



She Said No

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost~September 30, 2018

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

The king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, "What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king." Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?" Esther said, "A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated. Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year, as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Psalm 124

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| 1 | If God had not been on our side, *
let Israel now say; | 5 | Then would the raging waters *
have gone right over us. |
| 2 | If God had not been on our side, *
when enemies rose up against us, | 6 | Blessed be God, *
who has not given us over to be a prey for their teeth. |
| 3 | Then would they have swallowed us up alive *
in their fierce anger toward us; | 7 | We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowler;
*
the snare is broken, and we have escaped. |
| 4 | Then would the waters have overwhelmed us *
and the torrent gone over us; | 8 | Our help is in the Name of God, *
the maker of heaven and earth. |

James 5:13-20

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:38-50

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be

able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched. For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

While there have been some difficult days and weeks recently, this one has been particularly rough. We watched as, once again, a woman stepped (actually was forced) forward to tell her story and was dismissed, demeaned, and denigrated. For those of us who are survivors of sexual assault, old wounds were reopened, trauma re-experienced, and we were forced to re-live being dismissed and demeaned. And the gut wrenching thing is that it seems that this horrid cycle will just keep on going forever. That the courage of women who speak up, say no, and claim their dignity will never be rewarded. This whole sordid story, this routine dehumanization of women, is as old as time. And as old as the Bible. Time and time again in the stories we hold as sacred, women are dismissed, demeaned, denigrated. And, to be honest, there are times I just want to throw some of them out. And yet, these are our sacred texts—and we need to meet them where they are and listen for the voice of God in and beyond them, because if you look hard enough God is always there—sometimes in the parts of the story we ignore or avoid, but God is there.

This morning we have the story of Esther. The well-known story of a beautiful young woman who became Queen and used her beauty and brains to save her people. But there is another woman in the story, Vashti, whose story we never read in church. The text itself, and later the church, has treated her story as only useful as an introduction to the real story, as a dangerous memory. So who was she?

Her story begins when King Ahaseurus, who ruled a wide swath of land from Ethiopia to India, throws the biggest party the ancient world had ever seen—inviting all the ruling class from all 127 of his provinces to the fanciest blowout ever. The kicker is that this party was not to celebrate a military victory, or a birthday, or a wedding. It was just to celebrate. . . .him. . . .the King. A narcissist's dream, whose only point was to impress the whole world with just how fabulous and wealthy he was. A testosterone and alcohol infused party to which women were not invited. And on the 187th day, the King got talking about his wife, Vashti. About how much more beautiful and obedient she was than any of the other men's wives. And to prove his point, he sent for Vashti, commanding that she come to the party wearing only her crown so that everyone can "see her beauty". Yep, he commands his wife to parade naked through a room full of drunk men. And everyone knows that what the king commands, the king gets and you also know that whatever happens this is not going to end well for Vashti. Yet here is where things start to go off script and Vashti becomes the first woman in scripture to just say no. No, I will not come out and make a display of myself for your benefit. No, I will not degrade myself so that you can save face in front of your friends. No, I will not do whatever you tell me to do. That unexpected response did not go over well. The King was embarrassed, humiliated in front of all the important men of the kingdom. Worse, women all over the kingdom from Ethiopia to Persia heard that the Queen said no. And the men in the room, while at first just quietly laughing at the king's expense, suddenly had the awful thought that this one woman might set off a tidal wave of rebellion throughout the empire, with women everywhere finding the courage and realizing the power of "no". And this threat to domination, this upending of order, just could not be. They had to stop it. So the men put their heads together and came up with a plan: banish her and erase her memory.

On one level, the men are successful. Vashti disappears; there is a beauty pageant for young virgins to come and compete for the queen's title; and eventually one of them "wins": Esther is crowned queen, and we can get on with the real story of the book, Vashti and her story successfully erased from memory.

But, not so fast. There are echoes of her great NO reverberating through the Bible. Vashti may be nothing but a backdrop for Esther for all that we hear about her, but in the story she lives on in the minds of her people, the king and, most importantly, Queen Esther herself—who chooses to step forward and risk her life when all the Jews in the land are threatened with death. It dawns on her that perhaps God may have sent her, a Jew who had to hide her identity from the King, to the kingdom for "such a time as this". She speaks up and saves her people—a courageous and noble thing to do. And, as Dr. Anna Carter Florence whose words and thoughts influenced this sermon writes, I wonder if one of the things that influenced her was the courage of Queen Vashti. The realization that she was called on to have that same courage. In an age when women did not have any purpose other than being decorative and fertile, Vashti had blazed a trail. No, she said, I am more than one of your possessions. I am more than another beautiful decoration in your home. I am a human being, with integrity and self-respect, and here, I draw the line: I say no.

Esther finishes what Vashti started. Together, their story is a sacred memory of how women, or any oppressed people, can overturn a world by claiming their dignity. It is a story of how we are so connected that one injustice can lead to another; one resistance can give rise to another. And you would think that the institution that was built to follow Jesus, the ultimate rule breaker for justice and love, would love this story. But we never even hear it. Throughout the ages perhaps this story, with its clear dynamic of a woman defying a man was just too disruptive

to the way things are “supposed” to be to be heard in church. You can’t have women going around thinking and acting for themselves, right? And while I think that has an awful lot to do with why Vashti’s story has been forgotten, it is actually much more than a story about male-female dynamics, much more than a story for women looking for a role model for rebellion.

It is the story of a human being declaring that she is a human being—fully deserving of dignity. It is a story for everyone and anyone who has had her integrity called into question. It is a story for anyone who has been pressured by those who have power over them to do something they know is wrong, something that would cost them self respect. It is a story for anyone who has been in, witnessed, an unjust situation, and said NO, I cannot go along with this, I cannot do this.

What would it be like to hold this story up, to tell it to our children? Would that give them a role model for just saying no to adults who try to harm them? Would it give you and me a place to begin talking about the hundreds of awkward, troubling moments in our lives when we feel we are being asked to do something that puts our integrity at risk? Being asked at work to hide money in a fake expense account or a family member assumes that we’ll keep ignoring the addiction that’s ruining his life and ours. Things can and do happen everyday that challenge our integrity. What do we do? Do we just say no?

Oddly, the Bible doesn’t have many role models for just saying no. Jesus did put his foot down on several occasions, but we tend to think of our Christian faith in terms of saying YES—to God, to Christ, to a way of life. Maybe what we need to hear is that an equally important part of our life as Christians is finding the courage to say NO when we need to, even if it is a difficult, costly thing to do.

This story of Vashti, the King, and Esther does not have a clean and neat resolution. Vashti does not save the day with her no. By any of the world’s measures she loses. The King and his cronies take away her crown, her position, her good name. She is exiled and the backlash is a pretty harsh law about wives being subservient to their husbands. But in the eyes of God, something different is going on. Vashti’s courage inspires the next woman, and the next. Vashti’s NO becomes Esther’s NO, so that the Jews in the empire are not systematically murdered. Vashti’s example encourages women and men to speak up for themselves.

True, it does not immediately change the world. Sometimes it seems we have to take many steps backward before we begin to inch forward. And she may never have seen the fruits of her resistance. But her no sets something in motion which people remembered, which Esther remembered, which the writers of the Bible remembered, and which even the king remembered. Sometimes, we have to trust that that is enough.

I wonder how many kings of our age are waiting for a Vashti to say no. Perhaps you have or will encounter one of them. Perhaps it is even possible you have been sent to the kingdom for just such a time as this. AMEN.