

May I speak in the name of Jesus of Nazareth,
The God who is For us.
Amen.

He's privileged. Wealthy. Powerful.
He likes to party, to feast.
Sometimes for days at a time, no matter his responsibilities.
He loves his wine.
And when he's a little drunk,
He likes to boast. To brag. To make extravagant promises.
The combination of power and alcohol make him expansive and care-free.

I wonder if you pressed him,
Asked him pointed questions
About what it took to reach the halls of power,
To stay there, to fight off every challenge -
Would he would cry and scream and rage?
Isn't it his privilege to act however he wants?

And he likes the feeling of control, of absolute autonomy.
He could offer you half the whole world,
And yank back the offer if you displease him.

He doesn't have to answer to anyone.

She has spent months preparing for this moment.
An entire lifetime, in fact,
Devoted to looking right, to eating right, to dressing right,
To appearing pleasing,
To meeting the standard set
By all these men.
And not only physical appearance,
But even mental training
Keeping her secrets and her mind sharp but hidden,
The terrible secret of who she is,
Of the whirlwind that has caught her up,
Can be known only to her most trusted few.
And even more – religious restrictions,
Kept in quiet.
And whether through nerves or iron force of will,
A purposeful fast where she cannot even eat
So great is the time to which she's been called.

She makes her first request,
Nothing more than this.
To be allowed to come forward,
To be allowed to Speak.
To be seen, and be heard.

It was no guaranteed thing.
Nevertheless, she persisted.

And so she wins the right -
To prepare,
To create the setting and the place and the time
To please the standards of the halls of power
That give no thought to her needs.
And still, it somehow falls to her,
In the end,
To have to lift the entire emotional burden of truth.

Jesus couldn't be more clear.
Cast. The Demons. Out.
Give the thirsty water to drink.
And don't put any stumbling blocks before these little ones.

And, friends,
What a stumbling block has been placed in front of us this very week.
Some of you have heard it.
Some louder than others,
And some with deep, fearful, and traumatic echoes:

Your body does not belong to you.

Three times I have been told –
And please understand, I know this is not real trauma –
But three times I have been told
That my hair does not belong to me.
After dying my hair hot pink at the end of vacation Bible School,
The school I attended was clear:
You will not be let in the front doors with pink hair.
Two afternoons and Two sets of bleach later,
I came to school with hair the color of printer paper.

When I cut my hair into a Mohawk before leaving for my first summer camp,
The Vice President of the college called

And demanded that I cut my hair before I arrive at camp.
The camp director was more understanding,
But we did buzz all the hair off my head at the end of the week.

The following semester,
I dyed my hair pink again. I just liked it that way.
But the pastor in charge of the Sunday night worship ministry
Told me that I would not be allowed on stage to play the piano
With pink hair.
And so, another bottle of bleach later,
I ended up with a faint pink hue to my hair for the rest of the semester.

I know none of these stories are truly traumatic.
However drama-filled they were at the time!
But in each of them,
I was made to hear loud and clear the message:
You are not your own.
You do not get to control your own body.
You must meet our expectations.
We have power over you.
Your reasons do not matter.
The spirit in which you did it does not matter.
You must do as we say.

And that naysaying voice echoes through my body and my spirit in a thousand ways
At a thousand times
And dampens and deadens the voice of the Spirit within me.

I told these stories, once, in spiritual direction.
My director at the time stopped me and said:
“Shane. Those times were the Spirit working in you,
Trying to express,
Trying to create new life.”

And through hearing her words,
Having her spirit open up my own scars,
And through the pain of my own tears,
I began to heal.

In the sacred story of Esther that we read together today,
The woman came forward.
And was believed.
And the demon was cast out.

And yet all too often, in our world,
It is easy, so easy
To find those
Who cannot cut off their hand for the kingdom.
Who would rather keep the façade of their reputation whole
Than cut off their foot,
And so create hell on earth,
In their own hearts and in the lives of those around them.
There are those who trust only in their own two eyes,
And will not think to risk losing one of them
To see the strange and secret Kingdom of God bursting into Spirit around them.

Children, teens, adults, survivors, and young women everywhere have heard this week:
Your body is not your own.

And to them – to you – to us –

Holy Scripture has a message.
Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.
God dwells within you.

The church has a message.
We are the Body of Christ,
Meant to create love and justice in the world.

The Episcopal Church has a message:
We honor and respect the dignity of every human being.
Gay or straight, woman or man, cis- or trans.

St. John's prints its message every week:
We celebrate the gift of Christian Community,
And welcome all, without distinction,
To share the joy and pain of life's passages.

We believe you.

The Spirit of God Herself, the tenderest of mothers, has a message:
Your body, your being, was made to be loved.
Your body, your being, was made to love.
Wherever I am, you belong.