

# Shall We Dance?

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2 Samuel 6:1-23

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I've been away for two weeks. The first few days was my time to wind down with a day on a lake, canoeing in the rain, a movie, a walk, and the reading of 1st/2nd Samuel and 1 Kings, where we find the story of David. Thus prepared, I spent a week at Yale Divinity School with Peter Hawkins, professor of Bible and Literature, and Vicki Hoffer, professor of Hebrew, studying the texts with great freedom. Instead of looking for a moral, as Sunday School curriculum often aims to do, we read and listened carefully to these passages, aided by Vicki who knows the nuances of the language well. After our break each day, we looked at poems and art inspired by these David scriptures. And I was captivated. For the stories and poems resonated deeply with what I know of life with God--that it is messy, open ended, and ever changing. In particular, as I gazed into this scene of David dancing the ark of the Lord into Jerusalem, I thought a lot about the dance of our nation, America the beautiful, as beautiful and strong as David was that day.

David had come a long way since he stood up to Goliath with slingshot in hand. Saul, once calmed by David's music, had tried repeatedly to spear him. David showed himself to be a great warrior, leading and winning battle after battle. He exhibits great cunning when he escapes a murderous Saul by fleeing to Philistine, the nation of Goliath, convincing the king of Philistine to welcome into his land the one who would eventually defeat his army. And, when Saul dies, after more battles, more assassinations, the followers of Saul ally with David. Israel and Judah become one nation.

When David enters into Jerusalem, he has fought a war against the nations and a war within his nation. The Philistines, those uncircumcised ones, are defeated. Israel and Judah stand together as one nation, under God, indivisible. A capital is chosen, Jerusalem, the city of David. A palace is built to house the king. All that is needed is the ark, the holy presence, to complete the scene. The ark of the Lord is an elaborately carved vessel, holding the 10 commandments. Through it God communicated with Moses.

This day, the bringing of the ark into Jerusalem, is planned to be a day of celebration. Harps and tambourines, lyres and cymbals, are strummed and drummed. And David, with all of Israel, dances before the Lord with all his might. The ark is pulled behind the celebrating, dancing

crowd, on a cart. So we have here a parade, a chaotic one from all appearances. Instead of a Sousa march played by a band marching in time, we have a frenetic scene of sound and movement.

Go ahead. Dance your dance, create your rhythm, play your music and pull the holy behind. Life is about your rhythm, your friends, your music, your dance. Don't let the holy get in your way. If you dance with confidence, passion, with enough of yourself, nothing can stop you.

A woman I know told a story about auditioning for Broadway. It was a cold day. She was young and had all the pizzazz and talent needed for the stage. That day she danced with all of herself, all her passion, and she caught the eye of one of the decision makers. She had been chosen. And, in her joy, she leaped higher. She was Baryshnikov. When she came down, her knee was facing the wrong direction. Fifteen years later, she chides herself and those she teaches..."I should have warmed up."

The day the ark was being pulled behind the dancing crowd there was passion, confidence, and music. There was joy and laughter, leaping and hope. And in the midst of it all, the oxen shook the holy cart, and the Ark began to fall.

Five years ago my husband went on a pilgrimage to Ethiopia. Some of you may know that the tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is that the Ark today is housed in a small city in northern Ethiopia called Axum. It is said to be kept in a special enclosure, guarded at all times by its keeper; no one is allowed to see it. Many unfamiliar with the scriptures scoff at this—why shouldn't a tourist be allowed in? But the Ethiopians know their Bible; they've learned from Uzzah's experience. They're not about to lose a valuable tourist.

As the Ark began to fall, Uzzah, the would be hero, reached out to keep it on the cart, that the dance might continue. As he took hold of the Ark, God struck him dead. The celebration ended.

No warm up could have saved Uzzah that day, no amount of passion or joy or confidence or hope. If he had let the ark fall, would another have died?

Perhaps this is God's warning in scripture, the holy should not be placed behind us as we dance to our own rhythms. Indeed there is a feeling of being off kilter when we do

so. When we try to lead God into our own dance, there is often a shaking of that place within us that seeks what it is losing. It is that moment when we know we are about to go off track but are having so much fun that we don't want to listen.

Many of us know the consequences of such action. But often it is hard to know what is God's will and what isn't. Who is to say Uzzah should have died? A nation's, and even an individual's life, is not so easily brought into a clear order. After God's anger bursts upon Uzzah, instead of David walking away with his head down, confessing his sin, the scene opens to David's anger, David's fear, and David's confusion in this encounter with the holy. Hear this.

"David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perezuzzah, to this day. David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?" So David was unwilling to take the ark of the Lord into his care in the City of David; instead David took it to the house of Obededom the Gittite."

Uzzah has a landmark named after him. Forever remembered is God's outburst. And David, the king, decides what comes into his city and what doesn't. If the ark isn't going to behave, it can stay outside of Jerusalem. Indeed, instead of offering a confession, the king sends the ark into exile.

And the ark goes without complaint. Any two year old child would fight. But the ark goes as if it understands that it is in the wrong. Having been sent to its room, the ark decides to behave. For three months, Obededom is blessed.

And David returns to retrieve it, to bring it into his care. There is a second parade.

In the second parade, there are not so many instruments. The ark behaves. And David takes center stage.

"So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obededom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, [David] sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet."

The ark in deciding to behave has submitted itself to David. So David, on this day, wears a linen ephod, the sign of the priest. And he whirls about, dancing with all his might, a beauty of mankind, the dance of the one who has brought together a holy nation, the one who

is bringing God into the land. His body glistens in the sunlight, his virility exposed, all eyes are on him.

David is a personification of our nation's deepest desire, we who pledge as children to be one nation, under God, indivisible. America seeks to be a people that, like David, bring together the holy with unity, strength with joy, liberty and justice for all. There have been times and there will continue to be times, maybe even tonight as we look to the evening sky, when it all comes together, when America dons the ephod and we dance.

See there, America sparkling in the night sky! See there, America brave in battle. Listen--America's words and songs and leaders summoning all to hope.

When David finishes his dance, when he arrives in Jerusalem with the ark, he ends the celebration by handing to every person, to all the people, to all the multitude of Israel, to every man and woman, one loaf of bread and one date cake and one raisin cake. If not justice, David assures food for all.

Justice...it is not so easily achieved. During the celebration, Michal looks down from a window. She seethes as she watches the one she once loved leaping and dancing. His body is naked for all to see.

Michal...she is a protestor standing in front of the nation's capital shouting out how America has betrayed her. Michal is a woman in Iraq who links America's looseness to the devil. Michal is a Louisiana shrimper who cries out on national t.v., "what about me?"

Michal is Saul's daughter, the daughter of the one who would try to hurl his spear into David's heart. And, as David and his beautiful eyes turn to his home and gaze upon his wife, at the moment of his greatest triumph, Michal shish kabobs the pride of the warrior priest with a passionate critique: "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!"

Here's a question for you to consider: Is Michal in the right?

Is Michal a woman who can't see the bigger picture or does she see all too clearly? Can she not keep her own needs quiet for the sake of the nation? Or is she speaking the truth for a nation about a leader who will soon lay down with Bathsheba?

There's no devil here, no tempter, no embodied evil. This drama is distinctly, artfully, human.

David thrusts back: "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD,

that I have danced before the LORD.”

Is there no stronger statement of the LORD is on my side?

David has killed tens of thousands. David has killed off anyone who even looked like they might become his enemy. David has connived and survived.

And yet, we know the future. David’s kingdom will fall. David will kill a man to cover up his adultery with Bathsheba. Finally, David will die in old age with a woman near him, simply to keep him warm.

But at this moment to Michal, daughter of Saul, David proclaims,

“I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor.”

Here’s a man who will not be questioned, a man who will do as he wants to do, a man who will parade about the palace as he chooses. But might we also hear in his taunt of Michal an unconscious realization that what he has brought together on this day cannot last.

It is to this sense of scripture that John Berryman’s poem gives voice:

*King David Dances*

*Aware to the dry throat of the wide hell in the world,  
O trampling empires, and mine one of them,  
And mine one gross desire against His sight,  
Slaughter devising there,  
Some good behind, ambiguous ahead,  
Revolted sons, a pierced son, bound to hear,  
Mid hypocrites amongst idolaters,  
Mocked in abysm by one shallow wife,  
With the ponder both of priesthood & of State  
Heavy upon me, yea,  
All the black same I dance my blue head off!*

David will survive. Jesus, the Messiah, will be first introduced in Matthew as the son of David, the son of the one who would dare try to unite a nation and unite the nation with God—the son of the greatest of God’s earthly rulers in spite of his ungodly flaws. It is our destiny that we, who dare call Jesus Messiah, would seek the same: One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Be encouraged but be warned as well. What we are trying to do together as a nation is ever so more complicated than rocket science. It would be helpful for us to be kinder to ourselves and kinder to one another; kindness is a form of love. The times we get it right are arguably ubiquitous and precious, if unnoticed by the “Michals”. How many of our young soldiers, each day, each minute of the day, have

made exactly the right decisions and saved lives? And, let it be said, that Jesus made sure the “Michals” of our world were given voice to tell their truths, even allowing them to change his mind on occasion. Be assured of this as well. Jesus, the Messiah, the son of David knows what it is to dance his black and blue head off, for the love of God, for God’s love of us, for the joy of it all. For you, sons and daughters of David, joined with Christ, this is your dance...Jesus beckons you to come. Come, shall we dance?