

Refusing to Be Shamed: A Sermon on Queen Vashti

By Marisa Brown Ludwig

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The story we heard today is little told in the life of the church. Far more famous is the rest of the book of Esther, and the heroine the book is named for. Esther is a Jewish girl who ends up saving the Jewish people from genocide through her intervention with the King of Persia, a redemptive story celebrated by the Jewish people down through the ages in the Feast of Purim. But we didn't hear about Esther today, rather it is her predecessor, without whom Esther would have never ascended the throne. As Deb has said, the King in this story is based on Xerxes I, a real Persian King out of history, though this story is not likely true.

But I find it remarkable that this story is here in the book of Esther – and that we know this woman's name – Queen Vashti. As we have done about other stories, let's paint the context. It was likely written 300-500 BCE, that's before the birth of Christ.

Lillian Klein writes that in the Persian Court of ancient times, the wives could be present at banquets but only until the drinking started – and then they were dismissed and the courtesans and concubines were brought in for the wild partying that would commence. So when the King, already far in his cups, calls for Vashti to be brought before the men, everyone knows he is defying the respect protocol and asking her to shame herself. (p. 99) Add to that an interpretation from the Targum, the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which instructs that by commanding Vashti to come in her crown, the King intends for her to otherwise be naked. (Crawford, p. 201, in Newsom, Ringe and Lapsley)

Vashti is faced then, with a no-win scenario- she either has to obey the King and shame herself, or disobey the King and shame him. That will cost her all that she has come to know of life as Queen. This terrible decision is faced when all the kingdom is visiting the castle; all the Lords and Ladies of wealth, all the peasant men and women from all the lands of the King. The story stays Queen Vashti had just hosted the women of the realm in her own banquet. Surely they were all in her mind and heart when she chose to say “No.”

Katherine Sakenfeld reminds us that “Publicly recognized dissenters are often treated harshly in an effort to warn others to toe the line. Stories of brave resistance have great power to influence and transform others.” (2003, p. 63) So of course the King will have to act, and act big. He could shame Vashti without blinking an eye, but he can’t permit her to shame him. Her Crown is taken from her, and presumably she is banished from the realm to poverty. “There are many contemporary examples of persons who have said “No!” Women who have left abusive marriages, even at great cost; women who had objected to harassment in the workplace; myriad African-Americans continue to say “No” to systemic racism; whistle-blowers have exposed cases of corporate or governmental fraud or mismanagement. Some who have said “No” are well known, but most are unheralded persons . . . who have taken their stand for human dignity. Vashti’s “No!” is a model for women and men alike.” (Sakenfeld, 2003, pp. 63, 64.)

Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, in *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today*:

Lillian Klein, in *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*:

In thinking about Vashti, Renita Weems considers women married to famous men in our time such as Corazon Aquino, Jihan Sadat, Eleanor Roosevelt, Coretta Scott

King, Winnie Mandela, Betty Shabazz (Malcolm X's wife) – “Like their predecessor Queen Vashti, these women's marriages have provided them with opportunities not only to make use of their immense talents, but also to monitor closely the local and national issues which concern. Moreover, their marriages to men in positions of public leadership have given them immediate access to the lives of hundreds of women, whereby they could mobilize women across the land into political, social and moral actions.” (Weems, pp. 106, 107)

Renita points out that were it not for Queen Esther and the writing of her book, Queen Vashti's story would never have been remembered (certainly not by the king!). She concludes with a message to us today: “We have a responsibility to remember, celebrate and come to the aid of those women who once gave themselves on our behalf, but who, for whatever reason – be it divorce, death of husband, or political defeat – now no longer occupy positions of leadership . . . As sisters, it is our responsibility to remember the women, both single and married, who have worked to clear and pave the way for us, at the risk of health, sanity, comfort, reputation, family and marriage.” (p 108)

Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away*:

LaVerne McCain Gill, *Vashti's Victory: and Other biblical Women Resisting Injustice*:

LaVerne notices that Vashti gets a huge reaction to one small act of resistance – the King summons all his court to help him respond to her act, and his response is sent to all the households of the realm!

She writes about using a “justice reading” strategy that “focuses on a more holistic view of the story . . . it seeks discernment about God's purpose in the narrative, rather than human preoccupation with heroes and heroines. The justice reading strategy – borrowed from the literary tradition – speaks to the inclusion of these women in the biblical story as integral to our understanding of how God works in the world. The justice reading strategy makes the assumption that God chose to thwart injustice through the actions of these women” . . .

“In other words, the intention (by the writers) may have been to suppress the voice of women in the Bible, but a God of justice's intention would be to create stories that show that women are a part of God's created reality, and that they resist the culture that oppresses them against God's will for their freedom . . . God is revealed through their acts of rebellion and resistance. These biblical women evidence courage in the face of oppression and they resist efforts that attempt to

thwart the movement of God in the world. Many biblical women represent pockets of resistance allowing for God's realm to break through on earth." (2003, Introduction – no page numbers).

About Vashti specifically, she writes, **“What God calls all of God's creation to is wholeness and spiritual and physical liberation.** Vashti creates a different sense of personal resistance in what must have been an ordinary occurrence. Some have speculated that perhaps her meeting with the women of the province gave her a strength that she had never had before, out of which she received enough self-respect to act boldly. . . Vashti gives an example of what it means to be able to say “no” to oppression and to have faith enough to accept the consequences.” (pp. 12, 13.)

She calls it “the Vashti Paradigm” – “The Vashti Paradigm is a model for women to begin to say “no” to the human bias in the writing (of the scriptures) and “yes” to God's intention for them to be a part of God's unfolding story of salvation, through their everyday acts of resistance against injustice.” (p. 14.)

(Laverne McCain Gill)