

A Word Before the Powers: No
 Esther 1:1-2:4
 The First Sunday in Lent, (March 9) 2025
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What does it take to say “No!” when everyone else is saying “Yes”? Hannah Arendt who studied why people, otherwise normal and perhaps even moral in their personal lives, went along with the Nazi Holocaust. She wrote, “It is in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power. Such power can only be secured if literally all men, without a single exception are reliably dominated in every aspect of their life” (*Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 456).

So, what does it take to say “No” to such totalitarian control? Arendt’s study was about “men.” I know, I know Arendt was using the old masculine word for all humans. But still, based on our Bible reading today, we need to ask about why all “men” in a gender specific way cooperate with totalitarian control? Perhaps women, at least some women, resist such totalitarian control. Our story today is about one woman who was a single exception to domination and control.

This morning, I’m departing from the lectionary on this first Sunday in Lent, to highlight this remarkable story from the book of Esther, about this extraordinary woman, Queen Vashti. My guess is that most of you have not heard of her – unless you were at Children’s Camp last summer.

Our story begins with Persian King Xerxes the Great, throwing what was probably the biggest party ever given in the ancient world. And when I say “party,” we’re not talking about a nice dinner party in black tie and formal gowns. We’re not talking about a big fiesta, even. Xerxes puts on a great, big drunken brawl,

with no one but himself serving as host. We're talking about one hundred and eighty-seven days – six months – of straight debauchery.

Xerxes was called the Great for a reason. This is the Persian king, who in the 5th century BCE, invaded Greece and defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae before eventually being defeated by the Greeks at the naval battle of Salamis. He's called "the Great" because he ruled lands from Ethiopia to India. Xerxes liked being called "the Great" and so he decided to gather all the provincial officials, governors, and princes from the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces and put on a party that would impress them all that Xerxes was indeed the greatest. He wanted to show-off that his palaces were the greatest, his city of Susa was the greatest, his food and drink were the greatest, and he figured if he could get everyone drunk and stuffed with rich food for six months that might qualify him as the greatest of all time at partying. So that's what he did: the king invited his workers to leave their posts for about half a year and come party in the capitol of Babylon, Susa. There was no agenda except to gorge and drink and be impressed, which they did and were. And after six months of that, the king decided this wasn't enough; more people needed to be impressed and he brought in fresh recruits. The entire capitol city was invited to come for a final seven days of royal display; and, as the text says, the whole town drank by the flagons, without restraint, for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired.

After blowing tax dollars on endless partying, rounds of golf in gold plated chariots and showing off everything he can think of, the king decides that he has not yet displayed everything he owns; he has not yet shown the hordes his wife. That would be a fun thing! Bear in mind that in those days no one--and I mean no one--was allowed to look at the king's wives (and yes, there were many of them) except the king and his eunuchs, who were, as you can imagine, no threat at all.

But this is a king who likes to be called “the Great” and likes to impress, orders his servants to bring him the ravishing Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, so that everyone can “see her beauty” -- which means, basically, that he wants Vashti to come out wearing only her crown; nothing else. The king wants all these men who have spent six months eating the king’s food and drinking the king’s wine to take a good, long look at the king’s wife, as only the king can see her, and to remember that this is one thing they cannot have.

I love scholar and preacher Anna Carter Florence’s comment when she said, “Even though the atmosphere is as charged with testosterone as any you will ever find”, when the King orders the Queen to come, Vashti says “No!” “No, I will not come out and make a display of myself for your benefit. No, I will not degrade myself so that you can save face in front of your friends. No, I will not do whatever you tell me to do. And I most emphatically will not do it when you have been drunk for one hundred and eighty-seven days.”

The king’s reaction is predictable. He is enraged and humiliated in front of all the most powerful men of the kingdom. The story spreads. Women in Persia and Media hear of it; women in Ethiopia and India learn of how Queen Vashti just said no to the king. They decide to give it a try. Soon, men who may have been snickering at the king in the throne room are no longer snickering. They find that Queen Vashti’s example has let loose a tidal wave of rebellion among the women of the empire. Noble ladies everywhere are discovering great potential in just saying “No.” The order of the entire kingdom is disrupted. Households are turned upside-down. Men realize that things are getting out of their control and chaos is breaking out!

The king, the officials, sages, and empire efficiency experts put their heads together because something must be done! They ask: According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of the King? They decide: Banish her. Away with Vashti and away with any woman who fails to do as her husband commands. Then the king orders the Persian congress to pass a bunch of laws “declaring that every man should be master in his own house” (Esther 1:22).

Then they put on gigantic contest with lots of coverage by reporters, on television, on social media, and every possible way to help the entire empire forget Vashti ever existed. They decide to let another queen be chosen to take Vashti’s place.

Vashti disappears never to be heard from again, and eventually, there is an unknown young woman no one has ever heard of who is chosen to become the new queen: Esther.

But Esther has one big secret, unknown to all the palace bigwigs. Esther is Jewish. The rest of the story is that she ends up risking her life to save her people when she discovers a plot to slaughter all Jews in the empire. She realizes that God may have sent her to the kingdom “for such a time as this,” she decides to speak up on behalf of her people, and she saves all the Jewish people.

My question is I wonder if Esther would have ever found the courage to do as she did if she did not have the example of Vashti, her predecessor, the woman who just said “No”? In an age when women did not have a purpose, any purpose, other than that of being decorative and fertile, Vashti cut new ground. No, she said, I am more than a cheap thrill. I am more than a decorative display. I am a human being, with integrity and self-respect, and here, I draw the line: I say “No.”

Just one woman who said “No” to the most powerful king in the world. At great risk, she said a small word, that had big implications. She started something that Esther finishes. Together, their story is a sacred memory of how women, or any oppressed people, can overturn a world by just saying “No.” It is a story of how we are so connected that one resistance can give rise to another. It reminds us that sometimes it only takes one “No” to unmask the Powers and show that they don’t have all the control they act like they have. It only takes a word for their imperialism and domination to unravel.

And I believe it is another example of the sacramental nature of our lives. One simple act of mercy, one act of justice, of goodness, of kindness and compassion – one simple “No” to the Powers of Domination can be an act through which God works in ways we cannot imagine, so that God spreads that justice and mercy.

Back in Exodus, there was Shiphrah and Puah, who said “No” to Pharaoh to save Hebrew babies, and Pharaoh’s own daughter said “No” to her father, the ruler, in order to save a baby named Moses. Fast forward to the New Testament, where a teenage girl named Mary and a very young man named Joseph, both said “No” to the standard understanding of the Law, and have Mary stoned, because they were committed to saying “Yes” to the Living God and go to Bethlehem and have a baby.

Fast forward thirty-three years and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb of Jesus, early on a Sunday morning, so they might anoint the body of Jesus, even though they knew a massive stone blocked the entrance and they were told it was off-limits and guards had been posted by the

Roman governor Pontus Pilate. These three women said, “No” showed up anyway, and were the first to hear the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection.

In 1940, Fascist/Vichy French officials ordered all schools to begin their day with everyone, students and teachers and anyone else present, to give the fascist salute to the French flag. On the first day, Pastor Andre Trocme was front and center as everyone turned to the flag and gave the fascist salute – except Pastor Trocme. He did not salute. The next day, a few more refused the salute. Within a few weeks no one was saluting the flag and a few weeks later, no one even gathered around the flagpole. Everyone just went to class. Author Philip Haille wrote, “Trocme had created a dynamic of resistance; his originality generated originality in others” (*Let Innocent Blood Be Shed*, p. 92). Looking back, we now know that this simple act of saying “No” to giving the fascist salute was the first act in Le Chambon in defying the Fascists and saving the Jewish refugees.

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, a quiet 42-year-old woman took a seat on the bus on her way home from a downtown department store where she worked as a seamstress. The bus became crowded, and the driver ordered her to the back, in compliance with racial segregation laws. Rosa Parks said, “No.” And by simply saying “No” she set off a social revolution that spread throughout the world, and changed this country for the better, therefore, Rosa Parks is known and revered as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement.”

In the mid-1930’s in the slums of South Africa, every day a middle-aged black woman cook walked to work with her small boy beside her. One day, a strangely dressed white man approached them on the sidewalk, and instead of forcing them off the sidewalk while he walked by, he stepped aside, doffed his hat to the mother, and nodded and smiled to the little boy. Just the defiant act against

apartheid by stepping aside and doffing his hat to a black woman changed the little boy and helped changed South Africa. The little boy grew up to become Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who years later, wrote, “I wondered what kind of man this was and what kind of clothing he wore. And when I found out he was a priest, and I decided that I wanted to be a priest like him.”

In February 2017, the U.S. Senate voted along party lines to silence Sen. Elizabeth Warren for reading a 1986 letter from Coretta Scott King in the Senate protesting Sen. Jeff Sessions nomination as Attorney General of the U.S. Senator Warren continued reading the letter in the senate hearing and Sen. Mitch McConnell said on the Senate floor, “Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”

She violated the rule. She was warned ... nevertheless she persisted. She said “No!” to the manhandling attempts of the U.S. Senate.

Vashti said “No” with great risk. And in fact, from the perspective of the world, she loses. They take away her crown, her position, her prestige, her good name. In the eyes of the world, when Vashti just says “No,” she gets herself exiled and she inspires a pretty harsh law about wives being subservient to their husbands. But from God’s perspective, something else is going on. Vashti’s courage inspires the next woman, and the next, and the next. Vashti’s great “No” becomes Esther’s great “No,” so that the Jews in the empire are not systematically murdered. Vashti’s example empowers women and men and small communities of people to speak up for themselves and speak up for others.

Perhaps it seems that in the great scheme of things the world has not changed. Kings and rulers who desperately want to be called “the Great” are still

with us and still seek to use women, use people, exploit, and abuse, and destroy the Earth. But every once in a while, someone remembers Vashti, and it sets something in motion which people remembered, which Esther remembered, which the writers of the Bible remembered, and which even the king remembered. Sometimes, we have to trust that that is enough, because we never know how one simple “No” starts something bigger.

I think we’re living in a world in much need of Vashti’s, who know how to say “No.” And I think there are small communities of faith, small congregations, people who listen to God, and know their calling is to be a Vashti church, who know they must say “No” in a world that all too often just goes along with fear and bigotry, arrest and deportation. They know they are community who has been sent to kingdoms for just such a time as this.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.