

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Every scripture reading today has depths to mine and relevance to our lives, but I've been excitedly waiting since August, when I sat down to make my seasonal sermon prep chart with notes for all the readings this Fall, to get to today's small passage from the Book of Esther.

It is a capstone to a month of readings featuring rare female voices and images for God in scripture – from the matching of wits between the Syrophenician woman and Jesus, to the portrayal of the Wisdom of God as a woman in Proverbs and the Wisdom of Solomon.

The snippet we read from Esther's book today only makes sense to us in what we can gather from the context: it appears the villain was exposed, the king executed justice, and Esther's people – the Jews in exile – were saved by her heroic action.

This is the culmination of the story, and it is for this reason that the Book of Esther appears in the Hebrew Bible as one of Five Scrolls read on festivals or commemorative days in the Jewish Year.

But there is so much more to the story that gets us to that point, we need to back up to the beginning – so buckle up because this is a tale as old as time.

Esther was not King Ahasuerus' first wife. That honor was held by Queen Vashti.

As our story begins, the King of Persia is throwing a lavish feast that lasts 180 days – and then because why not – he extends it another week at his winter palace in Susa.

As if 180 days weren't enough to tell us of his self-indulgent tastes and hedonistic appetite, chapter 1 narrates the opulence of the palace and the abundance of alcohol flowing freely. Almost as a side note, we are told Queen Vashti gave a separate banquet for the women of the kingdom, as the King's was for his officials, ministers, nobles, governors, and army leaders.

On the last day of that 7 day feast in the courtyard of the king, things took a bawdy turn. We are not given details, though one Biblical scholar puts it aptly saying that at the end of this drunken week, the men began to tell tales – reminiscing about the women they had known, which invariably turned into a competition.

Leading the pack was the King. All other women, he waged, paled in comparison to his wife, Queen Vashti. To prove his point he dispatched seven trusted eunuchs to bring the Queen to him immediately, adorned in (just?) her royal crown¹ – so he could show her off.

Chapter 1:12 tells us, *But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command...At this the king was enraged and his anger burned within him.*

It is not recorded why Queen Vashti refused to come – but she must have known there would be fallout, that her life would be torn apart, for she had defied the King in a very public manner.

The King in his anger and embarrassment consulted with his sages, seeking their advice on what to do. And what did the sages say? Beginning chapter 1:15 the outline the case for deposing Vashti – of making an example of her.

¹ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, pg.102.

Not only has Queen Vashti done wrong to the king, but also to all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For this deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will rebel against the king's officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!

Vashti was forsaken, and the King went on a hunt for a new wife.

With the help of the same advisors, he held a sort of ancient beauty pageant looking for a younger, even more beautiful wife – expecting one less willful too now that the example had been made of the former Queen.

Here Esther enters the story. She was an orphan who was taken in by her cousin Mordecai who worked at the King's citadel. They were 4th generation Jewish exiles in Persia – so distant from that wrenching exile from Jerusalem, but still holding a sense of Jewish identity.

Esther, because of her beauty, was taken into the harem of potential wives for the King, and when it was her turn to meet him, he loved her best and made her Queen.

The story continues with more court intrigue. Mordecai discovered a plot to kill the King and told Esther, who told the king – and it was thwarted.

And then there was Haman, who advanced in the King's court until his power surpassed all but the King. Everyone bowed before Haman, as if he were king – except Mordecai. Haman was furious, and when he found out Mordecai was a Jew he began to plot to destroy all the Jews in the kingdom as retribution.

As you might have guessed from the earlier partying and relying on others to tell him what to do, King Ahasuerus was not the most hands-on ruler. So, when Haman came to him, telling him of a people in his kingdom who were different and didn't keep the king's laws, but instead the laws of their God, the King supported Haman in his plan to eradicate the Jews and left him to it.

Esther, at Mordecai's earlier direction, had earlier hid her identity as a Jew from the King. But now, as Mordecai learned of Haman's plan, he told her to go to the King and make supplication for her people.

If only it were that simple. To go to the King's inner court without an invitation was a death sentence per the law of the kingdom. She would have stand at the entrance, still a breach of conduct, and hope he invited her in – and then hope he listened to her plea. If he didn't she had a big choice to make.

So Esther put on her crown and royal robes and stood at the entrance to the King's court. The irony of his first Queen refusing to come when called, and she herself showing up without being summoned could not have been lost on her.

But there she stood, and when the King saw her he lifted his golden scepter and bid her to enter. The first hurdle was past. We may never know, but I can't help but wonder if Vashti's earlier independence somehow softened the King's heart toward Esther's.

And here is where our story picks up today – with Esther's courage saving her people and Haman's grisly end.

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There is so much about this story that we can learn from, that helps us make sense of our lives today. The role of power and gender certainly stand in stark relief against the backdrop of #metoo and our national dialogue.

But the thing I always come back to in the story of Esther – is that her story is not simply her own. Her story is Vashti’s story too – and vice versa – perhaps an ancient #metoo. By including Vashti’s story in her memoir, because that’s what this book of scripture is, she shows us we have a responsibility to one another to listen to and remember each other.

Each of us here, men and women, have stories that have shaped us for good or for ill. There are people whose stories are the building blocks that gotten us to where we are today, and have informed the choices we had to make along the way.

Former Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori spoke about the heresy of western Christianity’s focus on the individual – calling it a form of idolatry. The myth we can make it on our own, as if we don’t benefit from the structures and labor of those before us, as if salvation is an individual pursuit – just me getting it right with God.

But the story of Esther and Vashti shows us clearly that we belong to each other – that we are connected in powerful ways that are often beyond our control – and that salvation is found in God working through us together.

Through Vashti and Esther the Jews were saved from annihilation. And I believe it is through telling and listening to each other’s stories here, now, that we have the power to overcome the division being sown in our country.

~ AMEN ~