

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

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Proper 10; Mark 6:14-29

Twelve years ago, I found that I could no longer ignore or silence my sense of God calling me to ordained ministry. Up to that point, I had been somewhat successful at deafening the summons for over fifteen years, but the divine drumbeat within my heart had finally gotten so loud, so insistent, that I felt I had to pursue it or else go crazy. The “hounds of heaven”, as I have heard it described, were hot on my trail and I could no longer run.

When I was finally able to screw up enough courage to speak with my Rector about this, I was relieved to be encouraged to pursue this sense of call – and most especially to not be laughed at in scorn, which had been my biggest fear. But the most memorable part of the conversation was when he told me what ordained ministry is often like. He said: *Ministry is like dancing naked before God.*

We who serve in these roles must bare ourselves, removing the layers of emotional and spiritual protection that we wear like suits of armor in this often adversarial and contentious world. We must expose ourselves – our hearts, our hopes, and our fragile love – in order to enter into true community with others and to do the demanding work of helping to build the kingdom of God.

But it isn't only clergy who are called to dance naked. Jesus calls all of us, his disciples, to open our hearts and minds and souls to God and each other. Jesus insists that to follow him means to strip away our protective layers, to leave behind our old allegiances and identities in order to share with others the Good News of God in Christ as we have experienced it, and to recognize and live into the reality of our dependence on God's grace and our interdependence upon each other.

Just last Sunday, our gospel reading was of Jesus' sending out the twelve to carry his message of the in-breaking kingdom of God. While he gifted them his authority over unclean spirits, he also insisted that they bring nothing for their journey – no food, no bag, no money, no extra clothing for the coolness of the evening. *Discipleship is like dancing naked before God* – we have to make ourselves vulnerable to others in order to truly share the gospel message.

David seemed to get that.

Our Old Testament lesson is a fantastic tale – it has all the earmarks of good storytelling: surprise, drama, joyous celebration, flared emotions, and danger. David, fresh on the heels of two major victories over the dreaded Philistines, has succeeded in uniting the kingdoms of Judah and Israel and is now king of all Israel. He has established his capital in Jerusalem, renaming it the City of David, and is now ready to also unite what had been separate and sometimes competing powers under Saul – that of religious power and of political and military power. And so David brings the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, thereby making the city the religious, as well as political, center of Israel and solidifying his power.

The Ark symbolized and represented God's real presence in Israel and was a link with Israel's tribal past. It was a portable gold-plated chest that tradition said held the two tablets of the Law given to Moses. The Ark was originally housed in a special tent, called the tabernacle, and it led the Hebrews through the wilderness of the desert.

When carried, the Ark was always concealed under a large veil, even from the eyes of the priests allowed to carry it. One must never look at or touch the Ark directly, for it was holy, and

it was carried by way of long poles along the sides. Death, plagues, and afflictions were the unfortunate result of treating the Ark casually and without proper reverence and fear. For, along with great blessings, God's holiness can also bring great dangers.

So, David decides to bring the Ark of the Covenant from where it had resided in the former northern kingdom and install it in his city. With much rejoicing, David accompanied the Ark on its procession into the City of David by dancing before the Lord with all his might. Wearing a priestly apron-like garment (and possibly only that), the King leaped and danced with joyous abandon before the Ark, to the sounds of music and singing, and jubilant shouts of the crowds. We understand from his wife Michal's derision, that in his fervor and great happiness he, at best, behaved in a very un-kingly way and, at worst, he exposed his nakedness before the crowds of his subjects.

In the last part of this chapter from second Samuel, which is not included in our lectionary reading today, David returns home after the ceremonies had concluded and Michal confronts and chastises David with sarcasm and scorn saying, "O how the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!"

There has been much discussion and debate over the question of whether or not David exposed his nakedness when dancing before the Lord. The issue at hand seems to be more about David appearing like a fool; that he removed his royal robes and danced as a commoner might. David's offense in the eyes of Michal was, not so much his dancing per se, but that he stripped himself of his royal robes was not acting dignified like a king should. David was leaping and spinning with great fervor in front of everyone and his slave in the biggest parade of his kingship. This was his "coming out as king" party, and Michal felt he should have done it in a dignified, cultured way rather than wildly dancing in the streets.

I'm not particularly interested in picking nits over just how much David "exposed" his physical self, because what is important is how much he exposed his emotional and spiritual self through his exuberant response to the presence of God. In fact, I believe it only appropriate that David danced naked before the Ark – he gave himself fully and with complete abandon to his worship and joyous celebration of God's real and immediate presence among them.

David stripped himself down to his essential self as created by God – divested and laid bare of all other layers of protection – all the accoutrements of kingship, societal position, and wealth. In this simple purity, David's response to God's holiness and blessing is to dance and rejoice, for the God of history and the God of creation is present. As the Psalmist exhorts us in Psalm 96, "O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; dance before Him, all the earth."

Throughout human cultures, the act of creation itself is often envisioned as the dance of the Creator. Dancers come and go in the twinkling of an eye but God's eternal dance lives on. God calls us to join Him in that holy dance, which is why dance, whether of the body or of the heart, may in fact be the best response to the presence of God's holiness. It is always frightening to bare ourselves and dance before others, but we are called to just that sort of vulnerability and openness. Let us take courage in David's dance.

In his musings on David, writer and minister Frederick Buechner, goes even further to imagine this dance not as a solo expression of joyful devotion but one in which God joins David. He writes:

"How they cut loose together, David and Yahweh, whirling around before the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in

a single flame of such magnificence that not even the dressing-down David got from Michal afterward could dim the glory of it.

He had feet of clay like the rest of us, if not more so—he was self-serving and deceitful, lustful and vain—but on the basis of that dance alone, you can see why it was David more than anybody else that Israel lost its heart to...

Maybe we, too, will find the courage to dance naked and with wild and joyous abandon before the Lord. For, when we do so, we are not alone; God is dancing with us. Let us join God in this eternal dance. Let us rejoice in the holiness of God and come before his presence with delight and hearts on fire that dance with God's love.

Amen.