

# Faces of Our Faith: Queen Vashti

Esther 1



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Given that the book of Esther is featured only one Sunday in the three-year lectionary cycle that we usually use to determine our scripture lessons and that the particular passages featured on that Sunday are about Queen Esther and not Queen Vashti, I grew up knowing next to nothing about Queen Vashti. As a young girl, I had not learned the story about this woman who said no to a king. Merry with wine, the King of Persia summoned her to come before all the men who have been drinking and partying with him over the past 187 days. His motive is clear: he wants to crown the final day of his party by showing off his beautiful queen. Queen Vashti refuses. We are not told why she refuses to come before all these rowdy and drunken men. Her reasons or rationale are not relayed. They seem not to be the important thing to the eunuchs who were sent to fetch her or to the king. That she said no, and that she did so while his whole world was watching, is what matters to the king. That alone is what he and his counselors react to.

So angry and humiliated is the king that he immediately turns to his seven legal counselors about what to do. One of them, Memucan, says, “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.” Suddenly what began as a personal dispute has mushroomed into a political crisis. Suddenly the king is not the only man who is humiliated by Vashti’s “no;” every man in the empire has been offended. By interpreting Vashti’s “no” as a crime against every male in the empire, Memucan can deflect the focus away from the king and suddenly create a national crisis.

What happens next? A law is rushed through legislature, and as is the nature of law, it is meant to address not just one woman who said “no,” but every woman in the empire. Letters are sent “to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.”

It seems a bit excessive, doesn’t it? In fact, “excess” seems to be the operative word in this story from the book of Esther. Everything seems to be over-the-top: the size, scope, splendor, décor, and 187-day duration of the king’s party. By exaggeration or not, the point of the party was to display the king’s immense wealth and power. The proclivity toward excess is also reflected in what follows in chapter 2. After Queen Vashti is dismissed from her position, *all* the beautiful young virgins of the empire are herded into the harem so that the king can choose *one* to be queen. Then, an entire year of cosmetic treatments, oil of myrrh, and perfumes is required to prepare her for one night in the royal bedroom.

That excessiveness would characterize their legislation too, I guess, shouldn’t be too surprising. It is already reflected in the king’s earlier edict regarding drinking. Verse 8 says, “Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.” Even the personal decision to drink excessively was to be regulated by edict. This was the world in which God’s people found themselves. And it was in this world, where excess went unchecked, that Queen Vashti says no.

As we know from recent news, when it comes to the use of our tax money, excessive spending on some things is still viewed critically and has consequences. But usually, when our tax dollars are

not involved, we think of excessiveness as being a matter of taste and decorum, and therefore, we hesitate to be overly critical or judgmental. So, on my recent trip to Italy, I often withheld remarks about the Baroque décor of so many churches and palaces.

What we need to keep in mind, however, is that excess is not just about material excess. Excess can also show up when power is unbridled, unquestioned, unchecked. And that is when excess can become dangerous. When all the power is held by some and not shared with everyone, excessive behaviors of those in power often go unchecked. This has been made apparent in the #MeToo movement, which began in 2017 but is a response to a very long history in which men have been permitted such an excess of power.

I was reminded of this long history when, during our recent vacation in Italy, Michael, Sophia and I visited many Catholic churches built during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. In the chapels of these churches, I encountered friezes, statues, and sometimes relics of martyred saints who lived in Roman times. Among them were those of Saint Agatha and Saint Agnes. Both were young women who came from well-to-do families. They were just 12 or 13 years old when they had to learn to say “no.” According to the stories, because of their beauty, they were relentlessly pursued and offered marriage by powerful men. Refusing to marry and desiring to devote their lives instead as “brides of Christ,” they were punished, tortured, violated, publicly humiliated, imprisoned, and burned at the stake. For their martyrdom, they were beatified by the church, Agatha the patron saint of rape victims and Agnes the patron saint of young girls.

Excess can be dangerous, and to say “no” in the face of it can have serious consequences. Sometimes the consequences are not just personal, but also political. For saying no, not only did Queen Vashti lose her royal position, but all the women in the empire were made to suffer as well. It is not so simple to just say no. What can help is a sense of solidarity, the sense that other people have your back. And yet, a problem with solidarity, when it becomes politicized, is that it too can silence diverse voices, voices that need to be heard in order for a truer picture, a less one-sided or two-sided picture, to emerge. When, for the sake of solidarity, critique is not allowed and what one knows personally to be true, within one’s conscience, is shut out, that is when efforts to be in solidarity can become toxic. It is a problem not unfamiliar to people who have been part of a group to whom they feel loyalty and yet about whom they have critiques.

I have been thinking a lot about this problem since my trip to Israel and Palestine last April. Before, during, and after this trip, which was designed for Jewish and Christian clergy, I wondered both silently and aloud what role the Christian clergy were to play. Why were we invited, and what value could we add? As much as I learned, was enriched by, and took away from the trip, I wondered what value my presence and the presence of other Christian ministers added. I am beginning to think that perhaps one of the ways we added value was in helping to create a space, an alternate space, in which personal perspectives - perspectives that may have been held and wrestled mostly within one’s personal conscience, could be voiced aloud. A space such as this, I learned, is valuably different from the public arena and from the sphere of Jewish solidarity. As I experienced it, the space we formed together gave rabbis room to experiment in giving voice to the vulnerabilities of the Jewish people, the moral vulnerabilities of the state of Israel, and the moral ambiguities of their history over land without as much worry that what they said would be leveraged, exploited, or used against them.

As seriously troubling as the conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinians is, this trip gave me a deeper sense of hope because it exposed to me, it opened up to me, whole other arenas - arenas that are not toxic - in which persons are authentically and whole-heartedly wrestling with

their consciences, giving voice to their self-critiques as well as their critiques of others, and, as a result, piecing together a fuller picture of what true reconciliation would require.

We might worry that such alternate arenas are not really the arenas that count. We might think that the political arena, no matter how toxic or because it may be toxic, is the one that matters the most for a visible Christian witness. We might even be under the impression that, unless we work in the most visible of ways, God is not at work. What the book of Esther teaches us is the same lesson that Jesus teaches us: that the kingdom of God is like the growth of a mustard seed or like the work of leaven. God's kingdom starts small and grows in hidden and effective ways. Not once in the whole book of Esther, including the story of Vashti, is God named. Instead, God works invisibly behind the scenes. And thank God for that, because step by step, we do not know where one act will lead. When Queen Vashti said no in the face of the king's excessive power, and thus lost her position, her singular act may have looked like a futile dead end not just for her, but for all women. After all, we never hear about her again, and in the very next chapter, a new queen, Esther, is selected completely again by the power of the king. But as time reveals, the removal of Vashti makes way for the emergence of Esther, and, over time, Queen Esther emerges as a character whose actions are the antithesis of excessiveness and the epitome of measured proportionality. It is with this measured approach that Esther saves her people.

The story of Vashti is a critique of excess, excess of all kinds, especially of power. By saying no in the face of such excessiveness, Queen Vashti sets the stage for the person of Esther who learns to use the limited power she acquires as queen with measured proportionality. Though the story of Esther is not told in order to lift up a model of Christian witness or of faithful living for all times and places, it does nevertheless propose something worthy of consideration. There is something about refraining from excess, about being measured and proportional in our actions that I think is required in living faithfully in God's world. For if we truly trust in God's sovereignty, that God is working in all things, great and small, in every arena, then shouldn't we pay attention to and proportionally match our responses to what God is doing? It's a question, not an answer. Something for us to think about.