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July 12, 2009

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

Let's Dance

How many times have you thought to yourself, "Boy, I sure do want what he's got?" Be honest. Haven't you ever looked at the life of a friend or a stranger and found yourself thinking, "I sure could use some of that." Whether it's a lottery jackpot, a hard-earned degree, or simply more time on your hands, we've all found ourselves wishing that we could take a few steps in another's shoes for just a little while, or that some of what they have would rub off on us – just a little.

Our lectionary passage for today describes an awesome and awe-filled worship experience with David leading the procession as the Israelites bring the ark back to Jerusalem. The verses assigned for today describe a worship experience that most of us strive for. Utterly moved by the presence of God in his midst, and utterly thrilled by the prospect of housing the ark of God in Jerusalem, David worships God with abandon. David dances before God with all his might, celebrating God's goodness with music and song, with thank offerings and then more dancing.

And when we read these verses today, we might find ourselves thinking that *WE* want what David's got. *We* want to be so moved by God's presence in our midst that *we* can't help but dance with all our might. We want to be so filled with an awareness of God's goodness that we cannot contain ourselves. We want to be so moved by God's presence that we worship God with all we are.

Now many of us have tasted of this. We have enjoyed the proverbial mountaintop experience on a weekend retreat; we have encountered unsurpassed joy in our own lives that evoke praise at God's awesome goodness – the birth of a new baby, healing from disease, unexpected, gracious forgiveness. But the reality is, we come down from the mountain. And when the music stops, so does our dancing. In real life, we struggle to carry this fire into the streets, into our weekdays and workdays once worship is over. For most of us this taste is just that – a taste of what we want, but a taste of what we don't always have.

The lectionary does us a disservice today – that is why I have included the entire text for our reading this morning. In the verses prescribed for worship this morning, the passage is edited to make David's procession into Jerusalem seem like one big parade. When we read only the verses assigned by the lection for today, we receive a picture of David sustaining his excitement and seamlessly bringing the ark home to Jerusalem. The portrait we receive of the ark's homecoming is a continuous journey of dancing and singing God's praises.

But the truth is, **David did stop dancing.** As we heard, in verses 6-12, David experiences tragedy, loss and anger that compels him to not only stop the procession but to send the ark into hiding. In the missing verses, David's colleague and friend Uzzah reaches out to steady the ark when it experiences some turbulence on the journey. As the ox pulling the cart loses his step, Uzzah extends his hand to keep it from falling -- and immediately God strikes him dead. The tragedy hits a bit close to home for David, and he is overcome with anger and fear at this expression of God's wrath. If this is what happened to someone trying to protect the ark, how could David ensure the safety of the

rest of the 30 thousand moving the ark? How could he ensure his own safety? Was this worth doing, and was God worth praising?

The lectionary writers tried to leave out the hard stuff. They tried to give us a tidy, lovely package of praise and thanksgiving – and I can't say that I blame them. The text they edited out raises questions about God that are not comfortable, nor are they easy to answer. *We* understand God to be the source of life and redemption, and are confounded when that understanding is confronted with a picture of a destructive angry God.

Even as I studied for this passage, the best explanation that I could find indicated that Uzzah's death was a natural consequence of his actions. This writer explained that the Israelites, as it turns out, were not transporting the ark according to divine command. God had given clear, explicit directions for how the Israelites were to carry the ark -- these instructions were not only to ensure that God was appropriately revered but also to ensure everyone's safety. After all, the ark housed a measure of God's power – too much power for any human being to directly encounter – sort of like the blinding quality of looking directly into the sun. The Israelites simply weren't following the instructions put in place for their own safety, but were transporting the ark in the manner that the *Philistines* used. Improper transport of the ark came with some risk and the measure of that risk came to pass in Uzzah's death.

But even as I studied and searched for an explanation that melds my understanding of God with the text at hand I realized that even in our search for answers and in our quest for understanding, we have felt a lot like David – confounded by these deeper questions, overwhelmed by grief, stopped cold by fear. David, like many of us, is paralyzed by the wave of emotions he feels in the midst of an untimely loss. Tragedy strikes, David's plans are derailed, and his world is turned upside down.

As this celebration comes to a screeching halt, David himself must come to terms with the pastoral questions that are raised in circumstances like this: If God is so good, then why did a good man die so young? Are we doing what we're supposed to be doing if tragedy strikes one of our own just when we thought we were fulfilling God's will? Is God really "for" us if such pain could come so swiftly? David's joy is derailed by the complexity of loss and the weight of his grief. The procession stops, the dancing ends, and David hides the ark in the home of Obed-Edom, a Philistine, as he grapples with these, and other questions swirling around in his mind.

See, David's dancing stops just like it does for us. We too find ourselves stopped in our tracks in the face of tragedy and loss. Grief weighs us and slows us down as we engage in a necessary mourning process. And anger often consumes us when we are faced with an unjust loss – of a job, a friendship, a sense of economic stability. And fear can bring our lives to a screeching halt when a plan in which we placed our confidence fails. Sometimes it is not a worship experience that rocks our world, but a monumental experience of loss that shakes our foundations. Just like David, there is a lot that interrupts our dancing.

But when the lectionary verses pick up again we see that the dancing resumes. Although the dancing stopped for awhile, David hits the streets once again – dancing and praising God. The procession is back in full swing and eventually reaches its conclusion. The ark is carried safely to Jerusalem. The people are blessed. The land is filled with joy. The question before us is this: ***How does David pull it together again?*** How does David

remember and experience God's goodness once more after such a visceral, confusing experience of tragedy?

The text tells us that David remembers that **God is a God of blessing**. David sees that abundance and grace impact the lives of those in contact with the ark, while the procession is on hiatus. David hears reports of God's blessing in the life and household of Obed-Edom, the man keeping watch over the ark, and *he* wants some of *that*! David begins to realize that even in the face of tragedy, God blesses God's people. Tragedy doesn't stop the flow of blessings that stream from God through countless other channels. God's blessings continue to pour forth and David is reminded that God is, primarily, a God of blessing. **And a God of blessing is a God worthy of praise.**

And as David resumes his dancing, we see that he approaches the procession –and God – a little bit differently the second time. Aware of God's power and might, David approaches the ark in a state of awe. David is not clothed in kingly garments that emphasize his own worldly power, but rather clothes himself in a linen ephod –a priestly garment – and calls attention to God's power.

And this second procession is not about the rush felt by the participants; it's not about getting a worship "fix" or reveling in a personal experience of ecstasy. Rather this procession places God at the center of activity. David approaches this procession more tenderly, continually stopping to offer thanks and make sacrifices to God. And when they arrive at their destination, David gives thanks, approaching God with a measure of humility and gratitude – aware that God's blessing is a gift.

Friends, we might desire to relate to the joy of David's dance of praise – but we *do* relate to David's grief and fear when faced with loss. So how do we get back on track? Where do we find the strength to not only put one foot in front of the next and make it through the day, *but to be able to dance again* – **to see and experience the richness of God's blessings and to have the heart to praise God with hearts full of humble thanks?**

Even when our questions are aimed at God, David's example encourages us to turn to God. Through a closer look at who God is, we, like David may find a hope on which to stand. In small ways and in mighty ways we may likewise be reminded of the many blessings we have received – and even witness and experience new blessings in our midst.

And as we look at God we will see that God will not strand us in our isolation, abandon us in our grief, or let us focus on our fear. The words of our faith remind us that "even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death," God is with us. Even when tragedy strikes and we gravitate toward despair, the God who in Christ experienced the depth of human tragedy is with us. But it doesn't stop there. God is with us, AND the God who in Christ overcame sin and overcame death can overcome our sorrow to offer us new life.

So let us, with awe and thanksgiving, trust the promise of a living God who reaches into this broken world with a call to hope, a transforming love, and a redemptive power that can infuse us and all of creation with new life. Let us trust. Let us hope. And let us dance.