

# “An Act of Protest”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – August 9, 2020*

10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Esther 1:1-22

Rev. John Wahl

We have spent this summer looking at some of the *Forgotten Books of the Bible* – five from the Old Testament that are not often read or used in Christian worship. All five, though, have a role in the celebration of Jewish festivals. This morning, we turn to the book of Esther: this unique and compelling story of a Jewish woman who is chosen to become the queen of Persia and – because of this insider position – is able to save her people from destruction. Esther is read each year during the Jewish festival of Purim, a joyous festival that commemorates this heroic act of survival.

The book of Esther is certainly unique. It is part over-the-top, slapstick comedy; part fairy-tale; with more than a little social commentary. While the title character and her uncle Mordecai are described as Jewish, there are no acts of worship described; God plays no overt role in the story and is never named.

The story is set in the court of a Persian king named Ahasuerus, who is likely a parody of an actual king of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, BC named Xerxes. There is no historical record that there was ever a Jewish queen of Persia, so Esther is probably best understood as a fictionalized account: an outlandish but inspirational story written by and for members of the Jewish diaspora – descendants of those who had been exiled from Jerusalem generations earlier – about how to survive as a minority people.

The first chapter of Esther focuses on the story of Vashti, who is Esther’s predecessor as the Persian Queen. By the end of our reading, Vashti will have been deposed as queen – exiled or, at least, locked away – which sets the stage for the search to begin for a new queen. But Vashti does not depart before exposing her husband and the empire’s tenuous hold on power.

The story opens with King Ahasuerus hosting a festival for the imperial officials from throughout the kingdom. Through this party, he “showed off the awesome riches of his kingdom and beautiful treasures as mirrors of how very great he was.” (v. 4) This celebration goes on for six months. After that, the king holds another week-long party for the people of the royal city where everyone – rich and poor alike – is invited. Everyone, that is, who is male – the queen is hosting her own party for the women.

Obviously, the king does not care much about governing; or about anything but showing off how wonderful he was. The instructions for serving wine at this second party is *no limits*. And so, after seven days of non-stop drinking with the boys, the king summons his wife because he “wanted to show off her beauty both to the general public and to his important guests.” (v. 11) She was to wear her royal crown, which some have interpreted to mean that was all she should be wearing. Clothed or not, the point is really the same – the king thought of her as an object of beauty and not as a person; her consenting to come was not a consideration.

In an act of defiance, queen Vashti refuses to come. The king could have forced her to comply with his request, but the damage to his fragile ego had already been done. As Robert Williamson put it, “At the culmination of six months of self-glorification, the king’s party ends in his public humiliation.”<sup>1</sup>

There is a Jewish tradition of Midrash which suggests that Vashti would have tried to talk her husband down from his request; or at least to wait out his wine-induced whim. She likely knew that her refusal would not go over well, but also that she could not risk her safety – and her self-esteem – in such a compromising situation.

Angry, the king calls together his trusted advisors to generate a plan. While he frames it as a legal issue, his intent is clearly a personal vendetta against the woman who shamed him in public. It’s telling that though he’s mad at his wife, he does not confront queen Vashti directly; instead seeking to learn the official procedure. Not only has his fragile ego been exposed, but he does not know what to do and needs someone else to tell him how to act.<sup>2</sup>

The advisors respond not with the laws or penalties that are already on the books, but express anxiety about how Vashti’s act of defiance might empower other women throughout the empire – including their own wives – to do the same. Her public role, and the king’s flaunting of his desire to show her off, had exposed the weakness of the existing power structure: women are supposed to obey the commands of men; wives should submit to their husbands.

Thus, the queen is put away so that Ahasuerus can find someone better; Vashti is never heard from again in this story. Based on the recommendations of his advisors, the king issues decrees that “all women shall treat their husbands properly” (v. 20) and “each husband shall rule over his own house.” (v. 22)

The question could be asked: was Vashti’s act of protest worth it? While she was able to resist entering an uncomfortable and potentially harmful situation, the price she pays is steep; she loses her position as queen and the platform she may have had to speak out further. Then again, she lived in a very different time and place than

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible*

<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*

we do today, one where the choices and rights of women were severely restricted. Vashti's defiance may have been her only chance against total submission to her husband's will. And it may have had ripple effects, as well.

While Vashti was acting for herself – claiming autonomy over her own body and her own decisions – other women in the empire would have seen or heard about her defiant act and learned that the power that men held over women was not natural law; it was not the way things should or must be. The mere fact that the men in power decided they needed to write new laws that would codify this power structure exposes its fragility. But codified laws can be challenged in ways either small or large; in protests that are highly organized or spur-of-the-moment.

And while queen Vashti may not have been aware of it, one of the women living in the Persian Empire at the time, Esther, likely would have seen or heard about this act of defiance against the power structures of the day. As we will hear next week as we continue reading the book of Esther, a search will commence to find a replacement queen. For whatever reason – whether beauty or fate or the unspoken will of God – Esther is chosen to have the same position of influence that Vashti once held; and seizes the opportunity to save her people, the Jews. It may well be that Esther could act so boldly because of the courage she gained from her predecessor.

This summer has been marked by acts of protest not seen in our country in more than 50 years. The impetus for this activism and defiance has been multi-faceted: a health crisis, racial injustice, and economic inequality. They have at times been peaceful, organized and purposeful; sometimes not. Many have been asking if the acts of protest have been worth it; whether the instances of violence and destruction outweigh the positives of free speech, awareness, and change.

And yet, it is difficult to overlook some of the disparities and inequities that this season of protest has exposed. Some – like in the fictionalized kingdom of Persia presented here in the book of Esther – are laws that were established to uphold a power structure that is simply unfair; that blatantly violate the divine principle that people of every gender and race are created equal. Other targets of protest – like police choke holds and confederate monuments – are relics from a different era that have no place in today's society. It is a matter of justice to get rid of them, even if people may differ on the methods of their removal.

Unfortunately, the book of Esther has been used by some as justification for supporting unjust systems of power: noting that while Vashti defies the king's orders, and is banished from her position for doing so; Esther instead plays by the established rules and successfully saves her people.<sup>3</sup> This erroneously labels patriarchy – the power structure of that day – as a universal and biblical truth. But a more critical and

---

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, "Read Distraction Free"

faithful reading of the bible shows that God – and, for us as Christians, the gospel of Jesus Christ – teaches us to seek justice for all people. Human laws are not innately just; they must be evaluated in context of their particular time and place.

And so, whether her protest was successful or not; whether or not she could understand the long-term effects of her resistance; we can still appreciate the character and courage of queen Vashti's refusal to parade herself for the king. Notable women such as Harriet Beecher Stowe – the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – and suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton have praised Vashti's standing up for women's rights.<sup>4</sup> As we are all aware of – when we look through the list of our nation's 45 male presidents or when we hear these biblical passages about women submitting to men – patriarchy has not completely disappeared. There is still a place for more acts of protest; and for all of us – male and female – to lift women up.

And, as we will see when we turn to Esther's story next week, it is fitting that we should appreciate the way that she also acted on behalf of others, even given the existing power structures of her day. While different, hers is a story of resistance as well; an act of protest which reveals that the way of justice sometimes stands at odds with the way things are.

People of God, our protests may seem small; but when we act on behalf of others; when we treat all people – no matter who they are – with justice and compassion; when we speak up or out against inequality; when we lend those who are struggling our solidarity; we are following in Jesus' way. Matthew 25 people are those who are recognized by feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned, and healing the sick. Rather than tearing each other down – whether by our actions or our inaction – we are called to build each other up, until all are treated as children equal in the eyes of their loving God. Amen.

---

<sup>4</sup> Allen Robert Ginsburg, "Breaking Free of the Vashti/Esther Complex"