

***When You're Living in a Man's World and a Woman is Your Only Hope***  
*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on July 5, 2026*  
*based on Esther 1:1-13, 15-22*

The scripture set for this morning by the Narrative Lectionary you use here at St. Andrew's is the concluding chapter of the book of Esther; the chapter where the evil civil servant named Haman gets what's coming to him. I read it and, spoiler alert: he gets impaled. Pretty gruesome.

The revenge Esther's family and people get from that may be satisfying to a degree, but it doesn't bring out the best in us. It's not the best text for a sermon, so I decided pretty quickly to pass on it. Instead, I decided to have us go back to the beginning. Back to chapter one because I think it's totally fascinating and often overlooked.

First, though, let's recap the gist of Pastor Amy's sermon from last week so we are all on the same page. Some of you may have missed that one.

The king of Persia fires his first queen, Vashti, for being uppity, and they hire, Esther, who's Jewish.

Now, Haman who eventually gets executed as I said, doesn't know Esther is Jewish, which is ironic because he hates Jews and wants to rid the kingdom of them. Esther's older cousin, Mordecai gets wind of this and sends word to his cousin, now queen, asking her to appeal to her husband, the king, to spare the Jews.

Esther messages Mordecai back saying, "Please find someone else." She adds that she'd rather ride under the king's radar, remain a quiet, passive consort because intervening this way would be too risky.

This is where Mordecai writes her a reply, saying, "Don't imagine that because you are part of the king's household you will be the one Jew who will escape this genocide. If you keep quiet at this time, liberation and protection for the Jews will appear from another source, while you and your father's household will perish. In fact, it may very well be that you have achieved royal status for such a time as this!"

Now that was the core of Pastor Amy's excellent sermon. This week I want to give the king's first wife her due. Even though Queen Vashti is gone from the narrative by the end of chapter 1, her shadow looms over the rest of the book.

The king (his name is Ahasuerus) has just the one Queen, but he has a vast array of concubines, and he sends for them according to whatever whim drives him of a given evening. Well, when his favor eventually settles on Queen Vashti she sends word back that she'd rather sleep in her own bed in her wing of the palace, "thank you very much."

Fact is, she draws a line in the Persian sand; she makes a conscious decision for a reason that is not stated, She says, "No. Not tonight" knowing full-well it can lead to a ton of trouble for her. In fact, it leads to her banishment. At least she keeps her head.

Anyway, a conventional reading of the story sees Vashti only as a plot device meant to set up the rest of the narrative in which Esther is the protagonist.

I mean, this is a folk tale and like any folk tale, most of the characters are merely two dimensional. The king, for instance, is a stock character king. He's narcissistic, pleasure driven, self-indulgent, simple-minded, easily manipulated by his evil first minister.

To see Vashti as a willful, easily dismissible lever for this story is acceptable if one kind of skims the story, thinking it's only a folk-tale, but the story is more complex than that.

And, you know, looking closely, Vashti won't leave us alone.

What occurs to me is that to dismiss her as the perfect foil for Esther is not just unkind, it's inaccurate and a disservice to women everywhere.

I mean, to see Vashti as a kind of diva and Esther as merely passive and submissive -- the perfect king's wife, is to be complicit in every bad thing that men have ever inflicted on women since the dawn of time.

So let me pick the narrative up where I left off. Queen Vashti refuses to go to the king's chambers when summoned.

The king's first minister says, "Get rid of her, we'll find you a new Queen." Vashti is banished and an IQ test is given to all the women in the kingdom to identify the smartest among them. Just kidding.

No, you guessed it, a beauty contest is held, inviting women from all over the kingdom to apply.

They set up a runway and Esther, a diaspora Jew who hides her ethnicity, is chosen, based on her looks alone. You see what kind of a "man's world" we are dealing with here.

So, that being the background of the story, how does one preach this without throwing Vashti under the bus? Well, I think you do this by asking some important questions. You give Vashti her due. You at least ask the question, what has led her to say a flat, "No," to the king's summons?

Did something happen during a previous encounter with her king? Did she finally wake up and say, "A woman's life has to amount to more than this," or, "Being a queen has to amount to more than this," or, how about – "Being a *woman* has to amount to more than this."

In any case, we need to wake up and admit that when Vashti chooses to **say** a flat "No" to her husband's summons, she is putting her fragile life on the line.

What I am trying to get at here is that Esther is not the only person in the story to have an existential crisis and say those words, "If I perish, I perish."

Remember how that played out. Esther's cousin, Mordecai said, "You've got to go to the king. See if he loves you enough to stop the evil plot of Haman to murder all the Jews living in his empire." Esther first says, "No, find someone more suitable." Then when Mordecai says, "Our only hope is you, my dear," she decides to put caution aside and takes the risk of walking unsummoned into the royal presence which she knows can seem presumptuous and lead to her execution.

Well, Queen Vashti did the same thing when whatever was eating her up inside made her say to the king, "No," or "Not tonight."

Now, the upshot of her refusal is more than her banishment. Vashti's refusal sends shockwaves through the empire. If the King's wife dares say "No" to him, what will the wives of common Persian men say to their husbands? Horror of horrors, right?

By the final verse of Chapter 1 an urgent alert is sent to all of King Ahasuerus's subjects reminding them in no uncertain terms that "every man must be king of his own castle."

See what is at stake here? This is a very old folk tale – it's mostly told as entertainment. But you know, the same struggle we see fictionalized here in the Book of Esther, written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE is happening in this country in 2026. I mean, just this month there are people calling for women to give up their right to vote. Seriously, they're being asked to consider letting their husbands represent them in the ballot box.

More fundamentally, a question is being posed to our culture: "Do women exist only to please men?" That is the subtext of the larger question: Should women have any say in the control of their own bodies?

Let me hurry to note that genocide is central to the narrative of Esther, but the subtext about women and their bodies should not be ignored.

So let's look at the basics of the story. What we know about Vashti is this. Like her successor, Esther, she is very beautiful. Unlike her successor, she definitely has a mind of her own. Finally, we know that she knows how to plan a really good party. Hold that thought, it will be important later.

Here's what we know about Esther as the story opens. On the face of it, she appears to be the perfect king's wife, at least by ancient Persian standards. Totally submissive. The reflexive use of the Hebrew word "LaKaKH" is constantly applied to her. She is "taken" in by Mordechai as a foster daughter. She is "taken" to the king's harem, and, she is "taken" before the king. She's not her own person; at least as the story opens.

Even after she is crowned queen, we are told that Esther continues to obey the commands of her guardian Mordechai as she had done as an adolescent. It is no surprise that King Ahasuerus approves of Esther.

She is the model of docility. He obviously sees her as a welcome antidote to Vashti.

But the crisis that arises in the realm, when Mordecai reveals the genocidal plot to Esther, is where everything in the story turns. She is caught between conflicting obediences: will she choose to obey her guardian, Mordecai, or her husband, the king.

In this moment of crisis, Esther looks into a mirror and discovers that she does *not* look very different from Vashti, after all.

A cursory reading might surmise that she merely sides with her guardian. But that's not exactly true. As things play out we see that Esther takes matters into her own hands and what does she do? She decides to stand up to both sources of male authority. If you look at the story closely you will see that Esther assumes control of Mordechai's plan to save the Jews. In crucial ways she amends it as she sees fit.

Like Vashti, she will appear before the king only when she decides that the time is right. In this case it's after three days of fasting. Instead of following Mordechai's suggestion to simply show up in the king's court and make her petition, she decides to throw a series of small dinner parties as Vashti had done when *she* was queen.

So, ironically, in order to succeed, Esther takes on aspects of her predecessor, the repudiated former queen; she borrows tactics from her.

However, it's clear that Esther is more calculated, and more subtle, than Vashti. In fact, she out-Vashtis her, which is a delicious touch in the story for those who read it on its own terms. She takes her time and charms the king and his minister, Haman, like a Mata Hari.

But Vashti's is clearly the inspiration for Esther's transformation.

It reminds me of the fact that a huge part of maturation has to do with modeling ourselves after others; those special people we are drawn to, especially when we are young. I'm thinking here of heroes who help us explore and challenge our personal boundaries.

When I was casting around for contemporary models of Vashti and her protege, Esther, I thought of former congresswoman, Liz Cheney as a Vashti, and Marjorie Taylor Greene as the Esther.

Are you surprised? They may not have occurred to you in this case, but, you know, Liz Cheney went way out on a limb, separating herself from the MAGA crowd, and then, Marjorie Taylor Greene, following her lead, did the same thing in order to not abandon the victims of Jeffrey Epstein.

We are talking here about a thing called moral courage. Let me ask you if you remember a young woman named, Rachel Corrie. Rachel Corrie was a young martyr. She was the 25 year-old woman from Olympia, Washington who in 2003 single-handedly tried to save a Palestinian family's house from being bulldozed by the Israeli military in the West Bank. Wearing a florescent orange jacket, she was killed on the spot by a tractor doing demolition.

When I was pastor of the Presbyterian church in Ashland we hosted her parents who still, today, will go anywhere to share their daughter's amazing story.

Now, I happen to be the father of a very spirited and principled daughter, so it was sobering for me to hear Rachel's parents honor their daughter's courage.

The thing that hit me the hardest was when her mother told us that when she was raising her three tiny daughters she had begun to keep a diary so she could write down some of the amazing things they said every day. But here's the rub. She didn't have the energy to do that with any regularity.

She said that parenting was so exhausting she often fell asleep before they did. That's just the way it is for moms and dads sometimes.

Anyway, one morning Rachel, aged two, said something her mother just had to write down in her journal – she said. “Momma, is “brave” part of growing up?” There it is. Sometimes that kind of thing just appears in a child from the beginning.

Maybe Vashti was a Rachel Corrie. Maybe being courageous just came naturally to her. Well, it didn't come naturally to Esther, but she had a Vashti to inspire and teach her.

In life we explore and challenge our boundaries. If we are healthy, it goes on our whole life long. Let me encourage us all to reexamine whom we emulate and from whom we shy away.

What am I saying here? Well, if you think you aren't cut-out to stand up to tyranny, racism, child abuse, misogyny, the story of Esther says, "Think again." Think again.

Esther's story also reminds us that the struggle women have over who controls their lives has been going on a very long time and the battle has not been won. Yet. That war is currently a pitched battle. I mean the women's revolution is still in its infant stage.

So let me ask, what are you doing to further the cause? Let me put it another way. What are you saying to the children in your circle about this struggle. Your children, or your grandchildren. Your nieces, nephews. Are you behaving as if the success or failure of it is up to you in some large or small or even tiny way? I hope so.

Don't forget -- Esther first said, "Who am I to stand up to evil?" Later on when the spirit of her predecessor, Vashti wouldn't let her rest she revised her answer and said, "Who are am I NOT to stand up and speak my mind?"

Thanks be to God,

Amen