

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Emotionally"
SERMON TEXT: Esther 4:1-4, 10-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 15, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

The Adult Sunday School class is studying the Old Testament Minor Prophets. My husband is the one teaching the class, so he's the guy who has to prepare the most. But, just so I could be a little prepared as a student, I opened up a commentary this past week and read a bit from the introduction to Hosea. There in the first paragraph, the Bible scholar noted that the book of Hosea has been referred to as "a passion play" because the "word *passion* captures the incendiary relations . . . feverish lust . . . profound suffering . . . torment . . . [and] violent anger" that are expressed by the characters of husband and wife in the writing of Hosea.¹ Wow! That does sound passionate, doesn't it? Of course, the idea of "a passion play" conjures up more than the Minor Prophet Hosea. It also brings to our minds the story of Jesus and all the anguishing experiences of fiercely-pledged loyalty, agonized and exhausted prayer, conflicted betrayal, tormented denial, public rejection, torturous suffering, and horrific grief involved in Jesus' crucifixion.

For sure, the stories and songs of the Bible are full of drama and passionate emotions—some very dark and some very uplifting. That's because the Bible is a reflection of our human life. Like it or not, we are emotional beings. Maybe not in any given day or week or month, but over a period of years most of us can attest to having felt the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Most of us will have experienced the euphoria of love and the devastation of loss. Most of us will have known the strength of confidence and the weakness of uncertainty. We will have felt confusion and joy, frustration and peace, disturbance and hope. Over an expanse of time, we will have exulted in the infinite possibilities of new life and grieved over the closed-door finality of death. To a certain extent, emotions are just the feelings that they are. They're not good or bad, right or wrong. But to the

extent that emotions affect our health, behavior, and success in life, we might want to consider how best to handle and manage our emotions.

Since January first, we've been talking about different ways of starting the New Year well. So far, we've talked about starting the New Year well mentally and physically. In the weeks beyond today, we're going to talk about starting the New Year well spiritually, creatively, societally, relationally, and financially. This morning I want us to look at the story of Mordecai found in Esther chapter 4. Let's see what we might learn about starting the New Year well emotionally.

1—EXPRESS AND SHARE EMOTIONS IN CULTURALLY-APPROPRIATE WAYS

The first thing we notice in this scripture reading is that Mordecai is terribly distressed. His feelings of anguish are so strong that he does what he must. To be emotionally well, Mordecai must express and share his emotions.

The back story is that an evil guy named Haman had convinced King Ahasuerus to make a decree to annihilate all the Jews throughout the kingdom. As if it weren't bad enough that the Babylonians had already destroyed Jerusalem and taken a large number of the Jews captive—now, sometime later, in Babylon, their lives were being threatened again. When Mordecai, a leading citizen among the Jewish exiles, heard this devastating news, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went throughout the city, wailing with a loud and bitter cry. In every province of the kingdom, other Jews joined Mordecai in mourning, fasting, weeping, lamenting, and laying in sackcloth and ashes.

What Mordecai teaches us here is that, when we have an intense feeling, it's healthy to express and share our emotions. It isn't good to try to keep them bottled up inside. That would be true whether the intense feeling is joy or sorrow, apathy or attraction. One of the reasons why we human beings have emotions is to help us connect with other emotional human beings. Expressing and sharing our emotions is a basic part of our human design. When we try to hold our emotions back

and block them from showing, we fail to connect with others in ways that are vital to our human survival. Think of it like this: What if a baby never cried? Then its parents would never know that it was hungry and needed to be fed, that it was wet and needed to be changed, that it was anxious and needed to be comforted. Emotions are our most basic way of communicating our needs for life. God made us this way, and our well-being is dependent on us expressing and sharing our emotions.

That said, however, there are proper and improper, better and worse ways to express and share our emotions. We all know that sometimes it really is best to bite our tongues and walk away. We sure wouldn't start the New Year well if we let words, fists, or bullets fly every time we felt irritated or frustrated.

Expressing and sharing emotions well usually has something to do with the culture in which we live. In Mordecai's Jewish-Babylonian culture some 2500 years ago, apparently, the best way to express and share emotions was to tear his clothes, put on scratchy sackcloth, and pour dirty ashes all over himself. Apparently in that culture, it was appropriate to walk through the city wailing.

Today, we'd probably share our distress in a different way. If we felt like our people were being threatened, we might express our dismay and fear in a letter to the editor, a phone call to a congressional office, a protest rally, or a television interview. If we were techno-savvy, we might get people's attention through text messages, email, or Facebook. We might use Twitter to gather a flash mob.

Regarding emotions about personal matters, we might make a phone call, meet face-to-face with someone, or communicate our feelings through those little yellow happy and sad-faced emoticons that now are available in endless varieties to express all kinds of complex feelings. With social media, I've noticed that young people today put a lot more of their emotions out for public display than has seemed appropriate in my generation—which, of course, creates a generation gap that can cause additional emotions to both older and younger ones. And I know that in different

countries, ethnic neighborhoods, religious communities, and socioeconomic groups, people find it more or less acceptable to write their feelings in books, raise their voices on stage, spray paint one's feelings on a wall, express outrage by destroying property, or even inflict violence on other people's bodies. Obviously, there are limits, and that's why every culture has some laws. When we interact with people of different ethnic, sexual, and age orientations, there can be some challenges sometimes; and a lot of negotiation may be required to figure out what exactly is acceptable freedom of expression. But, for sure, to be well emotionally we need to express and share our emotions in a way that is appropriate for our culture.

2—REACH OUT TO SOMEONE WHO CAN HELP & SUPPORT

This story about Mordecai offers us some additional advice about starting the New Year well emotionally. It's one thing to express and share our emotions with others, but it may also be necessary to communicate our feelings with someone who actually can be a help and support to us. At first Mordecai was simply commiserating with his fellow Jews, which was an OK place to begin. But then he realized that he needed to take his anguish to the king's gate. He needed to share his discomfort not only with those who were similarly worried but also with those who had the power to ease his pain.

At the king's gate, Mordecai got the attention of his young cousin, Esther, whom Mordecai had raised like a daughter. Esther was now one of the queens of King Ahasuerus, and Mordecai hoped that Esther would be able to intervene in this problem. Sometimes emotions are just emotions, and the people who have them don't really want or expect anyone to try to fix things. The person feeling the emotions just wants someone to listen and feel their pain or joy along with them. But other times, like Mordecai's situation, he needed someone to care enough to act on his behalf.

Upon hearing the news and what Mordecai wanted her to do, Esther developed her own set of complicated emotions. But Mordecai pushed her to see that this was her time to act. And she did.

Most of us know the story of how Esther rose up “for such a time as this.” But today, I want to keep our focus on Mordecai’s emotions. I want us to clearly see that Mordecai reached out to Queen Esther for help and support. He didn’t just talk to his peers. Through messengers, he crossed the barrier of the king’s gate and got what today we’d call “professional help.” Mordecai expressed and shared his fears and concerns with a person who had the resources to bring about a better outcome. When that professional person didn’t react the way he needed at first, Mordecai pressed his concerns further. He insisted that Esther help.

Sometimes when we are overcome by emotions, we give up way too easily. When people don’t understand us or don’t respond in supportive ways, we assume that they don’t care. Mordecai shows us that to be well emotionally, sometimes we have to work hard to express ourselves in a way that really communicates what’s wrong. It might take more than one session with a counselor. Honestly, it might take more than one season. We might have to try more than one kind of professional. Maybe if we don’t get satisfaction with a person who holds a Master of Social Work or Master of Counseling degree, then maybe we need to go up a notch and try a psychologist or a psychiatrist. Sometimes the emotions that overwhelm us require talk therapy, and sometimes they need medications too. Mordecai shows us that, when we are suffering from emotional pain, we can’t keep silent, or we—and others—might die. We have to keep trying to find someone who can provide the emotional support we need.

Mordecai also shows us that, when that help and support are provided, there may be something more required of us. Esther told Mordecai that he needed to “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day.” It was only after Mordecai did as Esther had ordered that she was able to work up the courage to go before the king to request the deliverance of the Jews. When we reach out for emotional support, we have to be willing to cooperate with the help that we are given. Other people can’t single-handedly fix

what ails our emotions. It requires cooperation. When we reach out to someone who can help support our emotions, we have to be willing partners in the process toward healing.

CONCLUSION

On the front page of Friday's *Standard Examiner* there was an article about the demand for mental health programs at Weber State. In the 2015-2016 school year, there was a considerable increase of usage over the prior year. Ten percent more people engaged in individual or couples counseling. Nine percent more took advantage of group counseling. And, overall, 21% more counseling appointments were provided. This school year's numbers are expected to go even higher. This trend isn't just at Weber State. A collegiate mental health report indicated that, "nationwide, self-reported depression, anxiety, and social anxiety has grown slowly and consistently over the last five years, as has the lifetime prevalence rate for . . . self-injury" and the serious consideration of suicide.²

Of course, what's happening on our university campuses is a reflection of what's happening in our society at large. You could say, "This is us." Collectively and individually, we're feeling increased concern about our emotions. So, I'm thinking it would be a good idea to follow the example of Mordecai. When our emotions are worrying us, let's not just hold them inside and deny the problem. Let's express and share them in culturally appropriate ways. And let's reach out to and cooperate with someone who can actually help and support us. In my experience, that's pretty good advice for starting the New Year well emotionally.

¹Gale A. Yee, "The Book of Hosea: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1996), p. 197.

² Anna Burleson at <http://www.standard.net/Health/2017/01/13/Weber-State-sees-uptick-in-use-of-mental-health-services-as-student-health-takes-focus.html> .