

“David’s Dance”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 20, 2019

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 150

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-14

Ever since Dr. Henry Jones, Jr. – better known to movie-goers as “Indiana Jones” – appeared on the cinematic scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* thirty-five years ago, the Ark of the Covenant has played a role in the popular imagination that goes beyond the pages of scripture. Who can forget that climactic scene when the lid of the ark is opened in the desert, unleashing the glory of God and killing all who dare to look into the ark? Only Indy and his friend Marian, who are wise enough not to look directly at God’s presence, survive this unleashing of the literal face-melting power of God.

Sometimes it takes fictional stories in popular culture, or ancient biblical stories such as the one we read today, to remind us that the power of God is something to be worshiped, to be celebrated, to be awed, maybe even to be feared; because it is, in fact, the mystery of God in which we place our faith.

And so, in choosing to bring the ark to the new capital city of Jerusalem, King David has at least some idea of the mysterious power that was contained within. A large, intricately made chest containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the ark functions as God’s throne; the visible home of God’s invisible presence. During their journey in the wilderness, the ancient Israelites had carried the ark with them until finally entering into the Promised Land. The ark’s first home in Canaan was in the sanctuary at Shiloh. During battle, the Philistines captured the ark, but their possession of it did not go well, so it was sent away and stored for years at the home of Abinadab, where it sat largely forgotten.¹

But David knows that the ark remains a powerful symbol of God’s power, so he decides to reintroduce it to the people as a sign that he, David, is now lord over a unified kingdom, with its new capital in Jerusalem. The previous chapter of 2 Samuel tells the story of how David and his army captured the well-fortressed city of Jerusalem; showing again – as he had when he slew the Philistine giant Goliath – that this underdog should never be counted out because, as scripture describes it time and again, David was “a man after God’s own heart.”

¹ Elna Solvang from *WorkingPreacher.com*

We join the story this morning as David is leading the procession of the ark from the house of Abinadab into Jerusalem. There was no Temple in Jerusalem yet – that would be built during the reign of David’s son, Solomon – and so it was to be temporarily lodged in a tent. We hear that this procession was a time of great celebration and rejoicing, with feasting and dancing accompanied by a variety of musical instruments.

In the verses we skipped over today, this celebration is interrupted as one of the ark’s attendants, reaching out to touch it to try to keep it from tipping off its cart, dies on the spot. As with the scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, this appears to be a visible display of the power that rested with the invisible God contained within this holy vessel. The episode kills the celebratory mood and angers David, who postpones the entrance of the ark for three months.

At the resumption of our reading, we find David dancing again while the ark is finally moved to its intended resting place. Interestingly, this time, there is no music, and David seems to be the only one dancing; doing so – we are told – nearly *au natural*, wearing only a linen cloth. Maybe the mood of the people now reflects their fear and awe of God more than wonder and joy. Who knows: maybe David wants to dance to show them that God’s mysterious power is not out-of-control; or maybe he dances to help them remember that it was God’s uncontrolled power and glory that led them to this Land of Promise and has allowed them, after many generations, to establish this united kingdom that they have long awaited.

And so, the placement of the ark in Jerusalem not only establishes David as the people’s king: as the noble warrior who conquered their enemies, but also as their priest: the one who has brought God’s commandments back to the center of their new kingdom. And though he may not be a perfect servant of God – something that will be made very clear in the coming chapters of 2 Samuel – he shows himself to be a passionate worshipper of God; dancing in celebration at the coming of God’s presence; no matter what awesome mysteries it might portend.

Although we may not have an ark to place in the midst of our worship space – for while there are many theories, no-one knows for sure where the ark of the covenant rests today – there are other symbols that announce and remind us of God’s awesome presence in our midst. First, there is God’s Word, the scripture of the Old and New Testaments, that we believe tell the story of God’s covenant relationship with God’s people and of God’s salvation which is revealed to us through the grace of Jesus Christ. We also have the sacraments of baptism and holy communion that were instituted by Jesus for our practice. And, we are granted signs of God’s grace through the worship, fellowship, and mission of

God's gathered and sent people; those who help remind us what it means to live with faith, hope, joy and love.

Last week, when I led worship at North Church, there was a point during the worship service when – in response to the word of scripture that was read and proclaimed – one of the church members offered a liturgical dance. While this is not the way that we, here at Valley, typically respond to God's presence, it reminded me of this story about David and how, not once but twice – the first time with a celebratory processional crowd accompanied by lyres, cymbals, and castanets; and the second time dancing alone, scantily clothed, without music, after a tragic and seemingly senseless death – twice, David danced for God. The common thread of these two dances was not the situation, and certainly not the mood, but that it was done to honor God. David may not have always been a perfect person, but he shows himself here as consistent in his love for, devotion to, and awe of God.

When I teach confirmation class, I often show students a clip from another popular movie from long before their time – *The Blues Brothers* – where Jake and Elwood receive a message from God while worshipping at a gospel church, where James Brown is the pastor. I then ask the students what is different about worship at that church – where congregants are dancing in the pews and doing back-flips down the aisles – and our church; but even more important than what is different, what is the same?

I have gotten some interesting answers from confirmands over the years; but it might surprise you that they typically see as much or more that is similar than different. They can see signs that our worship is an occasion for joy, that there are signs of hope, that it inspires people to sing and pray, laugh and cry, persevere and start anew, that it speaks to the mystery of a God who may be invisible, but who is revealed in visible ways. Though we may not be dancing in the aisles, they know that God's power is made known in what is seen, heard, and done.

So, what are the ways that we celebrate the presence of God and God's awesome and mysterious power? If it is not by dancing like David, or the liturgist at North Church, or the fictional worshippers in *The Blues Brothers*, then how do we do it? Is it through music, the offer of our gift of instrument and voice? Is it in the way that we welcome, love, and support one another as members of this body? Is it through our reaching out – by supporting God's mission whether it be at North Church, or to students at the Dougbe River School, or to the thousands of people unknown to us who will receive meals packaged here in two weeks?

It is instead in the way that you care for one of your neighbors – maybe someone who is troubled, hurting, or lonely? Is it in the way that you serve as a care-giver, either full-time or in relief of those who sometimes need respite? Might it be in the way that you pass along some of the wisdom and knowledge that you have acquired; maybe it is through your intercessory prayer practice of lifting up those who are in need of God’s care? Could it be through your creative or culinary works, through letters written or words of encouragement spoken; or by being a good steward of the earth and the gifts that it gives?

What David remembered, and what we seek to remember too, is that the presence of God is a blessing to be celebrated, even in the midst of all its mysterious power. God’s demand is not that we understand the why and how and what all of that happens is going to mean, but just that we acknowledge God’s presence with celebration – offering ourselves, our bodies, our voices, our gifts and our resources with thanksgiving. We don’t know whether David felt like dancing that second time around; maybe he was still afraid of the power of death that bringing the ark to Jerusalem had revealed, but sometimes in the presence of God, we don’t need ask why or know what is going to happen, we just give in to our child-like side and dance.²

When we read stories like this one about David and the ark in 2 Samuel, we remember that our worship of God is not necessarily about understanding or making sense of everything. We are sometimes too often obsessed with facts and proof; David chose to believe instead that the presence of the ark would inspire his people to recall the power of God who released them from slavery and carried them to their Promised Land; that it would allow them to be guided by the commandments that God had given to help order their life and community. This is a God of mystery and awe, but also a God of delight and celebration; a God who holds power over life and death; a God to be worshipped. A God who even might be calling us, when we find ourselves in the powerful presence of that awesome mystery, to dance. Amen.

² Beth Birkhotlz, “David’s Dance” from *Day1.org*