something unimaginably big, and not us. We could call this force Not Me, and Not Preachers Onstage with a Choir of 800 or for convenience we could just say, 'God'."

The Psalms are replete with examples for prayer. If you read through the psalms, you will find a wide range of prayers and songs that cover every emotion – rage, anxiety, fear, sadness and grief, gratitude and delight.

Mother Teresa, when asked about her prayer life she said that she basically just listened. Well, then what did you hear God say? "God just listened too. And if you can't understand that, then I can't explain it to you."

However it is we come before God is okay. Sometimes we need to get out all our emotion, all our thoughts as Esther has done in this prayer, and sometimes maybe we just listen.

What happens in prayer is a mystery and no one should beat themselves up if they don't feel as though they don't get it or don't feel as though they hear a response, but often prayer is experienced as a way of slowing down and opening up a path to the holy other.

There are many examples in the gospels of Jesus going away by himself to pray. Interestingly, even in the gospel of Mark which is known for its quicker pace and the use of the word "Immediately." We see numerous examples of Jesus going out to a solitary place, going up the mountain to pray, withdrawing from his disciples and going to the lake. On and on. It's how he began his ministry. It's how he made important decisions. It's how he dealt with troubling emotions like grief. It's how he dealt with the constant demands of his daily life. It's how he prepared for important events. It's how he prepared for his death on the cross.

And we see so much of that in play here in Esther's prayer. She is letting out all of her emotions and taking time to brace herself for what is ahead and to think through it strategically.

Now if a child runs into a busy street or jumps into the deep end of a pool and you know she doesn't know how to swim, that is not the time to go into reflective prayer about what to do!

But there are so many other things, that taking some time to be reflective about what you will do or say or be, is so helpful. Indeed that is often what helps us move from anguish to action.

It is the story of Mother's Against Drunk Driving and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. It is the story of the Sandy Hook Promise and Black Lives Matter. When we are filled with grief and anguish and are reflective and listen to the spirit, we often find we become people of strategy and action.

Kristin Urquiza lost her father to the Coronavirus and in the time following his death she founded a group called Marked by Covid. Others joined with her to process their loss and advocate for policies that address the racial and economic inequalities exacerbated by the virus. The group has attracted national attention and now has more than 50,000 followers

NPR and the Washington Post featured a story about Chris Anderson, an elections supervisor in Seminole County, Florida. They asked Anderson, 'what is keeping you up at night?' he said, "making sure that voters have the right information between now and election day." His wife looked at him one day and said, "You look stressed" to which he responded, "Multiply that feeling by the 328,000 voters in this county, and that's about where I am at." Anderson is getting 96 calls or texts about COVID safety, mail in ballots and how the election process is going to go.

He stepped back, he took time to think through every step of the process, trying to determine how to make it as safe as possible. The first thing people need to do it check in on a tablet that probably 500 other people have already handled on Election Day, so that is a potential exposure. Then you sign in using a little stylus, and its covered with all kinds of germs. The voting booths are too close together, they don't have Plexiglas barriers. Then you pick up a pen. That's another exposure. You touch the secrecy shield. Exposure. It's one hazard after another. He came up with a list of about 100 things that they needed to solve.

Like those styluses. That seemed easy – just make them disposable – but the price tag for that was about \$250,000. If he bought those, he wouldn't be able to pay his poll workers. So they started experimenting and someone figured out that if you roll tinfoil around the stem of a qtip and dampen the tip with a sponge, that transfers electricity to the touch screen, and it actually works! So they started driving to every Dollar Tree in the area and bought all of the qtips they could find. \$5 for 1500. They cut them in half and rolled tinfoil around the stems. His kids

made some. His wife made some. The whole family made them while watching the Game of Thrones. As of the end of September, they had 100,000 ready to go. The article in the Washington Post outlines the whole process they have put in place for each precinct, using other creative ideas to make the process as safe as possible.

Often out of prayer and reflection comes good strategy. That was the case for Esther. If you read on, you will see that Esther slowly pulled the King along with three separate banquets before laying out her case that would ultimately save the Jewish people.

Not all of the things that keep us up at night and cause us anxiety need to result in something do or a specific strategy to solve a problem. Sometimes we just need to feel known and loved as we are.

I have a friend whose mom died from cancer when she was 13. At 13, my friend was of course asking, “Why?” Why did she no longer have a Mom to do all of the things for her as she had done for so many years? Why did she no longer have her Mom to talk to, and laugh with? At some point in that next year when she was alone and thinking and crying, and feeling very lost, I am not sure she would use the word praying at that point, but it certainly sounded like that to me. At some point she had a visceral experience that she still can’t explain, but she knew was as a real as the keyboard beneath our hands as we type. She heard a voice, that she names as God, saying “I am crying with you.” It was comforting and it made the “why did you do this to me” feelings go away. Her Mom’s death was no longer something that God had done. Now, as someone who is in her 60s, she looks back on that time and says that moment changed her life – from then on she knew there was a God who was paying attention.

It may seem counterintuitive as a time such as this, when so much change is needed, when we need to generate new creative solutions for problems that seem insurmountable – but it is for just such a time as this when all that is true and we are also anxious and worried, that we need to pray. It was Martin Luther who said, “I have so much to do that if I don’t spend at least three hours a day in prayer I would never get it all done.”

Don’t worry about getting it right. Maybe you will scream out. Maybe you will remain silent. Maybe you will chop vegetables or run as you pray. Maybe you will just say Help. Or Thanks. Or Wow. However it is that you approach it, however it is that you are, is just fine. But in these crazy times, find a way to step away from the noise of this world and breathe. Perhaps you will find a path that opens you to the Holy Other.

Amen.