

6th Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Esther 2-3

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's servants who attended him said, 'Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint commissioners in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in the citadel of Susa under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; let their cosmetic treatments be given them. And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This pleased the king, and he did so.

Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away. Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in the custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in the custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. The girl pleased him and won his favour, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem. Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell. Every day Mordecai would walk around in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was and how she fared.

The turn came for each girl to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their cosmetic treatment, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics for women. When the girl went in to the king she was given whatever she asked for to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back to the second harem in the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines; she did not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was admired by all who saw her. When Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus in his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favour and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great banquet to all his officials and ministers—'Esther's banquet.' He also granted a holiday to the provinces, and gave gifts with royal liberality.

When the virgins were being gathered together, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when

she was brought up by him. In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Ahasuerus. But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, both the men were hanged on the gallows. It was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him. And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, 'Why do you disobey the king's command?' When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated. But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur—which means 'the lot'—before Haman for the day and for the month, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries.' So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, 'The money is given to you, and the people as well, to do with them as it seems good to you.'

Then the king's secretaries were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language; it was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's ring. Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces, giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar; and to plunder their goods. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation, calling on all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went quickly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Ah, the morning after. Maybe you know what it feels like to have a massive hangover after a long night of drinking. Many of us know what it feels like to wake up the morning after and regret what sort of foolishness we did the night before. I imagine that perhaps King Ahasuerus felt that way at the beginning of the second chapter of the Book of Esther.

I imagine King Ahasuerus walking around the palace the next day, wearing sunglasses to shield his eyes from the light of all that shiny marble, rubbing his temple with one hand and dropping an Alka-Seltzer tablet into a glass of water with the other. As he waits for the tablet to dissolve, the text opens up the chapter with this intriguing sentence, “After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.”

I find at least two things interesting about this sentence:

First of all, “he remembered Vashti and what she had done;” that sentence tells us that the effects of Vashti’s act of resistance are not finished. Although Queen Vashti has been banished, her ghost lingers as the story continues.

Secondly, the passive voice at the end of the sentence is curious. The text tells us that he remembered what “had been decreed” against her. But you and I know exactly who it was who did the decreeing. A more accurate rendering of the text would be to say that King Ahasuerus remembered what *he decreed against her*. But the passive voice tells us that in his hungover state he is incapable or unwilling to take responsibility for, well, anything.

So as he takes a sip of his Alka-Seltzer water, his advisors come to him and tell him it’s time to move on. The most important thing to do with this king, they understand, is to keep him pleased. Vashti clearly didn’t please him. So now it’s time to find someone who will. And so they suggest to the king that they gather all of the most beautiful young virgins and bring them to the king in order for him to select one that will please him (aka, one that will not say “no” to him like Vashti did).

The scene changes and the camera pans toward a man named Mordecai and his younger cousin, Esther, whom he has raised as a daughter. She gets rounded up and forced to enter the mandatory beauty pageant to win the king’s affection.

It is important to note that Mordecai and Esther are Jews. The city of Susa, the location of the Book of Esther, was somewhere in what is modern day Iran. The Jews in this story were in exile, taken from their homes, living in a foreign land with foreign gods and foreign traditions. The text labels Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of the Jewish inhabitants of Ahasuerus’ kingdom as a marginal community that does not enjoy the privilege that the mainstream culture does.

And, in another sense, Esther is doubly exiled. Not only is she exiled with the rest of her kin as Jews in a foreign land, Esther is also exiled from her home, taken from her only family, and forced to enter this contest to win the affection of a politician who is the embodiment of toxic masculinity, misogyny, and arrogance. Therefore, Esther is doubly exiled and doubly marginalized. As Carol Bechtel puts it, “[Esther] faces the prospect of being doubly violated, both as a woman and as a Jew.” And because of this marginalization, Mordecai made Esther promise to keep her Jewishness a secret.

And so, Esther leaves her home and head’s to Ahasuerus’ palace to begin a rather excessive and rigorous 12-month beauty regimen with all of the other girls. But Mordecai doesn’t stay too far away. The text tells us that he would walk around by the gated entrance of the palace to keep an eye on her and perhaps listen for the latest gossip to hear how she was faring.

Then the time for the decision comes and one by one the girls present themselves to the King. Each girl is allowed to bring whatever they want from the harem in order to win the king's favor. Esther, however, is apparently the only one who has the smarts to ask the king's chief eunuch what she should bring. This makes sense; after all, who would know better the King's preferences than his closest servant? This, from the get-go, establishes Esther as a character of both wisdom and self control, two things that stand in stark contrast to Ahasuerus' immaturity and impulsiveness.

The text doesn't seem very concerned with the details of how Esther won Ahasuerus' affection but we know she won by a landslide. She becomes the queen and Ahasuerus' advisors sigh with relief that the drama of Queen Vashti is behind them. But trouble is right around the corner.

The scene shifts back to Mordecai who is keeping his ear to the ground by the palace gates. He conveniently overhears two of the palace eunuchs plotting to kill Ahasuerus. It would appear that these two eunuchs have had enough of enduring Ahasuerus' pettiness and insufferable whining. Mordecai takes this information and passes it along to Esther to tell the king. This act is a clever one that will give Mordecai leverage later on in the story.

And now enters the *real* villain of the story, Haman. For the Jewish people, Haman is literally the worst. We are introduced to Haman in the third chapter of the Book of Esther and are given no background information about where he comes from or what he has done to deserve the promotion that essentially makes him King Ahasuerus' right hand man. If any one should have been given that promotion, it should have been Mordecai. After all, it was him who literally saved the king's life!

But Haman gets promoted and, well, he lets it go to his head. Haman considers himself a big shot and expects the common folk to give him the respect his over-inflated ego demands. Everywhere he goes, he requires that the people bow down before him. He likes it. It feeds his ego.

But then something goes terribly wrong (or perfectly right, depending on who you ask). One day, as Haman goes for a stroll, he walks through the palace gates and sees a man who stubbornly refuses to bow down before him.

Now, if you were unable to join us last week as we journeyed through the first chapter of the Book of Esther, allow me to give you a 10 second summary. An arrogant, privileged, entitled man is used to getting whatever he wants. Then someone says no to him and he throws a temper tantrum and goes to a ridiculous extent to seek vengeance.

Just as Ahasuerus throws a temper tantrum for the ages, so does Haman. He throws a pity party. He becomes infuriated. He goes on a massive rant complaining about the "injustice" done to him. His anger is fueled not only by pettiness but also by his xenophobia, because he learns that the man who disobeyed him is Jewish and that only adds salt to the wound on Haman's fragile ego.

Now, I think we can all agree that there is a very broad spectrum of responses that Haman could have taken against Mordecai. He could have taken Mordecai to court. He could have had him imprisoned or fined. Instead, Haman skips all those measures and goes straight to genocide. Because one Jew is bad, all Jews must be bad, Haman decides. Thus, my friends, is the root of xenophobia and racism. And it's right here in the text, fueled by the arrogance and fragility of a man in power who has no business in the office he holds.

And so, Haman goes to King Ahasuerus and speaks to him in rather vague terms, never naming the Jewish people. Instead he says the following: “There is a *certain people* scattered and separated among the peoples and they’re nothing but troublemakers. Why don’t you let me take care of this and we’ll get rid of the problem. I’ll take care of the details; I just need your signature right here and we’ll be done.” And Ahasuerus, ever the one to be easily manipulated by wiser people around him, agrees. I think he agreed without hesitation because he just wants to go back to his drinking and womanizing. And thus ends today’s text. Ahasuerus and Haman hit the bar for a couple drinks while the city of Susa is thrown into confusion by the news of the king’s order.

I’ll close this sermon with a few observations about today’s story:

First of all, chaos and confusion is what happens when men in power, like Ahasuerus and Haman, allow their petty, racist, arrogant attitudes to direct their thoughts, speech, and actions. It’s funny, I’ve heard a lot of sexist people talk about how women shouldn’t be president of the United States because “they’re too emotional.” If anyone is too emotional in the Book of Esther, it’s two men called Ahasuerus and Haman. The two people who instead embody wisdom, restraint, and self-confidence are two *women* named Vashti and Esther.

Secondly, there will always be men like Haman. The cover of today’s bulletin depicts a scene from the 2012 superhero movie, the Avengers. In it, the god Loki seeks to subjugate earth and its inhabitants. When he first comes to earth he goes to Stuttgart, Germany and confronts a large crowd of people and tells them that the natural state of all human beings is to be submissive to authoritarian rule. Loki then demands that everyone kneel before him. Everyone obeys except for one man who defiantly stands before him. The man looks Loki in the eye and says “I will not kneel to men like you” to which Loki responds arrogantly “There are no men like me.” After taking a brief pause, the man says quietly but firmly, “There are *always* men like you.”

Friends, there will always be men like Haman who demand that we give them our complete and unwavering allegiance. There will always be men like Haman who disguise oppression and violence with words of salvation, freedom, and “law and order.” And, as Christians we have a choice. We can kneel before them and be complicit in their evil, or we can stand up for justice, kindness, love, and inclusivity. There will always be men like Haman. But there will always be Christians like you and me that are called to respond to their policies of violence and oppression with a Gospel of love, gentleness, compassion, and justice.

Finally, Queen Vashti is still an important part of this story. Though she has been banished, the ghost of Vashti remains, inspiring others to stand up to her petty husband and his administration. Many people skip the first chapter of the Book of Esther and, in doing so, are tempted to think that Mordecai was the first person to resist the Ahasuerus administration. But that is just not true. The first person to resist the Ahasuerus administration was a woman of color named Vashti who said no to an oppressive regime. Her faithful and courageous “no” will continue to reverberate throughout the remainder of the story of the Book of Esther.

Friends, I hope by now we are learning that this bizarre book of the Bible has some particularly relevant topics given our current circumstances. Next week, we will continue our journey through this book of disobedience, deception, and deliverance.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**