

“Dancing Before the Lord with All Their Might”

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

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We’re going to spend most of our time this morning looking at the passage from 2 Samuel about David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem for the very first time – a passage that has some intriguing mysteries and leads to some important lessons. But before we go there, I want to take a minute to highlight the reading from Ephesians. This is what I would call a “can’t miss” biblical passage. Not all parts of the Bible are equally relevant to our lives. I would put this passage from Ephesians among the top 20 “all time greatest” biblical passages, maybe even the top 10, for it contains a broad outline of the whole message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with beauty, brevity, and simplicity.

It tells us, first of all, what *God* has done for us: God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love” – which is to say, *way* back before the creation of this planet that we call “home,” God had *us* in mind – you and me! God “destined us for adoption as his children;” God chose us, specifically, to belong to God’s own special family. In that family we have a particular role to play, or, rather, a particular *job* to do; we are called to be both “holy” and “blameless.” That’s a tall order, a vocation that requires every ounce of our devotion, and a constant desire on our part to be wholeheartedly committed and faithful to our Maker. Which means, we not only need to make a sincere effort to *know* God’s will, but also, on a daily basis, an earnest effort to *do* God’s will.

This is not a journey for the faint of heart. It is also not a journey that any of us ever succeed in fully – though there are spiritual masters from throughout the history of the church whom we can learn from, people who were far more advanced in their spiritual journey in Christ than any of us are. Thankfully, one of the great gifts we have in Jesus Christ is the forgiveness of our sins, “redemption through his blood,” Christ’s great work on the cross that sets us free from all that we have done wrong so that we can focus on doing what is right. This gift was “lavished” upon us; it was “freely bestowed” to us. Also, in Christ we have come into a magnificent inheritance; we have been granted a great destiny, the hope that comes through the promise that God will gather us up so that we might live eternally “for the praise of his glory.” We have also been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, that was imparted to us pretty much the same way it was imparted to those original followers of Jesus long ago, through our belief in Jesus Christ. That Holy Spirit not only enables us to do the work that God calls us to do, it also serves as a “pledge,” a token signifying that we are the inheritors of God’s magnificent grace.

In a nutshell, that’s what the Ephesians passage is trying to tell us; it is a magnificent testimony to the amazing grace of Almighty God, and the benefits that we get as faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

But let us turn our attention now to a passage that is a bit less magnificent, though it still has to do with the grandeur of Almighty God: the story of the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem.

Let's set the stage. We have David, the second king of Israel. He has – finally, at long last – captured the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and made it his home, and the capital of all Israel.

David decides to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the city of Jerusalem. This was, as most of you know, a special, sacred wooden chest, plated with gold, which contained the two tablets that God had given to Moses, inscribed with the Ten Commandments, and a gold jar containing manna from the Israelites' wilderness journey, and the sacred staff that had once belonged to Aaron, the brother of Moses, the first Israelite priest. The Ark represented the very presence of God; indeed, the ancient Israelites believed that God resided, invisible, between the wings of the two large molten cherubim that were situated on the cover of the Ark. The Ark had spent the last two to three hundred years in other places in Israel; it had even, not long before, been captured by the Philistines. But now David decides it is time to bring this most sacred object into Jerusalem, and set up a holy shrine in the city for it.

We get some details here, like the names of some of the key people involved in the procession. This story is retold in 1 Chronicles 15, with even more details; there we get the names of several dozen people involved with the procession. It is a grand and celebratory scene; we are told "David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals." There is an abundance of music, singing, and dancing. Even royal King David joins in the festivities; he too "danced before the Lord with all his might."

The narrator tells us that David was "girded with a linen ephod." An ephod was an article of clothing worn by a priest. Imagine something like an incredibly elaborate apron. Exodus tells us it was made of fine linen, woven with gold, blue, purple, and scarlet threads, and embroidered with gold. Over the area covering the chest there was a large breastplate, attached with golden chains and rings, and studded with jewels. The whole thing was ornate. What is not clear is what *David* was doing wearing one. He was not one of the priests! It's also not clear if David was wearing anything *under* the ephod. Typically the priests wore a long tunic under the ephod, covering the entire body from neck to ankles, but there is no mention of a tunic here, and when David "danced before the Lord with all his might," well, apparently *something* happened that shouldn't have happened. For when the celebration is over, Michal, David's wife, reproaches him, saying: "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!" Evidently, when David was dancing "before the Lord with all his might," he exposed himself!

Now, as I mentioned, this story is also told in the book of 1 Chronicles, which was written later on, by somebody a bit more pious than the writer of 1 Samuel. The writer of Chronicles cleans up and sanitizes a number of the stories that were told in the books of Samuel. This is one of the stories that got edited. In the Chronicles account, we are told clearly that David was wearing an ephod *over* a robe of fine linen. We are also told, as we are in Samuel, that Michal "looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing; and she despised him in her heart." But there's no indication in Chronicles as to what, exactly, upset Michal so much; we don't get that private scene between husband and wife, as we do in Samuel. So if all we had were the Chronicles account, it would seem that David was fully clothed when he was dancing, and that Michal, for some reason, disapproved of the dancing.

But we don't have just the Chronicles account; we also have this version, from 2 Samuel, in which some of the details and nuances are clearly different. Which leaves us with a bit of a mystery. Was Michal's disdain for her husband *justified*, or was it *unjustified*? If David was recklessly exposing himself, then the fault is clearly David's. But if David, fully clothed and covered, was dancing and

celebrating, and his wife didn't approve, that would suggest that perhaps Michal is being a bit judgmental. For there is no indication in *either* version of the story that it was inappropriate to dance and celebrate, nor is there any indication that it was inappropriate for *David himself* to dance and celebrate. But, in the Chronicles version, Michal simply didn't approve of her husband dancing.

Which leads me to a few observations about contemporary expressions of Christianity. Christianity exists, as you know, in a wide variety of different forms. Some of those forms forbid any type of instrumental music in worship. But look at this story, which is *filled* with musical instruments. If you read the Chronicles version, you even get the names of all the musicians, recorded for all eternity! This is one of many places in the Bible where instrumental music plays a very important role in the worship of God. I really don't see any biblical justification for prohibiting the use of musical instruments in worship. Second, there are versions of Christianity that have strong feelings about dancing. Some Christians have grown up being told that dancing is sinful. But when you actually read the Bible, you can find a number of examples like this one where faithful people of God danced in celebration. Not all dances are for good purposes – the rebellious Israelites who made the golden calf were dancing too – but just because there are some bad examples doesn't negate the fact that there are many good ones. It is not right to prohibit all occasions of dancing when there are clear examples of joyful dancing and celebrating in the presence of God. Third, there are some Christian traditions that – even if they allow the use of musical instruments, and even if they permit people to dance – still feel that worship should be a very solemn, formal occasion. You know, like traditional Presbyterian churches, God's "frozen chosen". We Presbyterians have a long tradition of overly formal worship! Thankfully many Presbyterian churches have gotten over that, but still, you can find people who are just a little bit stiff when they worship God. Loosen up, people! It is *okay* to dance before the Lord with all your might!

This story also lends itself to a comment about the Bible itself. It is significant that we have two different versions of the same story in the Bible. That happens in the gospels all the time, of course, but in this case the differences are particularly striking. One version feels ceremonial and religious. The other feels much more human and raw. One version has been "sanitized;" the other has not. The people who compiled the Bible preserved *both* versions. *They could have just kept the ceremonial, religious, "sanitized" version.* They did not! People are sometimes shocked when they read the Bible; there is a tremendous amount of *humanity* in these pages; people doing all sorts of crazy things, some of which are definitely a bit risqué. The Bible would have been pretty dry and bland if it all read like Chronicles. But it doesn't. Not at all! Who needs Netflix when you've got the *Bible* to entertain you?!?

Finally, there is Michal, and her disdain for her husband. This episode marked a turning point in their relationship. Michal never bore David any children. It appears that their intimacy diminished after this episode. When a wife – or a husband – looks at their spouse with *disdain* in their eyes, with *contempt* – that is hard to recover from. Husbands and wives misunderstand and hurt each other all the time. Much of that is unintentional; most of it can be healed with some gentle words of forgiveness and love. But sometimes a line gets crossed, a point at which the relationship suffers tremendously as a result of something that happened, or something that was said. We need to be careful with the things we say or do that could irreparably harm a relationship; we especially need to be mindful not to put ourselves in the position of being *judge* of our spouse's character. That is what Michal did; she made herself David's *judge*. Things were never the same for them again. May we all learn from their mistake.

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