

“The Power of Reading the Room,” Sermon from Esther 1:1-12
Given Sunday, September 13, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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The following events took place during the time of Ahasuerus - the same Ahasuerus who ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia - when he set up the imperial throne in the capital city of Susa. During the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all of the government officials and members of the royal court as well as the governors of Persia and Media and all the nobles and administrators of the provinces. So Ahasuerus put all the wealth of the empire on display for many days - 180 in all - with a great show of pomp and grandeur.

At the end of those six months, Ahasuerus gave a banquet for everyone in the capital city of Susa, both the mighty and the lowly. The banquet lasted for seven days and was held in the courtyard of the royal gardens. The regal court was adorned with white and purple tapestries which hung by cords of fine linen and and purple thread attached to silver rings on large marble pillars. Couches of gold and silver were placed on a mosaic floor of malachite, marble, mother of pearl, and turquoise. Wine was served in golden goblets, each one unique in design. The wine flowed freely, as was the style at an imperial banquet. The ruler gave strict orders, however, that no one was required to drink, and that the waiters respect the preferences of the guests. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the court of Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day of the revels, Ahasuerus was drunk, after a great deal of wine. He ordered the seven eunuchs who attended to his every need, to bring Queen Vashti into his presence, crowned with the royal diadem, to put on “a show of her beauty” for those present and for the government officials - she was very beautiful. But Queen Vashti rebuffed the eunuchs and refused to obey the order.

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What makes for a good party? Isn't one mark of it that you lose all track of time? That at some point in the evening, you check your phone or you get a glimpse of someone's watch and you realize it's way later than you thought, that you were having so much fun you just didn't recognize the hour had grown so late?

We've been in quarantine – some version of restriction to keep ourselves as safe as we can from COVID-19 – for six months now. Does it feel like six months? It's the middle of September. Since the middle of March, we've been asked to limit our interaction. To stop touching each other. To cover our mouths and noses. To work from home, or on alternating days with our colleagues, or with different systems in place. To be careful what we touch. To stop sharing. How long has it felt like?

Imagine a party that lasted this long. Imagine if, for every day since mid-March, you just had to wave a glass and someone would come by to refill it. Imagine if every day since mid-March, people flitted by with platters of the most delicious food, offering it up for your pleasure. Imagine if instead of the eerie quiet, or the empty streets, every day since mid-March you were serenaded with music, and strangers and friends were coming to laugh with you or share stories with you or ask you to dance.

That's the tale our text is telling today. For as long as we've been in quarantine, the men in our story have been partying. Can you imagine that maybe they've started to lose track of time? Six months partying in the most gorgeous, most luxurious setting conceivable. Can you imagine that maybe they've started to lose track of reality? The King had invited all those who carried out his rule, across all the lands he controlled – 127 provinces, India to Ethiopia – who knows what was happening back home in all those places for that long – but they all came to be wined and dined, to be treated by the king.

I mean, it's not a totally generous offering, this party. The King wants Greece next. He wants everyone at the party to be on his side, to help him plot this next attack; he wants them to help him strategize this conquest. And they come, they do, and they join in these war games, and they love it. I mean, who knows if they have any right to how they really feel about it, but I'm sure, when he asks, they love it.

And when these festivities have gone on for half the year, instead of calling it to a close, the King extends the invitation even more widely. To “everyone in the capital city, both the mighty, and the lowly.” And that part sounds generous, right? But it's still strategic. These party guests – particularly the “lowly” – will be the ones who have to carry out the plotting the others have been doing for the last six months. He calls these

others in at the end, offers them food and drink and a place in all the revelry, and soon he will send them out, order them to kill and die for him, to appease, for a moment, his endless appetite.

But before that, he realizes there's one more treat he could offer his guests. One more way he could make the party super-fun, and, at the same time, show off what he has, that they could never. They've feasted on his rich meats and drunk his best wines. They've walked across his marble floors and laid on his gilded couches. They've wrapped themselves in all the luxury of his palace and imagined themselves as kings alongside him. But now, he tells them – wait until you see the very finest thing I own. Just wait, he tells them – you've not seen anything quite like this before. They hang on his every word. They salivate with anticipation. He hushes their murmuring and then, when he's sure he's got everyone's full attention, he tells those who wait on him, loudly, "Bring me my queen." ... So imagine what happens to that scene, imagine what happens to all that drunken, eager testosterone, when the eunuchs return alone, and have to report back to the one who sent them – in front of the kingdom he controls – "she said no."

I mean, it was just nowhere in the king's imagination that she might say no, right? Otherwise he wouldn't have made such a show of asking her, if

he thought there was potential for him to be humiliated like this. He is a man accustomed to getting what he wants. But she did. She said no.

And we're not told why she said no. It might be that she was busy with her own party, her own guests, and decided that her responsibilities took precedence over his whimsy. It might be that she could read the room, and she felt the eyes of every woman at her party on her as the eunuchs delivered their summons, and she knew that how she responded would have implications for how each of them responded to those who gave them orders back home. It might be that she could read the room she'd been invited to without ever setting foot in it, and she did not want to be put on display like another of the pieces of furniture the guests had been fawning over for months, passing out drunk on top of. It might be that she opposed the king's endless war-making, or she knew about his rash temper, and she was looking for a way out.

One old midrash – one old story about the story - sympathetic to the king suggests that Vashti said no because she had a tail – she had been cursed by an angel of the Lord for being cruel to her attendants, and given a tail – and if she appeared naked before all of these men, as was the subtext of her husband's summons – well, they would surely laugh at her. Don't miss the implication here: that for a woman to say no to a man makes her

monstrous; for a person of less power to defy a person with more power is to say he de-forms how things ought to be.

We're not told why Vashti said no. And, what's more, we're not told *why we're told* she said no. This story stands on its own. It precedes the story of Esther, but that story doesn't depend on this one. Without explanation, without clear reason, this story of a defiant queen is handed down for generations, even though it introduces this unsettling element, this potentially destabilizing example.

Did you know only 9% of the characters named in the Bible are female? And one of them is this woman who said no. The powers that be were so scared of her "no" that after she said, a decree was issued that all men everywhere are to be heads of their household, and all women are to obey them. It was written in all the languages of all the provinces, so there would be no confusion about the intention. And the midrash suggests that women in all of those places heard the decree, and gave each other the side-eye, knowing that their queen's defiance had made all their men nervous.

Commentator Anna Carter Florence says we aren't given a lot of models for saying no in our faith tradition. We're told that the faithful response is to say *yes* – to say yes to God's leading, yes to Jesus' call, yes to the Spirit's

prompting, yes to our communities who ask for our commitments and our selfless giving, yes to our world that has so much need. But what does a faithful no look like, sound like? From where can we summon the courage to speak it, when that's what's called for?

I think about other dangerous, faithful "no"s in our history...

When the field-hand-turned-activist Fanny Lou Hamer told a church full of people in Harlem that they needed together to say no to the Southern system that impoverished and oppressed black people, saying, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

When Andrei Sakharov, who had been a key scientist in Russia's development of nuclear weapons, who had said yes to that violent system time and time again, finally saw what it really was, and stepped away from that work at great risk and great cost, and said no more, said to everyone who would listen, "The future can be wonderful... but it might not be at all. That depends on us."

When women all over, from movie stars to migrant farm workers, started telling their stories of being treated like Vashti, and worse, when they said, "me too" and they said, "time's up" and they said no.

Anna Carter Florence says our text for today is “a story for every person who has ever felt their integrity called into question, who has ever had to weigh the risks between their job and their self-respect, who has ever had to stand up in the face of an unjust situation and say NO, I cannot go along with this.”

It is a holy practice to affirm your own dignity. It is a sacred call to all those around to recognize their own, too.

It's important to recognize that Vashti's “no” has consequences. When the king sobers up, he begins to hold auditions for a replacement queen. The legends vary – some say she's banished, some say she's executed, some say that years later, when the new queen, Esther, is facing her own terrible, crucial moment, she seeks out an exiled Vashti in the wilderness and asks her, “What do I do?” and together the two queens hatch a plan that saves Esther's people. None of that is officially preserved. But maybe that doesn't make it any less real.

What is officially preserved is the Vashti knows the scene she's in. She knows what's being asked of her. She reads the room. She understands the consequences of acquiescing; she understands the possibilities she creates by insisting that her body, her very self, is her own. She says no.

Carter Florence wonders what would happen if we told this story more often. “Would our children have a role model for just saying no to adults who try to harm them?” she asks. “Would they muster a little more courage for just saying no to a partner, or friend, who keeps pressuring them into activities they don't want to participate in? Would it give you and me a place to begin talking about the hundreds of awkward, troubling moments in our lives when we feel like we are being asked to do something that puts our integrity at risk? The boss tells us to hide money in a fake expense account or a family member assumes that we'll keep ignoring the addiction that's ruining his life and ours. Things can and do happen every day that challenge our integrity. What do we do?” she asks. “Do we just say no? It isn't easy.”

It isn't easy. But it matters. And it can be a gift, to us, when we say no; to others, when they hear it; to the world, when the consequences of our refusal might mean more justice, more dignity, more peace, for us and for more than just us. May it be so.