

Sermon - The Dance of Change
Scripture Lessons: II Samuel 6:1-19, Mark 6:14-29
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Our first scripture reading is II Samuel 6:1-19. It is the story about how David returned the Ark to Jerusalem. One cannot read this story without understanding the powerful underlying implications of moving the Holy Ark of the covenant (which represents God's sole leadership of Israel) to the city of David, the place the new king has established as central politically and now religiously. This is a story about change, the social and religious change that began for the Israelites when they first requested a king in I Samuel 8. Israel is no longer a loose tribal confederacy but has become an organized nation with a central leadership. David's decision to retrieve the Ark sets the stage for a confrontation between the old and the new. This is the word of God.

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. ² 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. ³ 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,^[a] the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴ with the ark of God;^[b] and Ahio^[c] went in front of the ark. ⁵ David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs^[d] and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.⁶ When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. ⁷ The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark;^[e] and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah,^[f] to this day. ⁹ David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?" ¹⁰ So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. ¹¹ The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.¹² It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³ and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴ David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵ So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. ¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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, ¹⁹ 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,^[g] and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes. Amen.

Our second reading is Mark 6:14-29. This is another story of change and confrontation of the new with the old. Those political and religious powers that David brought together several hundred years earlier in his Holy City are the forces in this first century story to stand in opposition to the change presented by the ministries of John, the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. In this story, dance is not a cause for joy and praise but the source of sorrow and destruction. Hear now God's holy word.

14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When the daughter of Herodias herself came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." 23 And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 25 Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." 26 The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28 brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "The Dance of Change"

The text: "*David was afraid of the Lord that day, he said, 'How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?'*" II Samuel 6:9

Let us pray. Holy God, give us the grace to accept the changes life brings, to integrate the new without losing the integrity of the old; to celebrate what is beginning without forgetting our reverence for what has been. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Both these biblical stories offer us insight into change. As Presbyterians in the reformed heritage we embrace change. Change defines who we are. We understand ourselves as "the reformed church, always reforming, always changing." Dr. Jack Rogers wrote about the meaning of change in an article entitled "Time to Stand Down," published in the Presbyterian Outlook Magazine. He writes:

As the Reformed Church "*we are rooted in the past. We must not lose touch with the tradition. At the same time we are a church which must be always reforming, according to the*

Word of God and the call of the Spirit. We must be open to the future. We must be able to change and to adapt to new situations and challenges.”

When I attended Fuller Theological Seminary in 1978, Dr. Rogers was Professor of Theology. His warmth, openness, vast knowledge and sincere faith made a lasting impression on me. As a young woman coming out of a denomination that did not ordain women, Dr. Rogers encouraged and empowered me in the call to ministry. Reading and discussing his book *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*, my first year of seminary was life changing and deepened my appreciation for the importance of moving beyond a literal interpretation of scripture.

Jack became Moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the PC(USA) from 2001-2002 during a contentious time in our denomination over an amendment to remove ordination restrictions for persons within same gender relationships. Jack absorbed incredible hostility as an advocate for our gay brothers and sisters as he led our denomination in a dance of diplomacy and dialogue. His book *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* was instrumental in framing sacred texts and ushering in greater understanding, acceptance, and inclusion in the life and leadership of the Church. For many people, this book was a spiritual game-changer of minds, hearts, and relationships. This book was the focus of an Adult Education Forum series in 2014.

Change is never easy, never without loss or pain. Perhaps that's why we resist it intuitively. And yet, change may also be exhilarating and liberating. Our story found in II Samuel reminds us that both these characteristics are a part of the dance of change.

Our reading includes a difficult passage about Uzzah's death and David's fearful response placing the Ark in the hands of the Gittite for three months. An incomprehensible incident for twenty-first century Christians –it's almost an embarrassment. Loving Gods don't strike people dead for offering a helping hand. However, we must remember two things here: First, all tragic events in this time in history were interpreted as the result of the wrath of God...a very simplistic, literal view of the world. And secondly, people's understanding of the nature of God has evolved throughout history. At this time Yahweh was still considered a tribal God, Israel's sole holy warrior and protector. Bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and placing the Ark in the temple threatened the independence and the power of this holy symbol...almost domesticating or taming Yahweh.

The death of Uzzah reminds David that this change, this shift in power, this move of Israel becoming an organized nation with a central leadership (a human king) must not be taken lightly or with ease. Uzzah's awesome death evokes an awestruck question on the lips of David. *How can the ark...come to me?* David becomes freshly afraid of Yahweh. Theologian Walter Brueggeman reminds us *When people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God's holiness, the community is put at risk.*

And so we hear and we heed the warning in change; the need to respect what has been. We recognize that the old understandings about the character of God's leading symbolized in the Ark can never have exactly the same meaning, when the Ark is permanently placed in the temple. And this story will never let us forget that it was God who took the lead in this change.

When David resumes the movement of the ark...dancing once again becomes central; however, the context is less casual. Sacrifices are offered after the Ark is moved just six steps and again in

Jerusalem. The celebration that followed is extravagant for the coming of the ark is Yahweh's self-giving to David and to Israel's new political beginning. And so we read about David's famous liturgical dance in his underwear. Walter Brueggeman again reminds us:

There has been much speculation about David's dance. At the negative extreme, it is suggested that David participated in a Canaanite ecstatic dance, and that is why he is rebuked by Michal. At the positive extreme, the dance is taken as legitimate liturgical dance, the bodily expression as proper worship.

There is definitely an element of being out of control in the joy and celebration of this new beginning, which symbolizes the transition between the restraints of the old tribal order and the possibilities of the new royal order. It is a moment of release and an occasion for creative response. My husband, the pediatrician, reminded me on our bicycle ride yesterday morning that children learn to dance before they learn to speak. Dance is a powerful expression, communicating delight, gratitude and deep joy.

However, we are quickly reminded that not everyone joins in the celebration. David's wife Michah, depicting the voice of the old house of Saul, her father, despises this change. The old order gave her security and status. And so when change occurs we see that those who resist are often those who have the most to lose; whose identity is more closely linked with the old. Their world is threatened and feels out of control. Likewise, those who welcome change are often those who have the most to gain; whose identity is more closely linked with the new. Their world is opening up with new possibilities.

And so several hundred years later, we're not surprised that the Herodeans and Pharisees resist the political change that was introduced by John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. John calls all to repent and be baptized, even Jewish men who considered themselves above this cleansing ritual. Jesus, in his teachings, continually reversed the structure of power asking those who want to be first to become last; those who want to be great to become servants. He broke the cultural norms of the day by speaking to women, eating with tax collectors, and healing lepers. Those on the outside of society were welcomed in Christ's inner circle.

By identifying Jesus with the lineage of the House of David, our biblical writers make it clear that although Jesus introduced something radically new, he was a continuation of the old; a part of an evolving tradition that continues to enlighten our understanding of who God is: I AM THAT I AM. The Trinitarian God; the inter-woven, inter-dependent, sacrificial God of Christianity has come a long way from the independent Holy warrior of the Ark of the Covenant. However, the two are not unrelated and, again, this change does not come easily or without pain. Let us never forget that it was God who disclosed God's self to us, who took the lead in our new understanding. And may this new understanding only heighten our awe, and respect for God's holy integrity and love.

The reformed church always reforming. My Christian, my Presbyterian friends, as we are called to adapt to new situations and challenges in our individual lives and in the political and social changes in the twenty-first century, may we be open to change but not without heeding the warning in change. May we embrace the new without abandoning the old. May we be sensitive that not all will be able to celebrate change with us. And with courage, may we continue to move forward to forge new frontiers of forgiveness and inclusivity in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the dance. Amen.