

DANCING DAVID
July 18, 2021
2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12-19 and 2 Samuel 7: 1-14
Psalm 24
Mark 6: 14-29

In our readings from 2 Samuel, we come upon David as he is achieving the peak of his power. He has conquered Jerusalem as well as the Philistines who challenged his rule there. He has acquired several wives and concubines and sons and daughters have been born to him. Now it is time for him to bring the ark of the Lord to Jerusalem to solidify the religious with the political power. The ark had been residing for some time in Baale-judah where it had been left in 1 Samuel, when the Philistines had captured it. Now he takes lots of soldiers and a new cart to retrieve the ark, and we hear about how there is much dancing and music and celebration, and, indeed, one almost gets the sense of frenzy. And in all of this David is participating with enthusiasm we are told.

The passage from the lectionary for last Sunday, was 2nd Samuel 6: 1-5 and 12 - 19. You might have noticed that it skipped verses 6-11. Usually when the Lectionary does this, it seems that it is just leaving out a bit of genealogical information or something of that sort. But this time, it left out a very important part of the story, one that seems to change the whole import of David's triumph.

One of the men, Uzzah, a priest who is driving the cart that holds the ark, reaches out a hand to steady the ark as the cart passes over rough terrain. It seems a reasonable and respectful action. But he is struck down and killed. Really. He is killed because God is angry that he touched the ark of the Lord.

And right here we know that it is not going to be easy for David... or for anyone. Already in his rise to glory, David has had setbacks and difficulties in his relationship with God. And it is an up and down relationship all the way. After Uzzah's death, David is angry and afraid, as well he might be, and he thinks that maybe it's not such a great idea that he have a jack-in-the-box of an ark with him after all, that maybe this is not the last occurrence of this sort to pop up. Then, after a while, when he sees that the people with whom he has left the ark are happy and blessed, he thinks, "Well maybe we should have it in Jerusalem after all," and so he goes and fetches it, and they all do the same dancing and singing and sacrificing that they had done before. Apparently David is doing all this dancing in a fairly unclothed state, and his wife, Michal, daughter of David's dead predecessor, Saul, calls him on it. She tells him he looks a fool, that it is unseemly for the king of Israel to be cavorting about half naked. And then he tells her that she may not like it, but that all the other girls will... so there! And so it goes for this he said, she said kind of thing... the kind of thing that's probably endemic to the human condition. And then we discover that God doesn't really want to dwell in a tented ark anymore but that he wants a real house, a more permanent sort of structure, one made of cedar.

We see that David keeps being impetuous in his assumptions. He has a victory, a period of prosperity, and he thinks that God is in his pocket. He is not consistently respectful of the mystery and power of God. He thinks he knows with whom he deals, but truly he can never know. He has been taught to just be still and "know," as it says, "that I am Lord." At some point he should just shut up in the presence of God, because there are things that neither he nor we nor anyone can explain, because God's presence

itself is a mystery. It is that that makes it God, the mystery, the unknowableness. But David forgets. “And he forgot the part about the stories that said to treat the ark with the utmost respect, to not touch it, to carry it in a certain way, with poles, with reverence, not on some cart. And his forgetting delayed the entrance of the ark into Jerusalem for months, and it cost some poor guy his life.”* And then, even after that happens, he goes through the same behavior all over again when he finally does bring the ark into town, all this naked dancing and carrying on... you would think that he would finally learn, but, really, he never does. It’s not even that the dancing is wrong, for it seems that God has asked for joyful celebration in his presence. What is wrong is the assumption, even if an occasional assumption, that he, David, is in control, that he can ever really know what might be the outcome of his dealings with God. Despite all his beautiful, sometimes humble, sometimes worshipful psalms, David doesn’t know that he can never understand the awesomeness of the power that he is dragging around on a cart thinking to make his own.

In preparing this sermon, I tried to be respectful. I watched the movie *Raiders of the Lost Arc*. This is a movie, you may remember, which involves a search for and recovery of the ark of the covenant, the very same one for which David was dancing. It was considered to be valuable beyond all treasures by the bad guys AND the good guys. It was to be a scene changer for the universe. And in the last scene, the ark is opened out in the desert and the bad guys are ready to harness its powers for their own ends and make themselves kings of the universe. And then, of course, that power was unleashed and killed all the ones who dared to look into the ark. Only, of course, Indiana Jones and his lovely sidekick, have

the understanding not to look, and only they are saved from the unleashed, literally face-melting power of God. This story of David, this movie, is all about what we might let loose by the most casual of gestures, by the touch of a steadying hand, by a glance. My husband, David, always says of horror movies, "Don't open the door!", for the guileless characters in these films are always doing that, and thereby comes the horror and the story. You'd think they would learn, but then we would have no story.

(In the gospel story for today as well, we get something of the same sense. In the horrible story of Salome, Herod, in a fantasy of optimistic largesse at his own birthday party, and hoping to please his angry wife, tells his daughter that he will give her whatever she wants in appreciation for the seductive dance that she has performed at his party. The daughter asks her mother what to ask for; the mother says "Ask for the head of John the Baptist!", and there it is. Herod is stuck. He ends up killing a man whom he at once fears and reveres, because he has made a thoughtless promise in public and can't take it back. And really, a thoughtless promise to a teen aged girl... even more reckless.)

It is this kind of open ended behavior that gets us into trouble. It is David making the assumption that he is God's anointed and therefore can do no wrong, that his decisions about the transport of the ark and the handling of it are the right and correct ones. Later he determines that he must build a proper house for the ark, and God reprimands him, saying, "Are you the one to build me a house?" He does not know with what he is dealing.

Now, the obvious question is, does anyone? In current times, we know well such hubris. It is all around us and it seems that perhaps it is a human characteristic from which we cannot escape. We might look at our good fortune and assume that therefore we can and should make bold moves, and we turn that good fortune into bad.

In an earlier version of this message that I gave in 2012, I talked about the dengue fever and the possibility that scientists had discovered a genetic modification of the mosquito which might possibly eliminate all the dengue causing mosquitos and the quandaries about that issue and whether or not we should open that door. Then, of course, we did not know about the horror of the corona virus and the devastating pandemic that would ensue. We don't know what door was opened to allow it to pass through or even if that is an appropriate expression to describe its origins. But we do know that all over the world we have fumbled in attempting to control its effects.

But certainly we are very familiar with quandaries of this sort. In agriculture, we found a way to produce food cheaply and make it widely available and we used it so much that we poisoned the landscape and our own health. In health care, we found antibiotics that would annihilate the most rapacious diseases, and we used them in inappropriate ways until we bred new germs that were immune. In finance, we built bubbles and elaborate mechanisms upon which we relied so extensively that they turned around and devoured the economies they had created. And surely the sources of energy about which we've built our lives are now leading to appalling and devastating weather events which we ourselves experience, and over which we have very little control.

So yes, we must dance and celebrate our triumphs. We must dance for joy, for victory, for love, and for a gorgeous view of the future. But we must remember respect and caution. We are not the end of everything - there is lots more beyond us. So, let's just think before we open the door, before we touch the ark, before we look inside. As Jesus says, just take a moment to rest, breathe, reflect before moving on.

*Birkholz, Rev. Beth, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Marietta, GA, in textweek.com