


Artfully wrestling with Scripture

Sara Erb

I am drawn to difficult biblical passages. The mysterious and broken places in which God is revealed in Scripture: Jonah's stubbornness, Vashti's bravery, Jeremiah's fury, Job's honesty, the way Ecclesiastes gives meaning



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to life by describing its utter meaninglessness. The difficult passages of Scripture are powerful and awe-inspiring. They are also filled with pain, suffering, and struggle. These are not stories to encounter lightly. These are not accounts where we can immediately see God at work. These stories leave us with so many questions. So much wrestling to

do. Yet, finding God in these stories gives me hope for our world because these difficult parts of the Bible show me that no matter what broken, painful, or dizzying state of life we may find ourselves in, God is still with us. And for that simple revelation, I give thanks!

Queen Vashti's bravery

The account of Queen Vashti (Esther 1:1–22) gets me every single time I read it. It infuriates me. It pains me. It weighs on me. I come to this story with questions and anger. In the story, King Xerxes commands his wife, Queen Vashti, to appear before him and his court as they engage in drunken revelry so they can gaze on her physical beauty. She refuses and is subsequently banished to set an example for the rest of the women in the empire. While we never hear Vashti's voice, we meet a woman filled with courage and tenacity. A woman willing to take on an entire empire. A woman who refuses to submit yet again to a humiliating and objectifying command. Even though the book of Esther does not record her words, Vashti's *no* reverberates throughout this entire story.

I give thanks for women like Vashti who are able to stand up and say *no*—and to do so against all odds. Vashti not only stands up to her drunken husband; she stands up to her king. And not just any king but King Xerxes, the ruler of the entire Persian Empire. At the peak of his power. At the height of his wealth and influence. Xerxes has all the power. He has

all the money. All the laws are in his favor and can be changed at his will. All the officials and all the people are on his side.

And yet, Vashti still says *no*.

That *no* shakes all the power of Xerxes. Vashti's *no* is stronger than all Xerxes's power, money, and laws. Vashti's *no* has the potential to undermine all the power that men throughout the empire hold over their wives. If the queen could say *no* to King Xerxes himself, in the middle of a party, in front of all of the officials and guests, what would stop women everywhere from saying *no*?

So Xerxes forms his plot to regain all the power. Vashti is stripped of the title of Queen, never again to enter Xerxes's presence, her royal position given to "someone better or more worthy than she" (Esther 1:19)—someone who would never question the king or threaten the role of the husband. King Xerxes decrees that every man should be ruler over his own household (Esther 1:20). Once again, Xerxes has the power to disgrace Vashti and minimize the power of her *no*. We never again hear from Vashti, this courageous woman.

The account of Queen Vashti gets me every single time.

Artful response 1

When I find myself wrestling with the difficult stories of Scripture, like Vashti's, I need an outlet. I need a safe place to express my outrage and disgust, a place to name the injustices that cling to me as I search for God in this mess. In the midst of the mess, I find artful response a healing practice. (See image on next page.)

Many words, themes, and phrases jump out at me in Esther 1:1–22: abuse of power, "master of his own house," royal order, "brought before him," and so on. It's hard to read this account and know what to do with all of these challenging and difficult words.

My artful response holds the frustration and anger I experience when I engage with Vashti's story. It also holds the frustration and anger I experience when I think how Vashti was not the first woman, nor has she been the last woman, to stand up against oppressive powers only to be steamrolled by those very same powers.

My artful response gives space to write out these challenging and difficult words from the text. Putting them onto paper releases them from within me. As I write each word, I can name the struggle and frustration that I feel as I sit with Vashti. Slowing down enough to write these words



out with my own hand, I feel the connections between Vashti's experience and abuses of power happening in the world today.

Through this practice of wrestling and artfully responding to Scripture, I have come to understand that Scripture is strong enough and holy enough to handle my rage and disagreements. In naming and expressing my frustrations, I am drawn more deeply into the ancient story of God at work. This artful response holds my frustration in a form of prayer, guiding me toward God as I wrestle.

Searching for God

Vashti's story reminds me of the #MeToo movement, which has created an environment for people to listen for women's voices, old and young, who like Vashti have experienced harm and have attempted to break the cycle. The #MeToo movement gave voice to the millions who have experi-

enced and survived sexual assault, harassment, and abuse. Many women have tried to speak up in the past only to be ignored or silenced. Like Queen Vashti, they seemed to be alone.

The *#MeToo* movement became so powerful because women are no longer alone. Women will no longer be silenced. Women are in it together. Woman after woman after woman began to tell her story. Began to claim *#MeToo*. Women were sharing and listening to each other's stories. They were walking with each other, companioning one another. Women began seeking justice together.

When it comes to justice, by all accounts, Vashti is a heroine! She is a courageous woman who dares to take on the power of the Persian Empire and its king. Unfortunately, Vashti is alone in her fight for justice. After she is removed from her position and silenced, the royal household reverts to the same structures of power. Xerxes is the same king ruling the same empire with the same officials and the same wealth. His power remains intact.

Xerxes begins his search for a replacement for Vashti, for a woman who is "better than her." The king's decision means that more young women are added to his harem by force. One of those young women is Hadassah, who becomes known as Esther. It isn't long before Esther also finds herself needing to stand up against Xerxes and his entire empire. The king's second-in-command, Haman, forms a plot and convinces Xerxes to issue a decree declaring a genocide of all the Jews. Unbeknownst to the king, this genocide would include his queen, Esther.

Esther finds herself staring down the same powers as Vashti. Though she is uncertain what would happen to her, Esther knows she cannot remain silent. The difference between Vashti's and Esther's respective situations, however, is that Esther has an entire community behind her. Esther has the ongoing support and guidance of her uncle Mordecai. Esther has all the Jews of the city fasting and praying on her behalf. She is not alone in this fight for justice. She is surrounded by the support, companionship, and strength of her community. And Esther is not ignored. Esther and her community take on all the power of the Persian Empire and put an end to the planned genocide of the Jews. Thanks be to God!



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main. The hope does not wipe them out. We must continue to hear them and share them. We must hold them close to us. But as we do so, the Holy Spirit invites us to bear witness to how the presence of God is emerging, giving light, hope, and justice to these stories and to our own stories.

Finding justice

These two heroic women in the biblical text teach us that God is more concerned about justice than about enabling the rich and ruling. God is more concerned about justice than about maintaining the stability of power and empire. God is in the business of justice work. Of turning the world

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upside down. Of raising up prophets and preachers and teachers and movements that stop us in our tracks. That force us to listen to those we have been in the habit of ignoring. To wrestle with difficult passages of Scripture and painful stories of injustice and harm.

God's justice comes not through one individual but rather through the entire community of God's people. This justice work involves all of us. It involves us listening and sharing stories. It involves us walking together into throne rooms and putting an end to the misuse of power and ongoing abuses. It invites us to risk the unknown by reading and wrestling with the many difficult passages in Scripture that disturb us and open our eyes to injustice—and perhaps even to our own participation in these injustices.

In doing so, by the grace of God, we join God in creating a world and a church where never again is anyone left to confront oppression on their own. We join God in creating a place where all of us can hear, believe, and claim that we are beloved children of God.

Vashti and Esther offer us so much hope. Hope that God passionately cares. Hope that God is turning the world upside down for good reason. Hope that we have a role to play in ushering in the kingdom of God: a kingdom of justice, wholeness, and peace. This hope emerges when we leave space to wrestle with Scripture. This hope germinates as we listen to the difficult stories and allow them to weigh on us, disturb us, and eventually awaken us to the work that lies before us.

While I may have a complicated relationship with Scripture, I continue to encounter Scripture as holy and experience God's ability to use it for transformation. I will never stop wrestling with Scripture because my life does in fact depend on it. Thanks be to God!

About the author

Sara Erb is pastor of faith formation at Stienmann Mennonite Church, Baden, Ontario, where this article first began its journey as a sermon during Lent 2019. Sara has been a regular contributor to the worship column in *Leader*.