

Kate Heinzl, pastor UMC

Esther 1 condensed

This happened in the days of Ahasuerus (pronounced Aha'-sue-rus - sounds like a sneeze), the same Ahasuerus (now known as King A) who ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia. In those days when King A. sat on his royal throne in the citadel of Susa (the capital of the Persian Empire), in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his officials and ministers. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were present while he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all.

When these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of marble. Drinks were served in golden goblets and the royal wine was lavished in accordance with the bounty of the king. 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. Furthermore, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for the women in the palace.

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who attended him, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Then the king consulted the sages who knew the laws, asking: 'According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of the King conveyed by the eunuchs?' One said in the presence of the king and the officials, '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 A. 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 A. 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! If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King A; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.'

This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as proposed; he sent letters 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.

I believe in the power of No.

I have lived more under the “little engine that could” mantra. Yes, I can do this. Yes, I will do this. That attitude has been very helpful. It requires courage and perseverance. Yes - I think I can, I *think* I can, I think I CAN. But for many years there was very little discernment about the wisdom of Yes, I CAN do this.

Yes comes pretty easily for me - Yes, I want to engage, to learn, to be a part of things. And that can come at a cost. Sometimes it's easier to say Yes than to say No.

When I don't say no, and it's out of a sense of fear - I often end up feeling bits of resentment. (EXAMPLE). Said - *yes, I can make that gathering, even if it's on my day off and I had other plans.* What kept me from saying No? Fear of rejection? Fear of not being liked?

Saying no, a purposeful no - not just an 'I don't feel like it, no, not now'. This NO takes a much different type of courage than saying Yes.

In our scripture today, Vashti refused to submit to the power of her husband, and cultural expectation. She risked big time - likely knowing she might be killed for saying No to the king.

But I wonder what she gained by saying no? Did she stand straighter? Did she have a clearer vision for who she was, regardless of the consequences?

When have I said a Holy No?

“*Are you wasting your life?*” That was the question my spiritual director asked me when I was feeling burned out and yet trying to stay in a job even though it was taking a toll on me. Could I say No to everyone who told me I had the dream job? Could I listen to the inner guide and say 'No' - no, I can't stay here? I did. It was hard, but not as hard as I had told myself it would be. Those inner voices can sometimes keep us scared. I had to say No to family who questioned my decision, and No to the inner voices that wanted to play it safe. It was a Holy No, a courageous No, and eventually I was able to see how it was absolutely the right choice.

I believe in a Holy no, and I believe in a Holy yes. The power of yes we will see in Esther - there's a big risk in saying Holy Yes - Esther risked her life; Mary, the virgin betrothed to Joseph, said Yes to the Spirit, risking everything.

The Bible has many examples of both holy yes and a holy no. The midwives who helped shepherd Moses into the world, said no to power. Moses' mother said no to power by hiding him, taking a risk to save his life.

Mordecai will also say “NO” to bowing down before Haman.

These Holy No's - seem to often be justice oriented. They require that we are rooted in a belief, have faith in something bigger than ourselves.

In working on this sermon, I've realized that these justice oriented Holy No's are more aspirational for me than real. I WANT to live out this no, and yet am often too scared to do so.

HUMBLING! I have examples of personal 'No's' but I couldn't come up with any actual examples of my taking a stand, saying NO, to something that was truly risky for me. Not even symbolic ones.

I have wanted to kneel, wanted to kneel during the singing of the national anthem, But I haven't. It's felt complicated, like I'd be mis-understood, like I'd draw hateful attention, and yet I've WANTED to do it - as a protest against the violence our government is a part of on a daily basis.

That's just a small personal example. Realizing that this is more aspirational than actual makes me pause. I have been so MAD at elected officials lately - take a stand, say NO I yell when I listen to recent podcasts or read the news. JUST SAY NO!!!

Wow.

Saying a public No - do I have what it takes?

Last Monday about 8 of us gathered at the Gates for our Monday evening peace vigil. We've been lighting candles and standing in protest of the violence in Gaza since October 2023. Our signs, a bit faded and tattered, that say things like “Send bread, not bombs” and “Let Gaza live” feel more relevant now than ever.

We occasionally have folks come up and ask questions, asking about what we're doing. This week, a person came straight towards us. Walking purposefully - he didn't look particularly friendly or sympathetic to our cause. I felt fear course through me for a moment. Is violence approaching? Can I stand firm?

He came close, didn't say anything, and turned away. Who knows what was on his mind.

Saying “no”, resistance, can come in many forms. There is irony woven throughout the book of Esther - Irony can be a form of resistance, quietly challenging the norms of power.

We're told Vashti was not sentenced to death, not banished from the kingdom, the writer simply says: “Vashti is never again to come before King A” and her position is given to another. Sounds like a win for Vashti!

The king's officials are trying to put fear in the hearts of all the women in the land, and to prop up the men, so that he "should be master in his house" and yet I wonder how the women heard this decree. Did they secretly rejoice for V? Look what she got away with? Did it give them permission to say "no" in smaller ways?

Some commentaries say she lost everything, I guess there are different ways of reading what it means to be banished from his presence. Did it mean banished from the kingdom?

I love these stories that leave something up to the imagination - leave space for alternative ways of understanding. The rulers, all men, saw their decree one way. How was it viewed by the women of the community?

My lack of big no's has me wondering about living into small ways of saying a purposeful, courageous No.

Our society, especially since COVID, has become more free in saying "no". I both celebrate that and at times feel very frustrated by them!

But Holy No's are different - they have a yes embedded in them. Even when they're small.

Vashti's NO was rooted in an unspoken YES that must have sustained her. A yes that told her enough was enough. A yes that knew that to truly live, she needed to risk her life.

We'll hear Esther say no - a no based on fear; a no that was challenged and turned into a Yes.

I'm going to continue to look for the places I say Yes, or say nothing, when a No is the courageous, faith-filled answer. I want to practice saying a HOLY NO, in small ways, so that if the time comes, I'm ready.

Thank you, Vashti, for teaching me what it means to stand up to power and do the right thing.

CONTINUE with confession and communion...

Confession: VT #894

Leader: O Prince of Peace, from peace that is no peace,
from the grip of all that is evil, from a violent righteousness...

People: deliver us.

Leader: From paralysis of will, from lies and misnaming, from terror of truth...

People: deliver us.

Leader: From hardness of heart, from trading in slaughter, from the worship of death...

People: deliver us.

(silence)

Leader: By the folly of your gospel, by your choosing our flesh,
by your nakedness and pain...

People: heal us.

Leader: By your weeping over the city, by your refusal of the sword,
by your facing of horror...

People: heal us.

Leader: By your bursting from the tomb, by your coming in judgment,
by your longing for peace...

People: heal us.

All: Grant us peace. Amen.

Communion

Bread - Evelyn B to make

Communion servers - Tim/Carmen and Joel/???

END with song