

“A Time to Dance”

II Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

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One of the reasons I love watching a good soccer match is that there is no rule limiting the celebration following a goal scored. Whether it's scored with a flick of the head or on a break away or a corner kick or a penalty kick or a first-time boot from a good pass, the one scoring the goal leaps into the air and hits the ground dancing! And within a matter of seconds, the rest of the team is dancing. It's a dance that's never been choreographed before. It has no set rhythm, no distinguishable steps, nothing identifiable such as a tango or a fox trot or the twist. It's just one explosion of joy, one mass of legs and arms, one frenzied exaltation.

Joy has that effect on people! Joy makes you want to dance! I am certain that everyone here has such a story of a time when joy broke into your life and you just felt the urge to tap your foot or waltz across the floor with an invisible partner, or just let yourself go with the Macarena or the McEnroe or the Macaroni.

Joy is a spiritual word and dance is often a spiritual exercise. When joy and dance collide, watch out! The spirit will not be contained!

That's what's going on in II Samuel chapter six. Young King David is so full of joy his feet get carried away! His tunic becomes a hindrance, so he flings it to one side, dancing up a cloud of dust. The Muslims might call this a Sufi dance, a dance of spiritual ecstasy.

The Philistines, Israel's historic nemesis, had managed to capture the Ark of the Covenant from its traditional place in Jerusalem.

The Ark of the Covenant is the sacred vessel holding the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. And it was the belief in ancient Israel that wherever the Ark was, there was God! So, when David was anointed king in the previous chapter of II Samuel, his first stated objective is to retrieve the Ark. He hopes to accomplish this feat in his first one hundred days in office! David doesn't rescue the Ark single-handedly; but he leads the parade as the entourage returns to the Holy City. His joy at the recapture of the Ark finds its expression in a dance that is to be remembered forever.

There was, of course, one person who was not all that thrilled with David's dance, especially after he tossed his tunic aside. That would be his wife, Michal. She scolds him up one side and down the other, reprimands him for exposing himself in such a childish way before the maidens of the city. Kings don't behave so recklessly! David listens to his wife's critique, then looks her in the eye and says essentially, 'There is a time to dance and a time to refrain from dancing. THIS is one of the times for dancing, for the Ark was lost but now is found. This is the time to rejoice with all our might!' You might say that Michal and David agreed to disagree about that.

To me, David's dance is an invitation to faith communities to allow joy its proper place, its rightful expression, its spontaneous eruption. My Puritan forbearers and I would agree to disagree about this, but I can live with that!

On my short list of all-time best movies is Billy Elliot, now a stage play on Broadway. When we first meet Billy Elliot, he is a young boy suffering with an oppressive father who wants him to learn the sport of boxing. In that coalmining town, boxing is what makes a boy into a man. But Billy is drawn to the opposite end of the gymnasium where the girls are learning ballet.

He gravitates to that art form with fear and trembling. As the pianist plays, Billy's toes come to life. He is awkward but he is alive, alive for the first time in his life! In time, he presents himself for an audition at the prestigious London School of Ballet. Again his movements lack grace, but they are filled to the brim with joy. As he heads for the exit door, one of the judges calls to him, asks him what he feels when he dances. He says, "Once I get going, I forget everything. I feel a change in my whole body. It's just there...flying like a bird, like electricity. Yeah...like electricity!"

That is how David felt when he danced before the Ark of the Covenant. It doesn't really require a thoughtful decision; it simply requires a letting go, a moving with the spirit, a trusting in joy's momentum.

David is the one who really shakes up the Hebrew community's understanding of liturgy and praise in worship. A quick read through his collection of 150 psalms reveals that he is quite the innovator. He is not one to sit stoically in the pew. It's much more likely to catch him expressing his gratitude to God with some movement, some rhythm, some instrumentation.

In Psalm 30, David has obviously experienced a healing from some life threatening illness. He has come to the temple to praise God for the restoration of health. He sings:

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
You have taken off my sackcloth
And clothed me with joy,
So that my soul may praise you
And not be silent.
O, my Lord, I will praise you forever.

Can't you picture him singing and dancing at the same time? Right there in the temple? Michael Jackson may well have found his inspiration right there in Psalm 30!

By Psalm 150, David is inviting the congregation to use every instrument ever invented to praise God for the varieties of blessings bestowed: trumpet, lute, and harp; tambourine, and strings, and pipe; cymbals, loud clashing cymbals! And, he says, praise God with dance! I am glad this happens to be the Sunday Judy Benton is teaching the children to drum. I am guessing they are learning to praise God with conga drum and talking drum, with oatmeal box and with empty paint can, with hands and fingers and palms, with drum sticks and tooth picks and paint sticks. I'm glad they're learning a language for praise!

For a very long time, I had a book of the most curious title on my bookshelf where I could see it everyday and wonder. The book is entitled, "Dancing at My Funeral." I am intrigued by this notion. It congers up images of a New Orleans funeral with a jazz band leading the procession to the cemetery and then back again to the reception. When they let loose on "When the Saints GodMarching In" they are really expressing the joy of the Christian hope of eternal life. They are announcing an Easter theology. Though the sorrow is real, so is the joy of a faith-filled life. If there happens to be dancing at my funeral, let it be a sign that I have known the joy of a loving heart!

More than one of our Confirmation students this spring wrote in her faith statement something of the sacred she finds when she lets herself go on the dance floor, expressing all that lies within her heart. And for each one there was a kind of sadness that such expression does not appear to be affirmed in a Sunday morning church service.

I want those young women to know that I have heard them speaking from their souls, as I have heard David speaking from his, and Billy Elliot speaking from his. How excellent it would be if a liturgical dance group came into being!

What matters most is that God is praised. That is what David made clear so long ago as he danced before the Ark. Let us be open to the rich diversity of languages for praising God's name, even the language of sacred dance! In the greatest of hope, Amen!