

Worship with the Dance

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

¹ David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ² David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. ³ They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴ with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵ 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...

^{12b} So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³ and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴ David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵ So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁶ As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

¹⁷ They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD.

¹⁸ When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹ and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

When was the last time you danced as if no one was watching? It is a rare sight, but this is exactly what David, 30,000 chosen men of Israel (v. 1), and all the house of Israel do with all their might (vv. 5, 14) as they bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. The ark was a box made of acacia wood, with dimensions of approximately 4 by 2¹/₂ by 2¹/₂ feet (Exod. 25:10-22; 37:1-9), that was built by the Israelites during the wilderness period. Closely associated with God's presence, the ark traditionally contained the tables of the law given to Moses.

David and his company are giving a thank offering (Heb. *todah*) for the victory over the Philistines (5:17-25). Traditionally, this optional thank offering was given by someone whose life had been delivered from extreme danger. Often, *todah*

involved a sacrificial meal, such as a David giving all of Israel "a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins" (v. 19). The central feature of *todah* is the joyful praise offered by the one delivered by the hand of the Lord (cf. Ps. 107:22). The *todah* of 2 Samuel 6 is not a single song or background music accompanying the return of 30,000 soldiers; it is the total embodiment of thanksgiving with "all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals" (v. 5). The dance of David and his men is the fullest expression of gratitude because they know that they were saved from peril, not by their own strength and cunning, but solely by the grace of God. It is the kind of celebration that is contagious; it draws people in (v. 15).

Do you remember going to that first school dance, where the boys and girls were self-segregated, lining the wall around the gym? The music would be playing, but no one was dancing. It always took a catalyst. The dancing might start with a teacher leading a line dance, or a small group of courageous students venturing onto the dance floor. No matter what starts it, though, once everyone forgets that others might be watching and, therefore, really begins to dance—then joy and laughter and celebration erupt. "King David leaping and dancing before the LORD" (v. 16) is such a catalyst to draw others in to the joyful celebration of the people of God. **David G. Forney**

When was the last time you danced before the Lord? That your joy of being in God's presence was so overwhelming, that you started to boogie? The psalmist tells us to praise God in God's temple with dancing (Ps. 150:4). For some Christian groups, dancing is associated with the devil or equated with sin. My father was such a one. Others who belong to reserved cultures, reacting like David's wife Michal, dismiss any expression of physical rejoicing by simply stating, "We do not do that here. We never have done it that way. Our fathers never danced before God."

David, while moving the ark of God, which he believed to house the very presence of the Lord, was so overcome with joy and delight that he stripped down to his undergarment and started leaping and twirling before God. The last time we had dancing in our sanctuary was one Advent when Karla did a dance of Mary and Elizabeth. I can't remember a recent time when we danced as King David? David must have looked like a drunken fool, a staggering buffoon, but David was not dancing to impress humans. He was dancing as an expression of joy that God was real and present in his life.

What would happen if our parish or congregation, during a Sunday morning service, were to break out in dance? If instead of following the order of worship, we would be so moved by the worship that we started to dance for joy, as Millie Nash might do? Such emotional expressions may be more common among our charismatic and Pentecostal sisters and brothers, but such demonstrations of joy might be frowned upon here. Is it because we have allowed our culture to shape how we worship God, rather than letting the presence of God shape our worship? Why do we allow socially constructed customs and traditions to influence how we come before the Lord? Worse, what occurs when we begin to believe that our particular style of worship is closer to truth than some other groups' worship style?

Our scripture cautions against prohibiting a form of joyful expression, lest we find ourselves in the company of Michal. Our cultural need to control events all too often stifles the very presence of God from being manifested. Sometimes we prohibit expressions of joy—dancing, drumming, guitars, instruments, modern music, and so forth—as if their inclusion somehow violated God's will. Our churches might be revolutionized if we were to allow God's people to worship freely, without restraints. **Miguel A. De La Torre**

Unfortunately, not everyone catches dance fever; such is the case with Michal (v. 16). Sometimes one person's public joy and praise touches upon another

person's pain and misery. When we are the one who has not been delivered, it can be agonizing to see someone else celebrating. It adds insult to injury. When we are praying for deliverance, day after day, year after year, but see only someone else receiving every blessing, we find ourselves despising their public display of triumph. David's open praise of God's deliverance hits Michal's raw and tender nerve. It is not clear if her pain stems from her family's waning fortune with the death of her dad, King Saul (1 Sam. 31). Her pain might also be because she was taken by David from her husband Paltiel (2 Sam. 3:12-16). Whatever the impetus, though, at the sight of David's dancing "she despised him in her heart" (v. 16).

How often we see this in life, when someone gifted and filled with joy comes dancing into a place of pain and sorrow. The story is told of one congregation, the Sunday school program had long been in decline; so, one class invited a gifted teacher to lead their class for six weeks. This teacher had the gift of weaving humor into her teaching of Scripture. The first week, the class began to loosen up and engage the lesson with one another. The second week, they were laughing out loud and really began to feel that the gospel is, indeed, good news. By the third week, the class had to bring in more chairs to accommodate newcomers, and everyone was fully engaged and animated with the lesson. They were dancing as if no one was watching. During this third week, midway through the lesson, a member of the Sunday school class next door came in and said, "It's OK if you all don't want to take this seriously, but could you please keep it down for those of us who do!"

While it is tempting to dismiss party poopers like this, or Michal, we need to hear their concern and beliefs. Michal's story is one of hardship and despair and, until she is delivered, she will not be able to dance in worship. If the gospel is true, though, we can laugh and dance and play as God's children.

Do we praise God with joyful abandon? Is the Lord's Table "the joyful feast of the people of God?" Is our music uplifting. Do we leave worship energized to serve God and God's people? *Todah* does, and so does David's dancing. The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving, which many traditions say at the Lord's Table, tells of God's salvation story for humanity and points to the glad feast that is to come. Even though we are not there yet, we do have seasons of rejoicing when we can dance as if no one is watching. **David G. Forney**

The text tells us that once the rejoicing ended, King David distributed among the people a roll of bread, a portion of dates (or meat), and a raisin cake. Worship—no matter how exuberant it may be—absent action is worthless. King David, the richest and most powerful man in the land, understood he had an obligation to those around him. Like Jesus centuries later, he fed the multitudes. While not everyone in the crowd was poor, no doubt many were. The food provided needed nourishment. True worship, according to Isaiah, is to cease evil, learn to do good, search for justice, help the oppressed, and plead for those who are most disenfranchised—in those times, the orphan and the widow ([Isa. 1:16-17](#)).

Dancing before God may provide space for a deep spiritual connection with the Author of the universe; but true worship is to seek justice, to physically—not solely spiritually—feed the hungry. There is something wrong with our religion if we ignore the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the alien, the incarcerated, and the infirm. Creative worship expressions may provide a sense of being close to God; but only when we touch the oppressed and dispossessed do we actually touch God. That which we do to the very least of these, we do unto God. Dancing is always fun; nevertheless, it is in the doing of justice that we get to enter into God's presence. Then we have something to dance about. **Miguel A. De La Torre**

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