

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 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. 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 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 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.

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

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.

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. 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, 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.

---

All the major religions and wisdom traditions use silence as a spiritual practice. And remaining silently attentive or prayerful requires the body to be still. In the earliest days of Christianity, one desert father advised a restless monk to “Go and sit in your cell and give your body in pledge to the walls of the cell, and do not come out of it.”

Soto Zen practitioners sit for hours in *zazen*; sitting in perfect stillness. In Islam, the practice of *salat* involves praying five times a day kneeling on a small prayer rug. Many Hindus sit with their legs crossed in the *padmasa* or lotus position to increase a stable awareness. Tibetan Buddhists call this meditative posture the vajra position. Jews who practice a form of prayer called *davening* stand in place to pray.

All these are practices that train and discipline the body so that the soul may be released and engaged.

And there are also counterparts in each of these traditions. Zen dance combines meditative breathing with traditional dance forms. Islamic Sufi dervishes twirl with the right hand reaching toward heaven to receive God’s blessing and the left hand extended toward

creation to share the blessing. Hindu *kirtan* practices use music and dance to open the heart through sound and bodily movement. In many Hasidic Jewish communities, bowing and swaying accompany prayer and from time to time, even ecstatic dancing and clapping arise.

Our own liturgy is a set sequence of rhythmic movements choreographed to music and chant using human bodies to worship God.

We dance, in short.

This morning, we heard two different readings about dances and kings. Mark's Gospel tells of King Herod, whose daughter-in-law danced for him in a way that inspired him to promise her anything. (Yes, sit with *that* for a moment!) Influenced by her mother, she chose the execution of John the Baptizer. You can see why this inspired Richard Strauss to recreate it as an opera.

And earlier, we heard another opera-worthy story from Second Samuel: the strange story of a king who dances almost naked in front of a box. David, dancing as his people carry the Ark of the Covenant – the container holding the two stone tablets with the Ten Utterances that God gave to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai.

David is an exceptionally complex character and so is his story. You can see why it enthralled people when the elders told it around the fire at night. You can almost see the flickering light chasing shadows across the face of someone's great-grandfather as he starts to speak: "And David gathered again all the picked men of Israel, thirty thousand."

And so the story begins. David, the newly chosen king of Judah and most of Israel has captured Jerusalem, now called "the City of David," and established her as his capital. One of the ways he wants to make this known is to bring the Ark of the Covenant, God's earthly throne, into Jerusalem.

The Ark radiated tremendous divine power. Israel's enemies, the Philistines, thought it actually *was* God. They had captured it in battle but possessing the Ark did them no good. Scripture says that the Ark caused Dagon, the Philistine's fertility god, first, to fall and then later to lose his hands and feet. The Ark's presence caused mysterious tumors and death and panic, so that eventually the Philistines were more than happy to give it back to the Israelites.

Now for whatever reason, our lectionary leaves out a serious event. As David and the house of Israel are dancing toward

Jerusalem, the ox pulling the cart slips. Uzzah grabs the ark to steady it and is struck dead.

Now, whatever we think of these ancient stories from our post-modern perspective, they tell us, first, that the Ark is to be revered – maybe even feared – as a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt. Second, keeping covenant with God by living out God’s teachings is of *consequential* importance. And third, if you are rummaging around in your grandmother’s attic and you happen across the Ark of the Covenant, for heavens’ sake – don’t touch it!

Alright...back to the story.

About three months later, things settle down and the parade is once again headed to Jerusalem. That’s why we suddenly hear that they are bringing the Ark from the house of Obed-Edom. They have been waiting for God to bless the house and make moving the Ark a *little* safer.

This time, David wears nothing but a linen ephod – a short, ceremonial priest’s apron that ties around the hips. And as David leaps and dances, he exposes himself, which his wife, Michal, notices with more than a little contempt.

Now, as opera characters go, Michal’s story is ripe with potential. She is not only the wife of the new king, David, she is the daughter of the former king, Saul. Saul was the first king of the new nation of Israel and Israel wanted to be like all the nations. The nations surrounding them – the Egyptians, Philistines and Canaanites – passed the monarchy down through the women. So to be like them, either Michal or her husband stood next in line to inherit the monarchy.

As a young woman, Michal fell in love with David, the dashing, handsome young warrior-poet. But so did her brother, Jonathan, who loved David so much that he bound his soul with David’s in a covenant with him. King Saul, of course, was insanely jealous of David and wanted him dead.

Saul made sure that David kept fighting the Philistines in the hopes that they would kill the warrior-musician David. “I shall give [Michal] to him,” Saul said to himself, “that she may be a snare to him, and that the hand of the Philistines may be against him.”

Later, when Saul plotted to kill David himself, Jonathan and Michal intervened to save their beloved. Twice, we hear that Michal loved David. We never *once* hear that he loved her. Instead, scripture uses exceptionally intense emotional language to describe the love

between David and Jonathan. It seems David cared for Jonathan far more than he did for poor Michal.

Saul thought that marrying David to his youngest daughter, Michal, would anchor David's loyalty to him and his house, never imagining that David's love for Jonathan might work much better. David left Michal like he was going out for a walk without so much as a "so long," but had a prolonged and moving goodbye moment with Jonathan.

With David gone off to war, Saul gave Michal to another husband who loved her. David married a second wife, but then came home demanding that Michal be given back to him. It's a whole thing. We'll come back to it another time.

Let's just say that, in this story, there are reasons that Michal despised David in her heart. Their backstory explains why the text refers to Michal, "the daughter of Saul," not "the wife of David" who sees *not* "David, her husband," but "King David." At the start of their tragic relationship, Michal helped David to escape from Saul's thugs through a window. And now, at the end, she sees him at a distance looking out through a window with contempt.

What we didn't hear this morning comes after the feast. David and Michal argue. David shuts her down and their story ends with this: "And Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children till her dying day." That's the last we ever hear about Michal. (I told you this would make a great opera!)

David is a complex character. Biblical writers see him as a hero. We remember him as Israel's greatest king and a forefather of Jesus. David loved God *and* he *also* loved the power God allowed him to have. He was a deadly warrior, a morally compromised politician and famously promiscuous.

He revered the Holy Ark and also used it to fortify his earthly power. By bringing such a powerful, even deadly, divine object into Jerusalem with a great procession, David intended to honor God. He also intended to impress his subjects and his enemies with his power.

David, in short, was so *very* human. And it's his humanity that makes his story so compelling and so real. He is one of us.

With not only his body, but his self-serving agenda and human brokenness exposed, David danced before God. His unguarded dance, like our liturgy, was public, not hidden away in privacy like the dance of King Herod's step-daughter. David's dance, like our liturgy, was a celebration of life, not a pretense for death like the one Herodias set up for John the Baptizer.

David danced *not* because he was a perfect man, a perfect king or a perfect husband. David danced unafraid to expose *all* of his nakedness simply because he was in the presence of God. And David's dance, like our own liturgy, reached a high point with a feast offered to all the people.

David danced before the Holy One who stands among us even now, with a hand extended to each and every one of us. Whether we feel powerless or privileged, God beckons. Whether we are anxious or fearless, God beckons. Whether our hearts are in pain or at peace, God beckons.

There are times to sit in silence in the presence of God. To practice stripping away our expectations and projects until we can approach God with a pure heart and naked intent.

And then there are times to *dance* before God with all our truth exposed, as naked as David, with only the music and the movements of liturgy to guide us exactly as we really are right now.

In this way, God, who pours out life and love and joy, can lead us in dancing our gratitude for the feast that God has prepared for us.

---

Works cited or consulted:

Alter, Robert. *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2013.

Horner, Fr. Thomas Marland. *Jonathan Loved David: Homosexuality in Biblical Times*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978.