

Sermon – Dance with All Your Might
Sunday, July 12, 2015
Scripture Readings – 2 Samuel 6:1-5, Mark 6:14-29
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Our first reading today tells us of a moment when King David has been victorious. He has finally consolidated his rule over all of Israel, and he has just defeated the Philistines twice. He has decided to make Jerusalem his capital city, and he goes out to retrieve the Ark of the Covenant, which contains the stone tablets on which God's law had been written in the time of Moses, with the intention of bringing the ark triumphantly into Jerusalem. Hear these words from the book of Second Samuel, chapter 6, verses 1 through 5.

1 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, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart 4 with the ark of God; and Ahio 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 and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

Our Gospel reading for today relates the circumstances of the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. Herod has heard of the strange things going on in the countryside, Jesus and his disciples curing people and casting out demons, and this story gives us the background explaining his reaction to hearing of all of that. Listen now for the Word of God in these words from the sixth chapter of Mark, verses 14-29.

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 his daughter Herodias 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.*

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon – “Dance with All Your Might”

*The text: “David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their
might...” 2 Samuel 6:5*

We hear today of two dances, separated by a great deal in time, as well as mood and purpose. Our first reading told us of David and all the house of Israel dancing before the Lord with all their might as they brought the ark of God toward Jerusalem. Great joy is present, songs and instruments, everyone celebrating the procession in a huge mass of thousands.

The second dance is much more disturbing— a boastful and rash oath, a grudge carried out in a murderous request, and the death of a prophet. It is hard to even name how many things are wrong with this scene. There’s problematic relationship; Herod is carrying on a marriage with the wife of his still-living brother. There’s problematic abuse of power; when the holy man John publicly objects to the king’s marriage to Herodias, Herod has John arrested to try to appease his wife’s anger. There are apparently rather severe problems within the marriage itself, since she manipulates his reckless promise in order to bring about the death of a man Herod was trying to keep alive.

There is problematic fatherhood; seeing him eagerly having his own stepdaughter dance to please a crowd of powerful men is an unsettling occurrence; and it is followed by problematic vanity: trying to show off with a ridiculous promise to her. We see problematic grudge-holding; Herodias can’t stand being criticized without getting revenge. We get problematic motherhood; apparently manipulating your youthful daughter in really disturbing ways for your own purposes is par for the course in this household, as Herodias instructs her daughter to ask literally for a man’s head. There is then problematic obedience; it isn’t clear how old the daughter is, but she seems to have absorbed this way of things and doesn’t question her mother’s suggestion but goes right along with it.

Finally, after Herod’s problematic pride doesn’t let him back away from his promise, we get more abuse of power in ordering an underling to commit murder, more unquestioned obedience of evil, and then murder itself, which is rather obviously problematic.

The scripture doesn’t tell us, but one wonders what the guests at the party thought of this set of events unfolding before their eyes. Maybe they just enjoyed the dance and then enjoyed the drama of it all. Or maybe not. Have you ever witnessed someone thinking he or she is showing off but is actually doing the opposite; for instance, the kind of man who likes to berate his wife in front of other people and thinks he is being somehow manly or impressive by it, but is really just making everyone around them uncomfortable and squeamish about his behavior? Perhaps the feeling in the room was one of supreme discomfort, embarrassment regarding the royal household, and worse, as the whole scene played out.

It is hard to say, since the reaction of the crowd to the execution is not documented, but it is clear that Herod himself, even while feeling compelled in front of that crowd to go through with it, internally has severe feelings of regret. Herod is actually a fascinating figure in his several appearances in the Bible.

Note that this is not the same Herod who ordered the death of all the male children under age two in the area of Bethlehem. There are several Herods, and perhaps it is worth a bit of a digression here to explain who this one is in relation to the others, partly to elucidate the circumstances of this story and partly to help in your own scripture reading when you encounter confusing references to different people with the same name.

The first Herod who shows up Biblically is the one you are likely familiar with from the story of the wise men who came to Jesus after his birth. This was Herod the Great, also known as Herod I. Herod I was raised as a Jew, although his ancestors were actually converts to the religion. He was named by the Romans as a client king over the Jews, and took that position by means of a violence-filled tale of Rome-backed war and family intrigue, including banishing his own wife and son in order to take a new wife who could help him secure power...a new wife he would eventually execute. Herod I was known as Herod the Great mainly because he spent huge amounts of money on massive public building projects, including an enormous expansion to the Jewish temple complex, but he was also disliked for his heavy taxation to pay for these projects, for his selective disregard for Jewish law, and for his tyrannical brutality.

Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., likely when Jesus was a very young child. (If that alone is confusing, remember that the A.D. and B.C. way of counting dates was begun five hundred years later, at which point it was only possible to make a best guess at what year Jesus appeared, based on incomplete and confusing records of the time).

In any case, apparently hoping to confuse future historians, Herod the Great had a succession of ten wives, two of whom had the same name, and had quite a few children, several of which were also named Herod and/or Philip. He executed some of them for treason, and changed his will regarding his succession several times, resulting in a conflict among his living sons about who would take over when he died. The Romans ultimately settled this by breaking his territory up among three of his sons, Herod Archelaus, Herod Antipas, and Philip, who was also known as Herod Philip II.

Herod Antipas is the Herod from the scripture today, and he ruled over Galilee, which was north of Judea and Samaria, and Perea, which was to the east. He had essentially stolen his wife Herodias, with her also ridiculously similar name, not from Herod Philip II, but from his *other* brother Herod Philip, usually known as Herod II. This got him into trouble with the powerful father of his first wife, who didn't care for this development any more than John the Baptist did, and eventually sparked a war.

The dancing girl in this passage is the daughter of Herodias from her first marriage, and she is typically known as Salome, although this passage adds to the confusion and seems to refer to her as also being called Herodias like her mother, which may be due to translation difficulties in identifying her either as the daughter Herodias or as the daughter *of* Herodias.

So this, and I'm not even describing half of the palace intrigue and family infighting here, is the crazy situation surrounding the party scene we heard about today.

Now this same Herod was the one who later would preside over part of the trial of Jesus. That itself is somewhat confusing, since he didn't rule over Jerusalem, but he happened to be in Jerusalem at the time, and Pontius Pilate, apparently looking to get out of dealing with the situation, sent Jesus to him since Jesus was from Galilee, which *was* Herod Antipas's territory. That trial, if you remember, also shows Herod's fascination, despite his being caught up in the whirling frenzies of worldly power and decadence, with the truly holy when he encounters it.

Luke is the only Gospel which mentions Herod's part in that trial, in chapter 23, where it reads, "When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate. That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies."¹

You can see again here the perplexedness and uncertainty coming from Herod. He is devoted to his own power, and yet is intrigued by the person and the rumors of Jesus, hoping for a long time to get a chance to see Jesus do something miraculous. Even back in the passage we originally read this is apparent, because although you may not have noticed, the entire scene is a flashback, explaining the background behind why, when Herod hears of this man Jesus and his followers preaching and performing miracles, and everyone has various theories on who Jesus is, Herod declares that it must be John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, raised from the dead.

Herod seems, in both of these stories, to be a man on the edge of hearing something, coming near to a realization but not *quite* willing to let it disrupt the way he does things. He considers John to be a holy man and likes to hear him speak even though it means hearing criticism, but arrests him. He arrests him, but protects him. He protects him, but gives in to his pride and the momentum of his way of life and has him killed. He has him killed, but regrets it, and grabs onto some kind of hope that John has been resurrected in the person of Jesus. He hopes this, and wants to see a miracle, but readily shifts to mocking Jesus and treating him with contempt when he won't perform on demand.

This is a person whom, for all the awful things he does, we can relate to. We are all on the edge, all the time, between these two choices; letting the momentum of our lives as we already live them dominate and carry on, or letting the message of Christ, which has infected us and intrigued us, actually change us. Will we hold back in caution, and let the usual worldly way of things go on, or will we plunge in and be transformed by grace?

¹ Luke 23:6-12 (NRSV).

We heard about two dancing moments today, and maybe the history of my own relationship to dancing is analogous to the choice I am talking about. When I was in junior high and high school, I was uncomfortable when school dances came around. I didn't really know what to do. I often didn't attend, and when I did, I hesitated on the edge of the room. People were having fun, and I wasn't quite sure how to join in. A friend once described my tentative dance moves as the Trajan McGill dance, where I could move a little, but with at least one hand firmly in my pocket and remaining still.

Sometime partway through college, I noticed the phenomenon where, if you attend a wedding, there is almost always one couple there, usually an older couple, who really knows how to dance together, and when the right type of song comes on, they will suddenly be gliding elegantly around the floor as a perfect, graceful expression of the music in bodily form. I started going to some lessons put on by the college's Ballroom Dance Club, and gradually came to greatly enjoy dancing of that type. It also gradually wore away at my resistance to other kinds of dancing, and although I prefer the coordinated movement of couples dances, I'm now happy being foolish out on the dance floor, too, making up ridiculous ways of expressing the music as it happens.

I know my resistance still persists, though, to fully embracing the tune the Holy Spirit sings into my heart, and chances are that you can relate to this as well. Dancing, even the inward dance of one's soul, feels risky, and makes us nervous. We are afraid to jump on board with the joyful hope of which we have heard hints and rumors, and which we have occasionally experienced in direct moments of clear grace from God.

And yet, we know, somewhere inside, that we are making a choice, less brutally obvious than Herod's, but a choice nonetheless. What will we do, when we find ourselves on the fence, again and again? Will we slide off of it, in the end, back into the things we know, the comfortable short-sightedness and the familiar jadedness, the easy reliance on the patterns of life and thought that are handed us by the world, or will we jump off into the pasture in which the shepherd calls us by name, living into our belief and living up to our call to testify to the hope which we have found?

David and his thirty thousand men went out to retrieve the ark, in which were deposited the words of the Lord. Those words spoke to them of hope, of goodness, and of victory over all. And so they danced, not hesitantly, standing on the sidelines with their hands still in their pockets, but with all their might. Let us go and do likewise. Amen.