

Sermon: 'David Danced'

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 15 July 2018

Reading: 2 Samuel chapter 6 (yes, all of it!)

Introduction

I've asked our readers to read all of 2 Samuel chapter 6 this morning.

This is the story of King David dancing wildly as the Ark of the Covenant was carried into Jerusalem. Before and after the dance come two deaths, of different kinds.

So today is the story of two deaths and a dance.

Before we embark on 2 Samuel chapter 6, a word of introduction about the setting. Chapter 5 tells the story of how David captured the city of Jerusalem. This is the very beginning of the 3 millenia long story of the City of David, mount Zion, Jerusalem as the centre of the world, the holiest place on the planet, the focus of 3 world religions. David captured Jerusalem by sneaking in through the water pipes, without killing a soul, a stroke of genius. It was a key spot, central and neutral between the tribes to the south which had always supported David, and the tribes to the north who had not. But for Jerusalem to be both a strong political and spiritual base, David needed the thing that epitomised the very presence of the Lord God, the Ark of the Covenant.

Let's hear what happened when he arranged for it to be moved up the hill to Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 6:1-8

Yikes! The stately procession of Ark up to the new capital city turned into disaster as the young priest is killed. Goodness me what happened there!?

During my primary school years we lived in Ruatoria, up the East Coast, miles from anywhere! We had a small caravan, big enough for my sister and I to tuck in on those small beds that turned into bench seats during the day. We'd drive that caravan down to Wellington, or up to Auckland, all over. One day, I don't remember where we were, the caravan was parked in front of someone's garage, and the extension cord strung up through the garage window to make the lights work. I went to open the caravan door and – WHACK – I got electrocuted, thrown back onto the lawn.

I was alright, but I've been a nervous of shocks ever since.

In my reading for this series I have been fascinated about this gold box of the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant. People in recent years have tried to replicate it, though using copper instead of gold, and what they discovered is fascinating. So, if you make a large box of very hard wood, and cover it inside and outside with solid gold, then you put 4 gold arches on top that almost but not quite touch ... and then you carry that box through the desert with hot winds. Do you realise what would happen to that box? It would acquire a very significant electrical charge. At times, especially when it was charged by hot dry air and sand, sparks would

crackle between the angel wings on the lid. No wonder people believed that the Lord God actually was resident in the box. This was a box of serious power. Not to be taken lightly. Really, not lightly at all, it was very very heavy. But it was dangerous. And the priest's son Uzzah did not respect that. He thought he was in charge. He tried to control God. It seems so obvious, that of course he would reach out to steady the box and stop it falling off the cart. But this simple action proved fatal.

So how about us? Do we take God for granted? Do we put God in a box? Do we want things 'steady as you go'? Uzzah is the patron saint of decency and in order. And it killed him. He is a warning to us to let God be God, And now we turn back to David and see what David did next, after the disaster with the Ark the first time around.

2 Samuel 6:9-15

I can't do better at this point than to bring in Eugene Peterson; I'm reading from his book, *'Leap over a wall'* about David.
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He had no sense of the years of slow suicide that came to a conclusion beside the ox-cart. All David saw was an interruption to his parade, turning it into a funeral cortege. Angry with God, David went home in a sulk, pouting.

David's anger with God didn't get him killed. It didn't get him killed because David was as alive to God in his anger as he was earlier in his praise. Alive to God. Alive. David didn't like what had happened, but at least he was treating God as *God*. Uzzah would never have gotten angry with God; he was far too well mannered and proper. And besides, one doesn't get angry with a box.

Home in Jerusalem, David had time to think it over and in three months had assembled his marching band again and was back with harps and lyres, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals, bringing the Ark to Jerusalem in grand style.

David danced. In God, David had access to life that exceeded his capacity to measure or control. He was on the edge of mystery, of glory. And so he danced. When we're going about our work responsibly and steadily, we walk. Walking is our normal mode of locomotion. But when we're beside ourselves with love, charged with excess of meaning, shaken out of preoccupation with ourselves, we dance. David danced. If David had been merely carrying out his religious duties or conducting a political ceremony, he would have walked in solemn procession before the Ark, leading it into Jerusalem with dignity. But this was no duty. He wasn't using God to give dignity to Jerusalem, or taking pains that God be properly honored. He was worshiping, responding to the living God. He was open to the life of God flowing around and through him, the God whose ways intersected history in a manner defined by that Ark, ways of salvation and revelation and blessing.

Religion—religious sites, religious occasions—is a breeding ground for joyful openness to God. We're never wholly ourselves until we're open before God, attending to the reality of God, responding to the action of God in us, receiving the word of God for us. Worship is the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves and attend to the presence of God. Worship is the time and place that we assign for deliberate attentiveness to God—not because he's confined to

time and place but because our self-importance is so insidiously relentless that if we don't deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to him at all at other times and in other places.

But even then danger intrudes, for having set the time and place, we sometimes presume to control the time and place, presume to confine God to the time and place. Uzzah again. That's why we have all these signs posted throughout our Scriptures: "Fear God." "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom." "Beware!"

But the warnings don't reduce us to cautious timidity before God. David is proof to the contrary. What they do is prevent us from reducing God to our specifications. What they do is prevent death by religion.

MICHAL'S MOCKERY

Michal, David's wife, saw him dancing and leaping before the Ark, having a good time with the people who had been saved and led and commanded and blessed by God. She mocked him for his behavior. He ought to be acting more like a king. He ought to do what other kings did: have the gods serve him, surround himself with pomp and circumstance, organize a religion that made him look important and *kingly*. For Michal, God had become a social amenity, a political backer. Michal was first embarrassed by and then contemptuous of David's dance. I've always liked Alexander Whyte's sentence on Michal: "Those who are deaf always despise those who dance."⁴

Michal would have been comfortable walking beside the Ark with Uzzah, stately, proper, careful. And dead.

But she mocked David dancing before the Ark, reckless, daring, careless, praising. And alive.

David didn't care. David knew that "the glory of God is a humanly alive" (Iraenaeus);⁵ that we don't have to be careful and cautious with God; that it's death to decorously and politely manage God; that it's life eternal to let him take care of us.

Before we read on, can I invite you to pause and pray for a moment. I invite you to imagine yourself dancing. Shut your eyes if it helps. Not careful dancing, nervous about getting your steps right, but wild dancing, exuberant. In your mind's eye fling your arms out, jump and run. There is wonderful music playing, other people are cheering and singing. Dance, just dance.

This is holy dance, holy ground, for God is here, the Lord God of all, and this is a dance of sheer love, celebration, just for the joy of it.

Did you catch just a glimpse of the dance? I'm pretty sure that's a taste of heaven.

Well, sadly, David's dance finished rather abruptly, and he was brought down to earth with a thump.

2 Samuel 6:16-23

This is the second death that I referred to: the death of a marriage, the death of a royal line, the death of fertility, the death of potential and possibility.

Michal was born a princess, the daughter of King Saul. And she seems to have inherited from her father the need for status. Michal initially loved David, but she never had him to herself. And in this story all vestige of affection is crushed by overwhelming scorn. I do feel a little bit sorry for her. For years David had lived in hiding, then they had a base in Hebron in the south, but hardly living in royal splendour. Now, finally, David had a city to call his own, and the prosperity and power base as King of all of Israel. Finally, surely, she could have a proper royal palace, and be queen.

And just when David, in Michal's mind, just when he should have been stepping into his new power with proper gravitas ... she hears the music coming, she hears the crowds cheering as they come into Jerusalem. Her heart lifts in hope, she looks out from her window to see the crowd coming, expecting David to be riding in Kingly glory, and what does she see? To her utter horror she sees her husband, the king of all Israel, practically naked and dancing, hurling himself around like a wild man, a dervish, like an evil spirit possessed. She does not rejoice with the crowd. What she sees from her window is not what everyone else sees. In her jealousy she imagines all the girls looking at him with lust. In her shame she imagines all the men laughing at him.

She feels personally betrayed. All love she once felt for this man dies. How could he do this to her?

I'm struck as I read 2 Samuel 6 at the honesty of this account. After the very public and wonderful celebration as the Ark comes to Jerusalem, comes this very intimate and bitter conversation between a man and his wife. It need not have been recorded. Why did David even tell this story? Most men would far too be embarrassed to tell this story. Who would tell of being told off and belittled by their wife? This is more evidence of the character of David, his openness, that this was recorded in writing, a strange counterpoint to the victory. David had no need to present only his good side to the world. That's why his Psalms are so powerful,

through the centuries, because they are so real, both intimate and public, warts and all.

This is the last we hear of Michal in the Bible. Her story ends here. She has no children to carry her father's royal legacy. Michal stands for us as a warning, the dangers of unmet expectations, lost potential. David invites her to dance and she despises him for it. She refuses to join the dance.

How about us? What triggers scorn in us, if we're honest? What makes us feel morally superior or more respectable?

Well, there you have it, 2 Samuel chapter 6. Quite a story. Thank you for following through it with me. Two kinds of deaths stand as different kinds of warnings – of the dangers of trying to control God and make ourselves superior and important ... and in the middle is David, dancing, worshipping, stripped bare. A dramatically different kind of leadership and worship, marked with joyful openness to God.