

“Shall We Dance?”

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

Sunday, July 11, 2021

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David dances before the Lord with joyful abandon, overcome by delight in expressing joy in his experience of the presence of God.

The story of David stripping his clothes and tying on his boogie shoes is probably not a story you heard in Sunday school. For one thing, David’s costume leaves very little to the imagination. For another, there is the troubling interaction between David and his wife at the end, and an even more troubling episode in verses six through eleven, which we did not read this morning.

There’s no doubt that this charismatic king has moves, but this is a sanctuary and not a ballroom, and Presbyterians are hardly known for their spontaneous outbursts of ecstatic, toe-tapping acts of praise. In fact, here’s a Presbyterian re-enactment of David’s exuberant dancing. (Standing still, waving hand awkwardly.) Want to see it again? There are reasons why we are known as God’s frozen chosen.

Given all of that, the image of a charismatic young king dancing in his skivvies may feel strange—yet for many of the same reasons, this story seems so relevant. David invites all of Israel to dance before the presence of the Lord, and he invites us into that dance as well. Let’s just remain fully clothed.

Before we pump the brakes on dancing, remember that dancing has long been part of many religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity. Psalm 149 invites God’s people to be rejoice and be glad and calls upon them to praise God with dancing and with songs. Ecclesiastes chapter three reminds us that there is a time to mourn and a time to dance, and certainly the festivals Jesus attended included joyful dancing and exuberant acts of praise.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s PBS documentary on the history of the Black Christianity in America provides glimpses of how Black church’s contributions of rhythmic songs and upbeat tempos shaped Christianity. Scripture itself is filled with the pulsing, life-changing sounds of tambourines and cymbals, and stringed instruments.

Pay close attention to the story of David’s dancing, and see if there might be a grace-filled invitation for us today. As we emerge from the soul-chilling laments of the pandemic into a time of renewed joy and hopefulness, allow the grace of Christ to lead you into this dance. David’s spontaneous acts of praise may teach us something about responding to the invitation of the Holy Spirit.

So, shall we dance?

David’s story, much like ours, emerges from deep mourning and sadness. Israel mourned the loss of King Saul, and David felt additional grief over the death of his friend Jonathan who was

Saul's son. In the defeat and loss, however, David emerged as a leader whose enthusiasm and faithfulness renewed the faith of Israel.

But while David grabs our attention, the actual main character of this story is the Ark of the Lord. Even more compelling than a charismatic king dancing around in his skivvies is the story of how the presence of God brings joy and transformation.

Now go back to all the things you learned about the Bible from "Indiana Jones and The Raiders of the Lost Ark." Go back and recall that the ark was a wooden box that held the stone tablets of the law Moses had received on Sinai. The box was carried by long poles and accompanied the people of Israel wherever they went. It was a symbol of God's presence with Israel, a reminder that God was accompanying them on the trials and tribulations of the wilderness. It speaks of the faithfulness of God in releasing Israel from bondage and embodied the promise that God would not abandon Israel. Generation after generation carried the ark in faithful procession as a symbol and sign of God's holy presence.

Remarkably, little attention is paid to the Ark until David comes on the scene. By an amazing act of ingenious leadership, David brings the Ark back into the center of Israel's focus. Captivated by this symbolic reminder of God's presence, Israel renews its worship in body, soul, and mind. David leads God's people in these acts of bold praise and exuberant hallelujahs—offering us a reminder that worship is a moment of losing ourselves before the presence of the Lord.

Throughout the pandemic, especially in the moments when we were isolated from each other, I found comfort in reading the accounts of Israel's Babylonian exile. Entering the sanctuary on Sundays when there were only two or three or four of us here, we'd look at the wonderful photos of your smiling faces and remember the moments we had shared together. For Israel, as for us, the time of being cut off was a time of relearning our identity as God's people.

And as we emerge from that pandemic, I believe now is the time for us to dance. Now is the time for our worship to be bold and filled with joy, and for our fellowship and service to be filled with loving laughter and hope. "The church," writes John Stevens and Michael Washevski, "lives by the grace of God. The church grows by giving itself away. It survives not by being hit but by being faithful." They continue, "In worship, we are called to be in one place together, both physically and spiritually. In worship, we think about and pray about and celebrate what God is calling us to be and do."¹

Worship is our primary spiritual practice—a time of joyful abandon and delight. David catches a glimpse of the Ark, and is filled with reminders of the presence of God. More than just knowing, he feels the outpouring of God's abundance upon him and upon Israel. He senses the power of God's love flowing around and in the people...and he begins to dance.

¹ John Stevens and Michale Washevski, "Rhythms of Worship," (2014)

As Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ came to us as the Lord of the Dance, calling us away from lives that were empty and without purpose, and calling us to moments of joy sustained by the promise that we are wholeheartedly, unconditionally loved by God.

Today am still feeling the beat of our Vacation Bible School music. This week, the children jumped joyfully, waving hands in celebration and laughter. There was joy in this place, real joy. On Friday, as the children lined up to sing their songs, one little boy pushed himself to the very front of the line. Pretty soon he channeling his inner-King David by throwing himself into the moves with joy and delight.

He found the presence of God, and to me, that is worth celebrating. He ate graham crackers with icing, hear stories about God's faithfulness, sang about God's love, played silly games and discovered the presence of God—no wonder he danced!

For too long we have been stuck, mired in the muddy grounds of seriousness, anxiety and worry. That is the truth. As the authors of the 2021 World Happiness Report have noted, our capacity to experience well-being and joy have been shaken as we have all tried to cope with the realities of the pandemic. (By the way, the United States ranks a dismal 19th in the official global happiness rankings.) Researchers found that there were large increases in negative emotions.²

We need the energetic enthusiasm of that little boy: rising from the lament and grief we have all experienced, we need to dance.

We need the reminder that the presence of God fills us with a holy joy.

There have been times when that tangible presence of God has rifled through my body, sending the hair on my arms upright. There were moments in seminary when the hours of academic about God and theology and endless debates about the different Greek verbs would get to me. I'd rush out of class, run across the street to the campus of Princeton University. I'd find myself lost in the University's massive gothic chapel, staring at its immense windows. There in the quiet of that large empty space I'd feel the presence of God once more. And while I didn't leave dancing, the Spirit was dancing in me once more.

Father Richard Rohr tells of a time when he preached and celebrated mass in a poor neighborhood in the Philippines. As he preached, he saw the shining eyes of little children who had been eaten up and spit out by life. As he celebrated the Mass in this squatter's camp, all around him was the excitement that "Fodder" was coming. "The kids met me to lead me into the barrio. Out of these shacks came kids in perfectly clean clothes. I don't know how the mothers kept them so clean," he writes, "They're all dressed up for Sunday. The boys all got

²See <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/happiness-trust-and-deaths-under-covid-19/>

their guitars, and it was the big event of the week.” Speaking to North Americans, Rohr adds, “They have something we lost...they’re smiling and a lot of us aren’t.”³

How long has it been since the presence of God danced in your heart? How long has it been since the joyful light of God’s love danced on your heart? That moment in Israel was as glorious as the light breaking through the panels of our stained-glass window. It was as powerful as the Earth-shaking tremors of a powerful pipe organ, or as inspiring as a Gospel choir. The ark was the signal of God’s presence.

So, shall we dance?

Amen.

³ Richard Rohr, “Everything Belongs,” (1999)