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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
July 16, 2006

2 Samuel 6.1-5, 12b-19
Ephesians 1.3-14

Shall We Dance?

“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.”

—2 Samuel 6.5

The Old Testament often seems to be filled with strange stories. Because it narrates events that are two to three thousand years in the past, things are bound to be very different. Sunday School teachers have long struggled with how to best bring these stories to life, and with how to understand that God might have needed to intrude more harshly into a world that was, itself, more harsh.

Despite their age, the Old Testament stories often contain wonderful sparks of humanity that allow us to hear them in our own, very different, times. The story of Moses being rescued by a compassionate princess, the story of an oppressive politician named Pharaoh, the story of the fear and relief of the Passover—all of these great stories present characters who “ring true.” They have the same hopes, feelings, and fears as us.

Our Old Testament lesson for this morning helps us to make a connection with another great figure of the Old Testament. It is a story about bringing a holy religious object into a conquered city, and yet it fairly bristles with human emotion and passion. Whenever I read this story, I’m always reminded of Frederick Buechner’s wonderful retelling of 2 Samuel 5-6. I first read his version in the early 80’s and it is still what comes to mind when I think of King David entering Jerusalem. Listen to how a master story-teller paints the scene:

To see what there was about David that made Israel adore him like no other king she ever had, as good a place to look as any is the account of how he captured Jerusalem and moved in the ark.

Jerusalem was a major plum for the new young king, a hill town considered so untakable that the inhabitants had a saying to the effect that a blind man and a cripple

could hold it against the U.S. Marines (2 Samuel 5.6). Just to remind people who it was that had nevertheless finally taken it, David's first move was to change its name to the City of David. His second move was a brilliant maneuver for giving his victory the stamp of divine approval by trotting out that holy box of acacia wood overlaid with gold which was known as the ark and contained who knows what but was as close as Israel ever got to a representation in space of their God who dwelled in eternity. David had the ark loaded onto a custom-built cart and made a regular circus parade of it, complete with horns, harps, cymbals, and psalteries, not to mention himself high-stepping out front like the Mayor of Dublin on Saint Patrick's Day. When they finally made it into town, he set up a big tent to keep out the weather, had refreshments passed around on the house, and, just so nobody would forget who was picking up the tab, did the lion's share of the praying himself and personally took up the collection afterwards.

So far it was none of it anything a good public relations man couldn't have dreamed up for him, but the next thing was something else again. He stripped down to his skivvies, and then with everybody looking on including his wife—a high-class girl named Michal who gave his administration tone as the late King Saul's daughter—he did a dance. Maybe it started out as just another Madison Avenue ploy, but not for long.

With trumpets blaring and drums beating, it was Camelot all over again, and for once that royal young red-head didn't have to talk up the bright future and high hopes because he was himself the future at its brightest, and there were no hopes higher than the ones his people had in him. And for once he didn't have to drag God in for politics' sake either because it was obvious to everybody that this time God was there on his own. 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 afterwards could dim the glory of it.

He had feet of clay like the rest of us if not more so—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 her heart to and why, when Jesus of Nazareth

came riding into Jerusalem on his flea-bitten mule a thousand years later, it was as the Son of David that they hailed him.¹

What Buechner captures is the passion and extravagance of King David's encounter with God. Sure, he was a cold, calculating politician. And yet, even this great King could lose himself in God's embrace. It is a love story, really. Not between David and his wife, Michal—things only got worse for the royal couple. It is a love story between David and God, and consequently between David and those other lovers of God who came later. All of us who love God, in a way, look to David as our great Casanova.

One of my favorite movies is a Japanese film called "Shall We Dance?" It is a funny and surprisingly moving story about an uptight Japanese businessman who takes dancing lessons to meet a beautiful young woman. His plans for romance don't work out, but he ends up being enchanted by the beauty of the dance itself. In his dancing, he finds a part of himself that he had never known before.

Maybe that's how it was with King David. Maybe that's how it is with all of us during those rare moments when we let down our guard and truly reach out to return God's embrace. It might not be a dance. It might be a song, or a prayer, or an appreciation of God's creation. It might be a personal encounter with the risen Christ or a quiet opening up of a new idea. Whatever it is, we all need such David-like moments—moments of abandon, moments of extravagance, moments of grace.

Shall we dance?

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*.