

Eighth Pentecost
July 15, 2018
Church of the Advent

The Happy Dance

When is the last time you danced for the pure joy of it, when something made you so happy inside that you couldn't keep still? Last week? More years ago than you can count? Sometime in the recesses where we keep altered memories of childhood? I'm not talking about a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers kind of dance, or something out of the Nutcracker ballet. I'm talking about that uncontrollable stomping and stepping thing that is closer to the Snoopy happy dance—something that says, "I got the job!" or "I got accepted!" or "He's coming home!" An athletic field or stadium may be the most common place to see this kind of dancing—wild, jumping, crashing, whopping and hollering, exuberant movement that says, "we won!" It tells a story of desire fulfilled by a combination of anticipation, hard work and luck—and for some, an answer to prayers. This is the kind of dancing described in our Old Testament lesson today—dancing as an expression of fulfillment, of loving relationship, of the deep joy of being beloved, of being alive in a moment without fear or anxiety, knowing that God is in the heavens and all's right with the world. It's the dance of babies, and toddlers.

The chief dancer in the story from 2 Samuel is King David, who had set out from the City of David with 30 thousand men to reclaim the Ark of the Covenant, which had been previously lost in a battle to the Philistines, an enemy people. The Ark of the Covenant—not to be confused with Noah's Ark—was actually a pretty fancy box, a gold covered wooden chest about half the size of a coffin whose doors held the tablets of stone carved with the Law that Moses had brought down from Mount Sinai. Built generations earlier according to God's instructions found in the Book of Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant was carried by the Israelites on long poles while carefully hidden behind a veil of cloth and animal skins, for all of the 40 years they had wandered through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. After Moses died—just prior to their arrival in Canaan—Joshua sent the Ark of the Covenant ahead of the people, and then led them across the Jordan River to Jericho, where they carried the Ark around that city each day for seven days until the walls came tumbling down and the battle was won.

Thereafter the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant into every battle, believing that God himself traveled inside it. They carried the power of God into each conflict, feeling assured of victory—that is until the Philistines stole it, sending the Israelites home after a crushing defeat. This was such a profound turn of events that the prophet Eli dropped dead when he heard the news, and his daughter in law died in childbirth, bearing Eli's grandson Ichabod, which means "the glory has departed Israel."

The funny thing is, the way the Israelites got the Ark back had more to do with the Philistines having a bad time of it while it was in their possession, than it did with any military prowess of the Israelites to recapture it. It turned out not to be such a happy thing for the Philistines, who suffered plagues in every city where the Ark was kept, because the Philistines did not get what the Ark was really about. After several months they actually plotted how to give it back to Israel, like a hot potato. David at first had it stored away from Jerusalem for a

few months—almost like a decontamination period—and then had it brought back on a new cart to Jerusalem with much rejoicing—and dancing. Samuel tells us the entourage included songs and lyres, harps and tambourines, castanets and cymbals, and David—the leader of them all—dancing before the Lord with all his might. God was coming home! They were God’s beloved, and David was doing the happy dance ! Not even the derision of his wife Michal, who despised him in her heart, could dampen David’s happiness and his need to dance. And he blessed the people, and fed them, and on that day David and his people knew the deepest kind of joy.

Our other story, from the gospel of Mark, offers a different take on dancing. The dance of Herodias, also known as Salome, the young step-daughter of Herod Antipas, did not express joy, but played a part in an entertainment drama of seduction and violence. Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who had sent the family of Jesus into exile shortly after his birth, was a chip off the old block—living the good life and appeasing the Roman Empire in order to hold on to his own power. He pretty much did what he wanted but lived in fear of losing his power, as most despots do. Earlier he had imprisoned John the Baptist, because John had not been not afraid to speak truth to power—loudly, fearlessly and publicly. Antipas had not yet had John killed because deep down he respected him—he admired John’s strength and certainty and knew he was a holy and righteous man.

As the story goes, Herod Antipas asked the child Herodias—who was both his niece and his stepdaughter since he took his brother’s wife—to dance for his dinner guests—probably a room full of lecherous inebriated men who appreciated a dance intended as a transactional expression of how men controlled women, and how women controlled men in return. Herod was so pleased with her performance that he offered Herodias a reward. Then manipulated by her mother, she in turn manipulated Herod to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter—which she got. This not only brought a violent, humiliating, gruesome and cruel fate to a fearless prophet called by God to prepare the way of the Lord, but allowed the evil to be sugarcoated by focusing upon a child as a scapegoat for an evil act. Instead of a spontaneous dance of joy in the love and power of *God*, the dance of Herodias became a seductive act of manipulation in the shadows of death, representing the emptiness at the heart of the power of *men*.

Why are we offered these stories of dancing—one so happy and another so sad—at the same time? Why does the gospel of Mark include this awful story about John the Baptist—whose story began when he danced for joy while still in his mother’s womb when his cousin Jesus came near—still in the womb of his mother Mary? John who sacrificed the joys of an ordinary life to live as a solitary prophet in the desert, baptizing and preaching repentance of sins? John who told his followers that he was not worthy even to stoop down and untie the straps of the sandals Jesus walked in? Would it not be more seemly that John be able to dance—like David—down the road with songs and lyres, harps and tambourines, castanets and cymbals, at the coming home of Jesus to Jerusalem?

The story of John’s death makes about as much sense as the Ark of the Covenant did to the Philistines. They thought they had some kind of mojo when they captured that thing—that it would bring them power and riches and glory. And I am sure rulers like the Herods thought that using their power to get rid of troublemakers like John the Baptist and Jesus would make their life easier and safer. But they were wrong. Because real power cannot be taken, but comes with

surrender of control and sacrifice of our own desires. Real power is a gift of God offered to God's beloved, manifest not in seduction and violence, but in a peace that passes all understanding. This power of God is the true source of our resilience and strength, our patience and perseverance; it is the only power that can overcome our fear of pain, and loss, and death. It does not come in a golden box, and it does not guarantee we will win every battle; but it gives us the courage to set sacrifice and love of one another above all else, just as Jesus taught us.

Jesus himself has no starring role in our gospel story—no speaking part. And yet Jesus rests at the heart of its message. He *is* the way, the truth, and the life; he gave his very life and conquered death once and for all, leaving us nothing to fear. There is no power on earth that comes close to that. And that should keep us all dancing the happy dance. Amen.