**Dancing and Celebrating**

**2 Samuel 6:1-19**

7/5/15

Thought for Meditation:

A reverent heart and a dancing foot can belong to the same person. David had both. May we have the same. *Max Lucado, “Facing Your Giants”*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

One man was dead. One man was dancing. Both were in response to the ark, and we don’t know what to do with either one.

Most of us have heard of the ark, though my guess is that much of what we know comes from Indiana Jones – the Raiders of the Lost Ark. If you want to see what the Bible says about the ark you need to look in the 25th chapter of Exodus. Moses was on Mount Sinai, and God gave him not only the Ten Commandments, but instructions for building the ark.

The ark is a box, a chest made of acacia wood. It’s about four feet long by two feet wide and high. The chest is covered with gold. The lid for the ark is also made of gold, and on top of the lid are two cherubim, angel like creatures. They face each other and it is between them that God sits. The ark was considered to be the throne of God, the holiest of places. It was a symbol of God’s presence and God’s holiness.

For forty years, as Israel wandered through the wilderness, the ark would lead them and the people would follow. When Joshua led the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land the priests carrying the ark were the first ones into the river. As soon as the priests were completely in the river the water stopped and the people crossed the river on dry land.

What is amazing is that after the people had entered the Promised Land they more or less forgot the ark. At one point the Philistines captured the ark and kept it for seven months. There are some wonderful stories about that in First Samuel. Finally, the Philistines couldn’t handle the ark so they sent it back to Israel. A priest named Abinadab kept it at his house, but it isn’t really part of the story. For seventy years or more the ark drops out of the story. It is almost as if the people ignored God.

Then David decided that he wanted to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Last week we looked at the story of David becoming the King of Israel and making Jerusalem the capital and unifying the kingdom. By bringing the ark to Jerusalem he strengthened his role as king and brought a religious legitimacy to it. He made changes in how Israel was governed and the ark would have brought the support of the conservative religious leaders. He brought a spiritual reformation to the Israelite faith. However, this was not an easy transition. It came at a great cost.

David and all the people who were with him went to Abinadab’s house. They put the ark on a new cart, pulled by some oxen, and headed for Jerusalem. Uzzah and Ahio, Abinadab’s sons, were in charge. Ahio walked in front of the cart, leading the oxen, and Uzzah walked beside it. David and the people of Israel went in front of the cart and danced.

The Hebrew isn’t clear exactly what happened. At one point the oxen stumbled, or the cart hit a bump and the ark started to tip. Uzzah, who was walking beside the cart, reached out and steadied the ark. God got mad at Uzzah for touching the ark and killed him right on the spot.

David’s reaction was very real. First he got angry with God for killing Uzzah. I have the sense that many people are uncomfortable with the idea of getting angry at God. It seems like a lack of respect and a lack of faith. David didn’t have any problem getting mad at God. In fact if you read the psalms it becomes clear that anger at God is a normal and healthy part of faith. Things happen in life that don’t make sense, things that we don’t like. A natural response, a faithful response, is to get angry.

David also became afraid of God. He recognized God’s holiness and his own unworthiness. He refused to take the ark to Jerusalem. It ended up staying at Obed-edom’s house for three months.

What do you do with a story like this? One man is dead, simply because he touched the ark, trying to keep it from falling. I doubt it is in the top ten favorite Biblical stories, or even the top one hundred. It makes us uncomfortable. We’d rather ignore it or even get rid of it. Many of the commentaries try to explain it away by saying that Uzzah was a priest and should have known better. There were laws about how the ark was to be transported. The ark had rings on the base of it. Poles were supposed to be put through the rings and the ark was supposed to be carried by priests on their shoulders, not hauled on a cart. In other words what happened to Uzzah was his own fault for not knowing or following the law.

That may be true, but this story is still very disturbing. Killing Uzzah because he didn’t follow the laws seems rather extreme. Isn’t the God we worship filled with love and mercy? Maybe smite Uzzah with leprosy for a couple of weeks, give him some food poisoning or have him sprain his ankle so he can’t lead the procession. But to kill him – that seems like overkill – literally.

This story points to a truth that has essentially been lost in our time. The God we worship is holy and dangerous. We must not be too casual or too comfortable with God. We need a healthy fear of God, because our lives might be threatened if we lose that fear.

To be honest with you, I’m not sure what that looks like for our lives. On the one side we want to avoid an unhealthy fear of God. We don’t want a fear that causes us to be paralyzed or legalistic, or a fear that causes us to withdraw from God. The other extreme is just as dangerous, but in our day probably more common. We don’t take God seriously. We ignore God’s commands and God’s word. We only pray when we need God, the rest of the time we pay no attention to God. We try to limit who God is and what God does or can do. God becomes nothing but a warm fuzzy who isn’t worthy of our worship.

Uzzah reminds us that the God we worship, the God of Jesus Christ, is the Creator and Lord of the universe. God is almighty and majestic, far greater than we can imagine. Our God is a god of judgment and salvation. Our God is dangerous and holy. We need a healthy fear of God.

About three months later David decided to bring the ark to Jerusalem. This time it was done properly. Priests carried it. Every six steps they stopped and offered a sacrifice to God. As the ark moved into Jerusalem people made all sorts of noise, shouting, singing, playing trumpets and banging drums. David danced in front of the ark with all his might, wearing nothing but a linen ephod. An ephod is like an apron that a priest would wear for religious ceremonies.

When the ark got into the city they put it into a tent and offered sacrifices. David took the food from the sacrifices and gave it to all the people. Everyone was blessed by the presence of the ark.

I want to share with you an illustration that is ***not*** intended as a political statement. It could be said of any president, so please don’t take this as a pro-Obama or anti-Obama statement. The past week or so have been pretty good for President Obama. Several Supreme Court decisions went his way. Congress voted for some of the actions that the President wanted. His eulogy at the funeral in Charleston was very positive and uplifting.

Imagine President Obama celebrating by wearing boxer shorts and doing cartwheels around Washington D.C.! That is an image that doesn’t seem possible. But essentially, that is what David did as the ark was brought into Jerusalem. Everyone was celebrating with David, except his wife. Then he made himself even more popular by handing out the food that was sacrificed. Everyone was blessed.

I believe that the lesson for us is that Christians should celebrate in a way that is extravagant and energetic. Our worship should be a celebration, filled with such passion and power that people will be excited about coming to worship. Worship should be the highlight of every week because it is filled with life, with energy and joy. Members and visitors will come to church just because it is the place to be, it’s a place where people will encounter our holy God, a place where people will be lifted out of their ordinary lives and filled with love and power.

The problem is that we are Presbyterians. I don’t want to get into a whole discussion about worship, but I think it is safe to say that, as a whole, Presbyterians are not known as having expressive and passionate worship. There are exceptions to that, but not many of us are comfortable with shouting “Amen.”

Tony Campolo tells the story of a church down south before the civil war. The white people all sat on the main floor and the African-Americans sat in the balcony. There was one slave named Frank who constantly interrupted the worship with shouts of “Amen” or “Praise the Lord” whenever the preacher said something good. Frank’s master got irritated with the interruptions but Frank just couldn’t help himself. Finally, the master told Frank that he would buy him a new pair of boots if he would stay silent all the way through a sermon. Frank desperately needed new boots so he was determined to stay quiet, no matter how good the sermon was.

That Sunday the pastor preached an exceptionally good sermon about all that God had done for us through Jesus Christ. Frank struggled hard not to say anything during the sermon. Every time he was tempted to shout out he would think about those new boots. In his heart he was shouting “Hallelujah!” but he kept his mouth shut. Toward the end of the sermon the preacher said something so wonderful about God that Frank just couldn’t control himself. He stood up and shouted, “Boots or no boots – Praise the Lord!”

Most of us aren’t comfortable using our bodies in worship. There aren’t too many Presbyterians who raise their hands or dance. Other than a black Presbyterian church I went to in college I don’t remember being in a Presbyterian worship service where people danced in the aisles.

So here is what I want you to do. First, I would like everyone to stand up – if you are able. Now, I invite you to raise your hands over your head, like you are surrendering, which is what worship is. Or, if you are a football fan, celebrate a touchdown. We are celebrating something even greater than six points. I’m not going to ask anyone to dance in the aisles, but would like everyone to turn around one time, with your hands up in the air.

I thought about asking Ron to play the hokey pokey – “turn yourself around.” Instead, let’s celebrate God’s love in Jesus by singing Lord of the Dance. I danced in the morning.