

“Reasons to Dance”

Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 (20-23); Mark 6:14-29

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Considered to be the holy lodging place of God, and a powerful force in and of itself, the ark of the covenant had accompanied Israel during its nomadic days. In our lesson, King David is leading the a procession bringing the ark to Jerusalem, where it will have a permanent home, though the temple David’s envisions for lodging it will not be built until after his own death.

Long before the ark was made famous by Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, the Bible tells how its power was experienced by the Philistines, as well as a man named Uzzah, who had tried to steady it on this current journey to Jerusalem. It all seems to be a scene of joy, until we read of David’s wife’s reaction of scorn. Let us hear God’s word to us in II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19:

*David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. <sup>2</sup>David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. <sup>3</sup>They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart <sup>4</sup>with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. <sup>5</sup>David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.*

*<sup>12</sup>... So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; <sup>13</sup>and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. <sup>14</sup>David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. <sup>15</sup>So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. <sup>16</sup>As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. <sup>17</sup>They brought in the ark of the Lord, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the Lord. <sup>18</sup>When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts, <sup>19</sup>and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.*

In the very next section of II Samuel, Saul’s daughter Michal, will again chastise David, and call his dance indecent, not just because he was king, but because of his scanty attire, implying his dance may have been more erotic than worshipful. We will look at David’s dance before the ark of the covenant, but this morning we have another dance.

Oscar Wilde's play, "Salome", is based on our Gospel lesson, which recounts the beheading of John the Baptist at the command of Herod Antipas, the less than capable son of Herod the Great. Biblical accounts of the story do not name the young dancer. It is Wilde who names her Salome, and Richard Strauss used Wilde's play to create his opera of the same name. Both take liberties with the story, but maintain the interwoven themes of lust, power and tragedy, with the girl's dance as a pivotal point.

Our lesson begins with Herod believing Jesus must be a resurrected John the Baptist. In that time, there were other stories of heroes who died, and then were restored to a new body with greater power. It makes me think of Warren Beatty in the remake of the movie, "Heaven Can Wait," where a football player dies and returns in the body of another player. Mark makes no such suggestion, but puts the concept in Herod's mouth. Mark does underscore John and Jesus were both killed as the cost of their willingness to speak prophetic truth and exhibit faithfulness. Let us hear the account of John's beheading in Mark 6:14-29:

*King Herod heard of Jesus' teaching and healing, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said,*

**"John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."**

Then Mark recounts exactly how that beheading takes place, while also telling of the unique relationship between Herod and John the Baptist. The characters are King Herod, his wife Herodias (who also happens to be his brother's wife, which John the Baptist considered a problem), and finally, there is Herodias' daughter, who Oscar Wilde named Salome in his play. The daughter is the dancer. As she is the daughter of his brother, she is also Herod's niece, but remember Herod has married his brother's wife, his sister-in-law, so the dancing girl is his step-daughter as well as his niece. If this story continued, I can imagine it could lead to Herod singing the song, "I Am My Own Grandpa."

We continue our lesson:

*Herod recalled he himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill John. But she could not, for Herod feared John.*

**I knew John was a righteous and holy man, and even after imprisoning him, I protected him. When I heard him speak, I was greatly perplexed; and yet I liked to listen to John.**

*But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl,*

**“Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it. I solemnly swear, whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”**

*The daughter went out and said to her mother, Herodias, “What should I ask for?” Herodias replied, “The head of John the baptizer.” Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”*

**I was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for my oaths and for the guests, I could not refuse her. Immediately I sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.**

There was a time when dance was defined by learning the steps, the patterns, the moves. Even in the sixties, while an older generation questioned whether the Twist was legitimate dance, teens wanted to be sure they learned how to do the Twist the right way – you may recall a common instruction was to move your arms and hips as if you were holding a towel with both hands and moving it back and forth on your backside.

I don’t watch “Dancing with the Stars,” nor the ballroom dancing on public television, but I do marvel at those who can effortlessly spin and slide, twirl and promenade through a whole dance. It might be a ballroom dance, or even a break dance, or a joyous yet intricate square dance. There are even times in sports, when we describe the movement of an athlete’s body as a dance.

Now, to be honest, I marvel at dance much of the time. I say much of the time, because sometimes, I see an individual or couple, who from my visual perspective seems to be showing off, drawing attention to themselves. I don’t know them, but it seems clear to me that is what they are doing. It may be why we resist movement in worship, or even clapping our hands during songs that are urging such a response. We are wary even a spirit-filled, or spirit-inspired movement might be viewed as a show-off performance.

This seems to be the reaction of Saul’s daughter, Michal, who was also one of David’s wives, when she saw the king dance his way into Jerusalem, accompanying the ark of the covenant. Let’s hear how David responds to Michal’s complaint, noting he himself sounds a bit gloating and full of himself. After all the people had gone home, with the goody bag of provisions David had provided them, the king himself arrives home. Eugene Peterson’s Message version concludes the chapter this way:

*David returned home to bless his family. Michal, Saul's daughter, came out to greet him: "How wonderfully the king has distinguished himself today—exposing himself to the eyes of the servants' maids like some burlesque street dancer!" David replied to Michal, "In God's presence I'll dance all I want! God chose me over your father and the rest of our family and made me prince over God's people, over Israel. Oh yes, I'll dance to God's glory – more recklessly even than this. And as far as I'm concerned...I'll gladly look like a fool...but among these maids you're so worried about, I'll be honored no end." Michal, Saul's daughter, was barren the rest of her life.*

At this time, David is still a new, young king. We recall he was the youngest of Jesse's sons, a shepherd, and had displaced a sitting king, even if it was not by his choice or coup. Newness arouses suspicion among the establishment. In his biblical commentary of II Samuel, Walter Brueggemann suggests there could well have been some politics involved in David raising up the importance of the ark, the old and cherished symbol of Israel's past. [Brueggemann, Walter, I and II Samuel Interpretation Commentary, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990)]

Today, we would listen for the political "spin" in the reports of the ark's arrival in Jerusalem. Supporters of David would highlight how the new king was solidly aware of his nation's heritage, so much so that he himself accompanied the ark into the city, offered sacrifices every six paces, and danced with abandon. David's opposition, including those from the old house of Saul would call this a political stunt, a brash seeking after the endorsement of the powerful Levite priests, or what we would today call Saul's "base."

So, we can look at David's dance at being utter joy of God's presence coming into the city of Jerusalem, or we can be wary of David's motives and find his joyous appearance suspect. It is a struggle we have in other aspects of life. We don't want to be fooled. We want to know if it is true or calculated joy we are witnessing.

We now leave David's dance and turn to the much different dance of our Gospel lesson, one openly lodged in lust and a vow, grief and an execution. The story line is quite straightforward. John the Baptist condemned Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias. Herodias resents John for doing so. Herod is afraid of John because of his holiness and righteousness. So, while Herod will imprison John, he provides him protection while there, and also must have called John in for some conversations.

Then comes Herod's birthday, and the fateful dance of the daughter of Herodias. Unlike the play and opera, "Salome", Mark details neither the dancer's degree of stimulation, nor the king's level of infatuation. We simply hear Herod and his guests were so "pleased" he promised the girl any wish for which she asked. She goes to her mother, who seizes the opportunity to exact revenge on John. Herodias sends her daughter back with the wish Herod is to grant: John the Baptist's head. Herod is caught between his grief and his pride.

Here, we have the prophetic voice of John being imprisoned, but protected, until Herod is caught in his own vow. My goodness, what would the pundits have said if he broke a vow? Later in Mark, one named Pilate must keep a vow to release a prisoner of the people's choosing and releases Barabbas instead of Jesus.

It would be easy to cast Herod's ethical shortcomings solely into the world of politics and politicians, who we say stand for the good until the good conflicts with being reelected. Yet, in fact, few of us are immune from such compromise, even if it does not involve campaign funding, or result in the beheading of a prophet.

I will admit there are times I weigh what others might think before deciding whether to take a stand or even offer a thought. As an interim pastor, one is a sojourner along for just a short part of a congregation's journey, so while expected to offer insights, I might think twice about suggesting dramatic change. Certainly, we are to consider the feelings and reactions of others, but the problem comes when we give priority to certain others – those with influence, those who will make our lives difficult if we cross them. Even in the church, we can find ourselves negotiating the petty to please or appease the powerful, the proud, and the privileged.

When I realize this has happened to me, when I have made an unhealthy compromise, or succumb to pressures of power, pride or privilege, I sense something deeply wrong in my gut. I feel I have lost a part of myself, even if no one else knows it. I expect it is a God warning, and I thank God for it; for unlike Herod who had John executed, we are often given second chances.

I'd like to return to one emotion with Herod we may miss. Upon receiving the request for John's head, Mark writes Herod was deeply grieved. Prior to this, we read how Herod liked to listen to John, even if John's words perplexed him. Biblical scholar Douglas John Hall puts a very human perspective on this when he suggests, "Herod...recognizes in the witness of John the kind of human authenticity to which he too is called." [repeat] [Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 238]

For me, this is a reminder, that when I see others dance only through the lens of suspicion their dance may not be true, I may be acting out of jealousy or cynicism as did his wife, Michal. How easy to dismiss David's dance as politically calculated, and miss the joy of God's presence coming to reside in Jerusalem.

When, with David, we have the sense of God's abiding presence with us, we have reason to dance. When we have been given the Good News of the grace, love, and peace of Christ, we have reason to dance. When we resist unhealthy compromise, and do not succumb to the temptations of power, pride, and privilege, we have reason to dance.

Yet, such dancing comes with risk. As one has written, "The world (like Herod) does not take active affirmation of God's rule readily. People lose their heads if they claim too much for the gospel – too much joy, too much demand." [Texts for Preaching Year B, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 421]

People can tell if we have a heart for the dance of faith, not by the steps and moves we have learned, but by the spirit and passion with which we live them. Let us encourage one another to have reasons to dance...for joy...for life...for peace...for love...for justice...for God.