

Dying, or Dancing?

Ephesians 1:3-14

2 Samuel 6:1-15

Let us pray: Amazing, Life-giving, Lord of the Dance - help us to hear your music. Teach us your choreography. Give us the joy, the passion, the sweet renewing of your Holy Spirit that we might join in the dance with you. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

When I was about four years old, my parents enrolled me in a dance program. I remember little about it, except my debut in a tap dance to the music of the Teddy Bear's Picnic, which was captured on film by my proud papa. There I was with two other little girls, on some stage somewhere. I had the best pink tutu of the trio, I can tell you, and the teddy bear which I clung to seemed to wear the most congenial expression of the three, but I was as uncertain about the steps as a novice could be. The whole dance through, I was consistently one step behind the others, even though I kept glancing furtively at the towering five year old to my right, who clearly remembered exactly what we were doing there.

Although I certainly did not understand or appreciate much of what was going on at the time, I was left with a deep passion and joy of dance. In fact, my latest secret (or not so secret) vice is my addiction to the TV show *So You Think You Can Dance*, which I cannot watch without wanting to leap up from my seat and fly around the room with that same gravity-defying grace and energy. I think dance is innate within us all. If you doubt that, then spend more time with a two year old—any two year old—who automatically will move to the music, bouncing on little tiny feet to the beat. It's only as we become older and conscious of ourselves that we evaluate our own grace, or lack thereof, and slowly but surely shut down our joyful, spontaneous responses that lie God-given in the center of our souls.

As I was preparing to preach this Sunday and turned to the prescribed lectionary texts for the week, I found myself drawn to this weird and wonderful story from the Hebrew Scriptures. It's not an easy story, and I kept searching around for a different option to preach—but long ago, someone told me that the preacher doesn't choose the text, the text chooses the preacher. I found that to be particularly true this week, as I just could not escape the lure of this story. I think it's because it's about The Dance. The great, mysterious, passionate, frightening and irresistible dance that happens when we listen to the drumbeat of God. Let's listen together to the Word for us this morning, as it comes from 2 Samuel 6:1-15, reading from the New Century Version:

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel - thirty thousand of them. He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the Lord Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. They put the Ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of Abinadab's house on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, led the new cart which had the Ark of God on it. Ahio was walking in front of it. David and all the Israelites were dancing before the Lord with all their might. They were playing wooden instruments: lyres, harps, tambourines, rattles, and cymbals.

When David's men came to the threshing floor of Nacon, the oxen stumbled. So Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark of God. The Lord's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the Ark of God. David was angry because the Lord had killed Uzzah. Now that place is called the Punishment of Uzzah. David was afraid of the Lord that day, and he said, "How can the Ark of God come to me now?" So David would not move the Ark of God to be with him in Jerusalem. Instead, he took it to the house of Obed-Edom, a man from Gath. The Ark of God stayed in Obed-Edom's house for three months, and the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his family.

The people told David, "The Lord has blessed the family of Obed-Edom and all that belongs to him, because the Ark of God is there." So David went and brought it up from Obed-Edom's house to Jerusalem with joy. When the men carrying the Ark of God had walked six steps, David sacrificed a bull and a fat calf. Then David, dressed in a holy linen vest, danced with all his might before the Lord. David and all the Israelites shouted with joy and blew the trumpets as they brought the Ark of the Lord to the city.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Aha. Odd little story, isn't it? For us even to talk about it at all, I guess we need to cover some Bible background. Way back in the early days, the people of Israel had escaped from slavery in Egypt and were wandering through the wilderness of Sinai. It was during this experience of seeking direction, and being formed into a people who knew themselves to be guided by God, that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. These precious tablets were too holy to be handled casually, and so a special box was built to house them—a box of specific dimensions and design, with winged angels or cherubim on the lid, and special rings and poles to be used for transporting the box so that you did not touch it directly. The box came to be known as the Ark of the Covenant, or the Ark of God, and it was understood that it signified the physical presence of God in the midst of the people. If you aren't familiar with the biblical account of this special box, perhaps you know of it from the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, so popular in the 1980s. That was only a movie, but its premise correctly reflects the biblical notion that the ark, as holy evidence of God's relationship with his people, is not to be trifled with, or treated casually or contemptuously. Those who did so came to terrifying end.

Our scripture picks up the story at a point where King David wanted to make Jerusalem the religious center of Israel, as well as the political and military capital. So, he decides to bring the Ark of the Covenant—the symbol of God's holy presence and power—into the city. David and his men load the ark onto an ox cart, and set out in a religious procession that included music and dancing, and singing, a holy festival. Along the way, however, the oxen stumble, the ark slips and, in what seems to be a purely reflexive gesture, Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the box.

The next instant Uzzah is dead, and everyone—including us—is shocked. The music dies away, the dancers freeze in mid-pirouette, and the parade halts right there. An awestruck David asks the question, "How can the ark come to me?" He has been shocked into recognition that the presence of God is indeed a transcendent thing, that worship is a life-and-death thing, and that God's holiness can never be taken for granted, or presumed upon, or treated with such familiarity that it becomes a casual affair.

It seems to me that this story points to much of what we suffer from in the world today. It seems that for many, even for many Christians, God has lost his holiness. Christians have turned Jesus into our buddy, our Coach; the Holy Spirit into emotional entertainment; the Creator of all that we are and all that we might become into a comforting presence that reassures us we're OK. For many of us, worship has become a casual affair. This may be what we think we're looking for, but for many outside the church, they've stopped coming because they have failed to encounter a God who offers something different from what the world offers, a God who is Other, a Spirit with the power to transform us, a Messiah who can save us.

But we crave that—deep down inside, human beings crave a world with meaning, a life that matters, a God who has real power and presence today. Some say as post-modern, post-literal people, we've lost our story, we've forgotten who we are ... we've forgotten whose we are. When we forget our story, we have no framework for the present. When we forget whose we are, we live entirely for ourselves. When we do not stand in awe of the holy otherness of God, we create idols to fill the void. How else do you explain how the death of someone like Michael Jackson—who lived an admittedly talented but tragically distorted life—can call forth such an outpouring of response that even the secular commentator on the news could remark on the "religious fervor" of that event?

People today are literally dying to encounter something worthy of our energies and attention, something that unites us together with others in one heart and mind, something that inspires us beyond ourselves into awareness of our own validity as human beings. The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians in the first century, provides a roadmap, a readjustment, a realignment in answer to the idolatries of this and every age:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ... In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we ...might live for the praise of his glory.

That's it right there. As the Westminster Catechism reminds us: What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy him forever (Westminster Larger Catechism Q.1.). We are called to live for the praise of God's glory. That's why we're here this morning. That's what we're doing right now. We're here to glorify God and worship him in Spirit and in Truth.

I'm always interested in why people come to church. Often I hear folks say, "I come to get my pick-me-up for the week." "I come to meet my friends." "I come because I feel guilty if I don't." Or... "I don't come because we've been busy." "We don't come because of the kids' sports." ...or, most shocking of all, "I don't come because I don't get anything out of it." And I'll speak for myself in my days at Ford Motor Company when I didn't come because Sunday was the one day of the week when I didn't have to get out bed early in the morning. I know. I understand; I do. But the trouble is all these responses stem from a misunderstanding of what we're doing here.

We come to Worship. We come to glorify God and enjoy him forever. We come to realign our lives, to reorient ourselves to the one who created us. We come to remember who we are, and whose we are, to remember our story, to stand in awe and holy wonder, to dance and sing and praise and bend before the One who made us.

When people say "I didn't get anything out of it" they reveal that they understand themselves to be the consumers of a commodity that is designed to please them. But who do you think is the audience in worship? ... It's God.... And if God is the audience, then you are the performers, you are the musicians, you are the dancers. You are the ones who come to make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation, as our call to worship invited you to do.

Liturgy is the fancy name for the order of worship that is printed in your bulletin. Liturgy is Greek for the Work of the People. To worship God is to serve him—to do his work. We think of serving God with our mission and our ministries, doing things God needs to have done. But we also serve God by doing things that we need to do—by doing what we were created to do. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes it: "We pray, we listen to God's word, we confess, we make peace, we lift up our hearts, we hold out our hands, we are fed, we give thanks, we go forth. We practice the patterns of our life together before God, rehearsing them until they become second nature to us. In the liturgy of the word, we come to understand that the God who has been involved with us since time began is involved with us still. In the liturgy of the table, we experience the incarnate Lord who feeds and forgives and calls us to follow him into the world. Through ... these encounters we expand our images of what it means to be human and what it means to be divine, so that we are better able to live into the fullness of our heritage (..or our inheritance, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians) as sons and daughters of God."¹ This is work of worship, and there's nothing casual about it.

Judging by the way most Presbyterians go about it, it's dire and gloomy work indeed. We aren't called the frozen chosen for nothing, as we awkwardly and self-consciously mouth the words, hoping no one else can hear us sing... we sit woodenly in our pews, afraid to let our bodies move in case we makes fools of ourselves. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Earlier this year I had the great joy of worshiping with 1400 other clergy and lay worship leaders from around the world at the Calvin Symposium on worship. And let me tell you, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven—not because the preachers were the best in the world, or the musicians the most outstanding—but because the worshipers came to the work of worship body and soul, filled with the immense joy of lifting up hands and hearts and lives and spirits and souls to worship the Living God. Everyone sang at the tops of their lungs, and let me tell you, when everyone is singing at the tops of their lungs, no one hears or cares if *you* are out of tune. When everyone is willing to dance in the aisles, we're all fools for God.

When we abandon our self-conscious restraint to become again the children of God we truly are, then we are liberated to join with the Lord of the Dance in the greatest work of our lives: the work that reconciles us to God and to ourselves and to one another; that fills us with the living Word and transforms us by Holy Spirit; that empowers us to go from this place realigned, able to proclaim the Good News with our lives.

After some time of pondering the frightening, otherness of God, and after hearing that God had not fearfully wrought havoc on those who harbored the ark, but on the contrary blessed them, David renewed his commitment to bring this holy reminder of a holy and awesome God to Jerusalem. You can bet he set out on that holy parade with due awe and reverence and wonder... but also with joy and abandon, yielding up his whole being, dancing with all his might, in praise and worship of an awesome God.

Our purpose as human beings is to worship and serve *God*—a *God* who came to dwell among us, a *God* who provides our lives with story and purpose; a *God* who invites us to leap up from our seats and join with David and all who have gone before in a glorious, exciting, impassioned and passionate dance. It's what you were created to do.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life*. Cowley Publications. Cambridge, Mass. 1993. 64.