



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Reverend Denise Weaver  
June 16, 2019 Sermon

---

## Lines: Drawn and Declared

Scripture Lessons: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

Today's scripture reading drops in on Esther towards the end of her story, let's go back to the beginning.

The story of Esther actually begins at a banquet thrown by King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, whose kingdom, Persia, spanned some 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. The banquet followed an incredible "showing of the guard" for all the king's officials and ministers, the nobles and governors of those 127 provinces "while", as scripture tells us, "*he displayed the great wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and pomp of his majesty, for many days, one hundred eighty days in all.*" (Esther 1:4) When that extravaganza ended and the multitudes departed for home, the King "*gave for all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small, a banquet lasting for seven days.*" (Esther 1:5) The King's banquet was an open bar like none other; "*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.*" (Esther 1:8) Talk about an after party! While the King hosted the men, Queen Vashti, his wife, hosted a banquet for the women.

On day seven of this drinking party, the King summons Queen Vashti to get her crown and appear before his officials and the people so he can show off her beauty. Queen Vashti's response? NO!

We are not given the reason for Vashti's refusal but the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Targum, states the King wished Queen Vashti to appear wearing *only her crown*. Whatever her rationale, her answer was NO and, as one could guess, it was not well received!

King Ahasuerus, fearing her example may cause other wives to rebel against their husbands, on the advice of his nobles, issues an edict legally making men the masters of their homes. He then banishes Queen Vashti from court.

Drawing that line with her husband cost Queen Vashti the crown and Queendom. She took a risk which changed her life. One might think she lost everything but looked at what she retained and gained, her self-respect, integrity, freedom.

Queen Vashti reminds me of my friend, Lauren, a minister/colleague I worked with two decades ago. Lauren, unbeknownst to her friends -- myself included -- was married to an emotionally abusive man. The abuse became physical one night and she narrowly escaped being pushed down the stairs of their home. She appeared on my doorstep seeking shelter.

During the ensuing weeks, her husband refused to apologize, take responsibility for his actions, or enter counseling. He even refused to promise it would never happen again which we all know is no guarantee. The one thing he did do was ask her to return home. It was surprising the number of Christian friends who thought forgiving her husband was synonymous with her returning home even though that put her at risk. "No", I will not return home" she told her husband. She entered counseling and began an honest evaluation of their marriage. Believing the physical abuse would escalate just as the emotional abuse had, she made the difficult decision to divorce him. She lost a number of friends and a church community in the process but she gained self-respect, safety and freedom from fear.

Queen Vashti and Lauren's stories are similar in that each said "NO" to being demeaned and devalued as a human being, "NO" to being treated as property to be used and abused, "NO" to being put in harm's way. Each of them drew a figurative line in the sand to protect themselves.

Queen Vashti's line in the sand tells us she valued herself as a person. Her subsequent banishment clears the way for a new Queen to come on the scene. Queen Vashti's "NO" opens the door for God's plan to be set into motion as Mordecai prepares his cousin, Esther, to become the next Queen.

The King decrees all the young virgins of the kingdom are to join his harem so he can choose a Queen. Esther complies but hides her identity as one of the many Jews living in exile in Persia. An orphan, she relies upon Mordecai, her cousin, who serves in the palace. Through a series of events far exceeding a PG13 rating, Esther wins the love and favor of the King and is chosen to become his Queen. Esther is chosen Queen some seven years after the banishment of Queen Vashti.

Esther starts out being a passive, obedient queen. One might think her only power derives from her husband but that is inaccurate. Esther has personal power; she uses her intellect, her voice, her "wise as a serpent" ways to operate within a system that oppresses her.

When the King is duped into ordering the annihilation of the Jewish population by his wicked advisor Haman, Esther faces a dilemma; she can either approach the King unsummoned, which by law is punishable by death, or remain silent which means certain death for her people. Deciding to fast and pray for three days to bolster her courage, Esther requests through Mordecai that the Jewish community do the same. Her request demonstrates the power of community; particularly the strength, courage and comfort to be gained knowing others petition God on your behalf, aware that others "have your back" to whatever extent that is possible when it is one's one neck on the line. She tells Mordecai, "*After that I will go to the King, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.*" (Esther 4:16b)

Esther risks her life by approaching the King unsummoned! Surprisingly, providentially, the King not only spares her life he grants Esther's request that he and his advisor, Haman, will join her for a private banquet. This is where today's scripture picks up the story.

The great irony of the story is that Haman and his family are the ones executed, and the Jews, including Esther, exact revenge on their enemies. Esther's actions saved the Jewish community and, as the Book of Esther explains, are the origins of the Jewish Feast of Purim; a two day holiday of feasting and celebration, sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor. A feast that the Jewish community celebrates to this day.

Queen Vashti and Queen Esther are both heroines of the story; Vashti for bucking outright a system that did not value her as a person, Esther for rescuing her people from genocide and for the ways she challenges and changes an oppressive system from within. Their stories are powerful reminders that what women suffer today is not new.

In spite of Esther's courage and saving an entire race, the Old Testament Book of Esther has long endured one critique, that it never mentions God. "Just because God is not mentioned does not mean God is not involved," writes Jewish scholar Jon Levenson. He argues that God provides and protects throughout the story in "the happenstances" of life. "God is there," Levenson states. "God is just anonymous." "Sometimes the handiwork of God is clearly visible and at other times one feels the need to dust for fingerprints," a Christian preacher has said.

Surprisingly, this may be where the story of Queens Vashti and Esther most resonates with our own. Oftentimes we cannot see God directly working in our lives. It is more typical to see God's hand at

work indirectly or in hindsight. Notice that in the story of Esther the Israelites are delivered, not through a miraculous event such as God parting the Red Sea, but through the actions of flawed, but courageous, human beings. Human beings who were probably not completely confident they were doing the right thing. Yet, they saw a wrong and tried to right it.

It is not always easy to know how to go about righting wrongs, nor are we always confident we are the ones who are called to do so in a particular situation. Often, we find ourselves unsure how to proceed. Righting a wrong may require us to step outside our comfort zone trusting God has orchestrated our being in the right place at the right time, similar to Esther being queen "for just such a time as this." (Esther 4:14b) As one commentary writer states, "humans are limited in their knowledge of God's purposes and their own role in them, but "[t]hey must act, with profound hope that they are thereby participating in the divine scheme." ("Esther," *The New Interpreter's Bible*).

In Nairobi, Kenya, where sexual assault rates are sky-high, a program called "No Means No Worldwide" empowers girls and boys to create a culture of respect. Boys and girls, 10 – 20 years of age, are taught practical, hands-on tools to speak up, prevent or intervene in an attack. Adolescent boys are taught positive masculinity and standing up for women. If, for example, a boy is standing with a group of male friends who make suggestive comments about a female passing by, they are taught to speak up, "What if that was your sister? Your mother?," they might ask. If that fails, they have been taught ways to intervene if they anticipate or witness predatory behavior.

The same program teaches girls to say to would-be perpetrators, "I am dangerous! I say NO! I can defend myself." They also learn ways to talk themselves out of trouble. If that "NO" is not respected, the girls have been taught self-defense training to back up their words.

Rape and sexual assault rates have dropped as much as 51 percent since the training began. 50% of the girls reported stopping an attempted rapist the year after receiving the training. Among the boys, 74% have intervened successfully to prevent an assault.

What seems most surprising is the phrase, "I am dangerous", spoken by someone who might become a victim.

Abuse thrives on silence. The batterer, the date rapist, the sexual or physical abuser all depend upon silence to do what they are going to do. It is more than just abuse that thrives on silence; "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to remain silent" it has been said.

The training program in Kenya teaches the power of speaking up, drawing and declaring lines in much the same ways Queen Vashti, Queen Esther and my friend Lauren did. We also have the example of Jesus Christ; the One who said "NO" to oppression, inequality, injustice and ill treatment of the marginalized. The One who declared, "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" (John 10:10)

What if we fully realized we have the power to speak up to help others have abundant life? What if we trusted there are times when we might be in the right place at the right time, by chance or divine intervention, and given the opportunity to be courageous for God and for human beings even when it means taking great risks? What if we stepped out in faith trusting God was working in and through us to right a wrong or align life situations to God's vision for the world? What if? What if?

Speaking up seems to be the first step. I invite you to join me in affirming God and Christ's vision for our world by saying the Litany of Truth printed in the bulletin. You may remain seated.

## A Litany of Truth

- Liturgist: We are called by Christ.  
We come to affirm our life in Christ.  
We come to dispel myths and lies,  
to question and challenge injustice,  
to question structures we know oppress women,  
and hold us hostage.
- Liturgist: It is not true that women should feel and experience  
that being a woman is of secondary value to the community.
- All: It is true that women are created women, the image of God,  
co-workers with God in caring for life,  
in struggling for the liberation of humanity  
and for world order that respects each one's dignity.**
- Liturgist: It is not true that women should accept rape, incest, battering,  
or any humiliation as the fate of women.
- All: It is true that Christ has come into the world  
to heal the broken community between women and men,  
to restore our sense of self, dignity, and inclusion.**
- Liturgist: It is not true that young girls  
should be denied the opportunity to learn how  
to read, to write, and to analyze the developments of their country.
- All: It is true that everyone is called to respond to the gift of life  
and to the needs of our community with all our heart, all our soul,  
and all our reason.**
- Liturgist: It is not true that sexual slavery, bondage, and prostitution  
are impossible to counteract and eliminate.
- All: It is true that Christ has come into the world  
to overturn the tables of injustice.  
Women and men, empowered by the Holy Spirit,  
should challenge poverty and patriarchal culture.**
- And it is true that God the creator has given us  
the responsibility and trust to care for all of creation  
in humility and faithfulness,  
to work and to love as co-creators with God.**

(This litany is a resource from the FaithTrust Institute.)