

*Texts: Esther 1:1-22 Vashti Deposed*

*Theme: Who's in Charge Here?*

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; Aug 2, 2020, Online; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,  
Amen.

This year our church, the ELCA remembers 50 years of the ordination of women, 40 years for women of color, and 10 years for LGBT people as pastors and deacons. So many congregations have been blessed by having these leaders. Some of you were here in those days. From some of those who participated in breaking those barriers, I've heard stories, of the struggle and worry of those, like one of my dear seminary professors, the Rev. Dr. Norma Cook Everist, who in 1980, at the ten year anniversary, spoke about the fear that existed among the early group of Lutheran female clergy. *They were unsure that it would last.* Still, they took a step forward and made a place in the church that would not have existed if not for their little moments of faithful resistance. Fifty years later, we can look back and give thanks for leaders like Pastor Emily Wilhide, who served here at Reformation, Pastor Marta Poling-Schmidt, who has served this church for over 30 years, with congregations, our Grand Canyon Synod, and the ELCA churchwide organization. Here in Las Vegas, we have been blessed and served by dedicated pastors like Rev. Lois Shuart, Carolyn Arness, Rev. Diane Drach-Meinel, and pastors currently serving in other cities like Pastor Kathy Morris, Pastor Stephanie Johnson, Pastor Jennifer Zahnow and so many more. Our current bishop, Deborah Hutterer, is the first female bishop in our synod. They are ones who have persevered in their calling even in the face of insults, aggression, and unnamed indignities, and proclaimed the Word of God over us. I have heard the stories of church members crossing to the other side of the communion line to avoid being served by a

female pastor. Pastors and deacons in this church have shrugged off compliments and criticisms of their physical appearances, family choices, and more.

The roots of patriarchy run deep. This week, we may hear of the name of the person who will run for the office of Vice President on the Democratic ticket. The presumptive nominee Joe Biden has committed that a woman will be in that role. So already, those who make guesses about such things, speculate about whether this will help or hurt Biden's chances of being elected. The truth is for some, this will be a barrier. Some among us still struggle with the idea of women in power. And it's not just men. A recent study noted that *40 percent of women* would not be comfortable with a woman in charge.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Esther raises up this issue, even before the appearance in the story of the title character. In the Hebrew Bible, Esther is a book that explains the festival of Purim, and the celebration of the victory over Haman, the King's adviser, who sought to destroy the Jewish people. In it we find political intrigue, humor, exaggerations - so I guess it is a lot like our experience of politics in the news. Today we hear of King Ahasuerus who represents the actual ruler of the Persian empire, King Xerxes. The King has celebrated with his officials and nobles and soldiers for six months. Then, after that party was over, he decided to throw another week-long bash for all the residents of the city of Susa. And while all the men partied on one side, Queen Vashti held an event for all the women elsewhere in the palace. This was some serious partying - there were white cotton curtains, purple linens, silver and gold couches, marble and mother of pearl. Do you get the idea? This was excessive. The men at the feast had been drinking

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/half-us-men-uncomfortable-with-female-political-leaders\\_n\\_5dd30b73e4b0263fbc993674](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/half-us-men-uncomfortable-with-female-political-leaders_n_5dd30b73e4b0263fbc993674)

wine by the pitcher for 7 days, and the King was showing off his fancy stemware, his lavish decorations, and all his shiny possessions, when he decides to call Queen Vashti to appear before them, “wearing the royal crown.”

The drunken King doesn't just go and command the Queen himself, of course, he has people for that. He sent the eunuchs of the court, and if you don't know what that means, just know that they are men, *who have been made* to be unable to have children, and serve the royal house without threat of taking over power. For this reason, they are the ones that can go over to the women's feast and give the order to Vashti to come over, wearing the crown. Well, Queens wear crowns, right? That doesn't seem to be odd, unless like some scholars, we read this to assume she is to wear the crown and nothing else. Ahasuerus seems to order up his wife, to present herself for the entertainment of the men at the banquet in a display of the power of the King.

And she said no.

In that moment at least, Vashti was free. The Queen was liberated from a life of following the King's demands and briefly in control of her future. But as is the case most often, this act of self determination would have consequences. The Queen refused the command. This was unheard of, and of course something had to be done. There were laws against refusing the King, and the Queen was not an exception to the law. So, the king has to sober up a little, consult with the experts, and find out just what to do about this grave insult. But again, he can't just go and give a decree without consulting with the “sages who knew the laws,” who speak the real reason this offense must be dealt with. “This deed of the queen will be made known to all women, causing *them* to look with contempt on their husbands.” If this Queen is allowed to stand up for herself, then

all women might try to do the same. The precarious power held by the King and the noble elite, enforced by the military, upheld by a populace satiated by wine and food, would be under threat if a woman dared to disobey a man.

Vashti boldly steps into a new role here. Pastor Robert Williamson, Jr., writes that, “the king’s advisers - not the wisest lot - certainly understood the potential of her action to empower the women of the empire. It’s safe to assume she did, too.”<sup>2</sup> She knew what she was doing. Rather than be a queen who lords power over others, she takes a turn as advocate for other women - for all women. No longer content to play the passive wife of the monarch, she takes the lead.

Queen Vashti’s actions only momentarily upset the balance of power, and the result is that she is no longer welcome in the presence of the king - she is deposed as Queen and cast out, making room for another to take her title.

The news of numerous attempts to wield power over women is everywhere, even in our time. We hear it with the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, founded by queer women of color, and just last week stories of male congressional representatives using gender to curse their females colleagues. In many of these instances, men in powerful positions have found themselves indicted by their appalling behavior around women. This push against females in leadership seems to come from fear of males losing their own power. What should we fear? In acts of faithful resistance, women across the ages have stood up to assert their dignity, their personhood, and to name the injustice of powerful men abusing those they find inferior by their words and deeds. We should always honor them.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible: Recovering the Five Scrolls for Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 143.

To stand up for oneself does have consequences. To speak truth to power will invite persecution, retaliation, and condemnation. In voicing opposition to the standard way of things, one may bring about their own suffering. God who took on flesh, who invited fishermen and tax collectors to follow him, Jesus, whose own ministry was supported by women and those marginalized by the polite and powerful, found death on a cross. Yet, this moment, like Vashti's moment, like our own little moments, opened a way to deliverance, to healing, and a new reality.

Vashti's actions, even though they've been deemed criminal and written into the law books, cannot be taken back. What's done is done. Those who come after her will know that there is another way to exist. Perhaps they will no longer be beholden to the whims of the powerful. They will no longer tolerate abuse at the hands of men with titles. They will find a way to survive, to thrive, to open the door for more freedom, and for the seeds of *liberation* to take root.

This is only the first chapter of the book of Esther. The story is just beginning. In the celebration of the festival of Purim, this story is read aloud, and the assembly roars with laughter to drown out the elite male voices, together asserting the sovereignty of the Holy Divine who fights for the oppressed, who delivers, who preserves dignity and saves all who suffer at the hands of the powerful. Letting all who hear the story - where God is not directly mentioned - know who's really in charge.

We can look at the news and shudder over most of what we see, and long for the way it used to be, or we can trust the Spirit of God is still moving, still making everything new, still calling new voices to speak truth and proclaim eternal life for our sake. Jesus tells his friends, "The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are

tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant” (Matt. 20:25-26). Men are not granted a birthright to be lord over those who have entrusted them with power. Women, like the first ones at the tomb on the day of resurrection, among their many gifts - have voices that are powerful, and are wise and vulnerable and strong and resilient in ways that I will never fully understand. In Christ Jesus, we are all one, and we have all been called and commanded by our true Lord to serve one another, in boldness, in faith, in charity and love.

The Spirit is breathing new life into us and into the world, and this newness is uncomfortable. There will be hardships. There will be suffering. But as we faithfully put our trust in God who breaks boundaries, we will continue to catch glimpses of what it looks like to be a part of that great assembly in the beloved kin-dom.

Amen.