

**This week's readings:** Esther 1:13—3:6

*Reflection by the Rev. Elizabeth Felicetti*

I grew up in the Episcopal Church and do not remember ever studying Esther in Sunday School. My first encounter with her was in junior high or possibly even high school, when my brother and sister-in-law gave me a young adult novelized version of Esther's story. I devoured it, stunned that the most straightlaced people in our family had given it to me—and that this story was in the *Bible*.

Much of the book filled in gaps, imagining what life may have been like for Esther growing up with her cousin Mordecai, being forced to join the king's harem, and then living for a year with other women "beautifying" with oil and ointments. I couldn't find that book from the 1980s, but I don't recall it criticizing the king for making such a horrible decree as forcing young women into his harem. I do remember the book portrayed the king's wife, Vashti, as problematic instead of brave. Frankly, at the time, I was just surprised that a biblical story had sex outside of marriage in it. (Clearly, I didn't read the Bible enough.)

In last week's email, I wrote about "turns," and Vashti refusing to come before the king when he beckoned her was a huge turn. Today's reading takes place immediately after her refusal when advisors to the king ask that he make a decree that she will never be allowed to come before him again. The advisors believe the king needs to make an example of Vashti: they worry her independent streak could influence their own wives as well, causing them to look with contempt upon their husbands.

I don't remember what I thought of Esther back when I read that novel, but now I admire Esther, and Esther would not have been given the opportunity to become queen had Vashti not defied the king, refusing his order to be paraded around in front of a bunch of drunk men. I wonder if there's a book that explores Vashti and her story. How did she come to be married to the king? What did she do after she was deposed? (If you know of one, please tell me!)

As best I can recall, that YA novel of Esther also did not look critically at the king, who is definitely portrayed as foolish in the biblical book: first, he wants to expose his wife to a bunch of drunk dudes; then he listens to others at how it should be handled; then he rips young women away from their families and forces them to be part of his harem. In the coming weeks, we will hear even more about his foolishness. This book takes place during the exile, when some Jews had returned to

their homeland while others remained in foreign lands. The portrayal of the king as foolish is probably intentional.

Besides introducing the titular character of Esther and watching her become queen, the readings for this week also introduce Mordecai, Esther's relative who raised her, who discovers a plot against the king. In addition, we meet the villain Haman, who detests Mordecai, in part because he refuses to bow down before Haman. Since others tell Haman that this refusal is because Mordecai is Jewish, Haman determines to exterminate all Jews.

I'm grateful that I was introduced to Esther in a way that appealed to me as an adolescent, but I wish I had explored themes of female empowerment and being part of an underprivileged people. I hope young people—and all people—can explore the story through such lenses today.

**For further reflection:**

Salvador Dali painted "Ahasuerus falls in love with Esther" in the 1960s, which shows Esther in the king's head, showing how she consumes his thoughts but also becomes trapped there. This image can aid prayerful meditation on Esther in this week's readings. View the image here: [Assuerus Falls in Love with Esther - Assueres adamavit Esther \(Esther 2:17\), 1964 - 1967 - Salvador Dali - WikiArt.org](https://www.wikiart.org/en/Salvador-Dali/Assuerus-Falls-in-Love-with-Esther-1964-1967)