

## David's Dangerous Dance

I can't read this story without thinking of a little song I heard many years ago, called "The Dancing Heart" ...

David danced before the Lord,  
he danced with all his might.  
His heart was filled with holy joy,  
his spirit was so light.  
Michal through the window looked  
to criticize did start.  
She didn't know that David  
had got a dancing heart.

Oh, the Holy Ghost will set your feet a-dancing,  
the Holy Ghost will thrill you through and through.  
The Holy Ghost will set your feet a-dancing,  
and set your heart a-dancing too.

This song, by the way, was made famous in certain parts of the church by a family of kilt-wearing Scottish Pentecostal singers known as the Camerons. And I've sung it, at least in part, because it does something that we Christians tend to do with many stories from the Bible. It pulls out one piece of the story, that while true in its own right, glosses over a lot of other dimensions and layers that also have a lot to say to us. But gaining a deeper understanding of all those dimensions and layers is important to our own growth into maturity as disciples of Jesus.

With that in mind, I've decided to call this sermon "David's Dangerous Dance." Now to some of us, just the thought that your pastor might stand in the

pulpit and suggest that we all need to start dancing before the Lord is dangerous enough. But that's actually not what I want to focus on.

We've fast-forwarded through a lot of David's story here, so we need to retrace our steps a bit. David's defeat of Goliath in the story we read last week begins a dramatic series of events that lead to the end of king Saul's reign and the rise of David as Israel's next king. It's the story of Saul's irrational jealousy of David and his attempts to kill him, and of David's loyalty to Saul and his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan. That story reaches a tragic climax at the end of 1 Samuel with the death of both Saul and Jonathan in a battle against the Philistines, followed at the beginning of 2 Samuel by the messy political infighting that ultimately leads to David's coronation as king.

This story also reveals just how complex David is as a person. He shows himself to be a man who is devoted to the Lord, who is remembered in Scripture as "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14, Acts 13:22)—just the sort of person who might dance before the Lord with all his might. And he shows himself to be a person of integrity and loyalty.

But he was also a shrewd and calculating politician, who was driven by personal ambition along with his desire to serve the Lord. As we read just before this, in 2 Samuel 5, we learn that as soon as David becomes king he starts acting like one—he makes Jerusalem his capital and builds a fine house for himself from cedar imported from Lebanon, and even gets himself a harem. Maybe he's just

proving what the prophet Samuel warned the people about, even a good king is still a king.

It's only after David settles in that his thoughts turn to the idea of bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. In order to appreciate what's going on here, we need to remember a few things about the ark. In the days after the exodus from Egypt, the Lord commanded Moses to build a wooden box, covered with gold. Inside the box were three important symbols of the Lord's covenant with Israel—the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments, a golden pot filled with manna, and Aaron's rod. On either end of the lid of the ark were golden-winged creatures called cherubim, whose wings met over its center. The Israelites believed that the ark was the footstool of the Lord's throne, that he was—as the reading says—enthroned on the cherubim.

The ark was ordinarily to be found in the innermost part of the sanctuary, the holies of holies, and the only person who could enter there was the high priest when he came once a year to make atonement for the people's sins. But in those early days, the people were constantly on the move, so the ark was designed to be portable, to travel before them across the desert. So each corner had a ring attached to it, and it was to be carried by poles that went through the rings.

For years the ark had sort of been in storage, kept by a man named Abinadab in the hill country of Judah—but now David decides to move it to

Jerusalem. Why would he want to do this? Was this purely an act of devotion to the Lord—a way to provide a more permanent place for Israel to worship now that the nation was at peace? Or did he have other, more political motives? Like bringing this ultimate symbol of Israel's faith into his capital city as a way of consolidating his power as king. Of course, it's possible that it may have been both of these things.

In any event, David calls together a huge assembly of thirty thousand "chosen men", has the ark loaded up on a brand new oxcart, and starts singing and dancing his way to Jerusalem. And then the dance turns dangerous. As the party approaches a stopping point, the cart wobbles, and one of the escorts, Uzzah, does what anyone would do. He reaches a hand out to steady the ark—but as soon as he touches it he's struck dead.

I'm not going to try to make sense of why the Lord would do something so harsh, and we need to avoid any kind of superstitious ideas about the ark having some sort of supernatural powers of its own. But the message it sends to David is that in putting together this big joyful celebration, he had ignored one key thing—the ark was the ark of God, the Lord of hosts, the Holy One of Israel, who is enthroned upon the cherubim.

One theory, which makes sense to me, is that this tragic event happened because David put the ark on that ox cart. As we've seen, it was designed—at the Lord's own instructions—to be carried by men on foot, not jostled around on a wagon. But David had presumed to bring the ark to Jerusalem, to the place

he chose to be his capital city, and to do it on his terms and in his way. He presumed to believe that because God had chosen him to be king Israel, he also had some special or privileged relationship with him. He forgot that the Lord was more than his friend or political ally—he was and is the Holy One.

Although it's been many years since I last read it, whenever I think of this I'm drawn to a passage in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and Wardrobe*. The children are remembering something Mr. Beaver, one of the residents of Narnia, had once told them about Aslan the lion, who is the Christ-figure in the stories.

"He'll be coming and going" [Mr. Beaver] had said. "One day you'll see him and another you won't. He doesn't like being tied down--and of course he has other countries to attend to. It's quite all right. He'll often drop in. Only you mustn't press him. He's wild, you know. Not like a tame lion."

And in another place, when Susan asks Mr. Beaver whether Aslan is "safe," he says, "Who said anything about safe?' Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

It's true that the Lord is our shepherd, that he's the one Jesus teaches us to address as "our Father" and that Paul says we cry out to as "Abba! Father!" when we pray. The Lord is all that, but he also cannot be tamed or contained or controlled by us or signed up as our sponsor.

In the story, it says that after Uzzah's death David was afraid of the Lord and afraid to bring the ark to Jerusalem. But after some time for reflection, David gets a do-over. On his second try, you'll notice that the narrator says that they carried the ark, and that they offered sacrifices along the way. This time, David

made sure that this procession was all about the Lord. And he danced so enthusiastically that he became an embarrassment to his wife—and I'm sure that if his children were looking on there probably a few eye rolls from them, too.

How will we worship the Lord with holy reverence? In a time when our language has become so devalued, when I turn on the evening news and everything that has happened that day is a “bombshell” or a “blockbuster” or a “breakthrough,” and practically everything is “awesome,” how shall we find language to express the glory of God? How shall we draw upon the fullness of God's gifts, not only of language, but of music and visual art and movement, of time and space—to reflect and experience the holiness and majesty of God?

How we will worship the Lord with holy joy? It might be an odd thought, but every now and then someone will comment that they appreciate that I smile so much when I'm singing. Since I think we're pretty far from dancing and tambourines, that might be a place to begin. When we sing, like we did last week, “I sing because I'm happy ...” we might dare to look like we're happy! To leave aside just a little bit of our self-consciousness about the quality of our singing voices, or what the person sitting next you might think if you starting clapping or—heaven forbid—moving a little bit with that song that moves us and express what's in our hearts.

David's dance was dangerous because he dared to draw near to the Lord, the Holy One. How shall we worship him in holiness and in joy? Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding/First Presbyterian Church, Dixon/August 5, 2018*