

## TWO DANCES

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 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. 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 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 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.

David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. 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. 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.

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, 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, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes. David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, "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!" David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD, that I have danced before the LORD."

2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 14-21

King Herod heard of [Jesus], for [his] 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." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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. For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 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.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When [the] daughter [of] 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." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." 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." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Mark 6:14-29

Herod liked nothing better than to preside at the head of a banquet table, loaded with exotic foods and fine wines. But most of all, Herod liked being the center of attention. Not just because it was his birthday, but even more, because this party was an exclusive, invitation-only gathering of cronies, toadies, and wannabes, all of whom owed what little power they had to the patronage of Herod. Even more than the palace, even more than the expensive spread, even more than the trophy wife, this gathering of movers and shakers was an affirmation of Herod's own power. And for Herod, power was synonymous with control.

And then, after the lavish birthday dinner, his stepdaughter begins her dance and Herod's control begins to slip.

It was more than the seductive power of this dance that evoked his generosity. Having the power to offer her anything she asked for gave Herod the appearance of control. Of course, when Herod thought of power he mostly thought in terms of control over his little province in a corner of the Roman Empire, which he thought of as his kingdom. But his stepdaughter and Herodias her mother were not interested in kingdoms or political power. They had their sights set on a meddling prophet. And they took advantage of Herod's vanity. They dangled the bait, let him bite, and set the hook before he was able to refuse their demand and lose face in the presence of his yes-men. It turns out that Herod was seduced more by the illusion of power and control than he was by a dance. And in the end, Herod found that for all his apparent power, for all his efforts to maintain control of events, he was powerless to refuse their brutal request, and powerless to prevent an act of cruel vindictiveness.

Unlike Herod, David really was a king. And in terms of real power over people and control over events, he towered over petty provincial autocrats like Herod. But the difference is that David never assumed that he was a self-made man, or self-made king, or that he was in control of the events of his own life. He recognized that the real symbol of power for Israel was not his personal influence, but the ark of the covenant, that mysterious artifact that dated back to the tabernacle in the wilderness. The ark was not only a sign of the presence of God; it was also a tangible reminder of the centrality of God in the life of Israel.

And so when David set out to bring that powerful symbol into the city of Jerusalem, he staged a procession and celebration and feast that made Herod's birthday banquet look like a child's afternoon tea party. And leading the way was David, the king himself, stripped down to his skivvies, and dancing for all he's worth.

The story says that when Michal—David's wife, and the daughter of the deposed King Saul—when Michal saw David dancing with wild abandon in public, she despised him. But I don't think that what she despises is simply David's embarrassing funky jive in the public street. What this story really comes down to is the kind of king that David reveals himself to be, the kind of servant of God. What Michal finds offensive is not the half-naked dancing in itself, it is David's lack of decorum as king, like her father Saul, his abandonment of all the trappings of power and control, like Herod. What Michal finds troubling about David's dancing naked before God should trouble us all.

This story is not just about a single, exuberant display of celebration and joy. Even more than that, David's dance is a sign that for all his achievements on the battlefield, for all his stature as the successor to Saul, for all his power in consolidating the kingdom of Israel, for all his command of the economic and social and political life of his people, David has yielded control. He has stripped himself bare and has entered into an uninhibited dance with God. And clearly God is the lead partner in this dance.

Two dances, two kings, two ways of understanding our relationship with God, even for us who are not royalty, not quite as powerful as David or Herod. One dance is calculated and

manipulating, used as a means to a horrific end. The other is an end in itself, an abandonment of control. The dance of David is about giving yourself away in order to find yourself, about yielding up your life in order to be more fully alive.

Let me tell you another story. You may remember it, because I have shared it before, but it is worth revisiting.

In his book *Dangerous Wonder*, Mike Yaconelli remembers the summer of 1952, when he was ten years old. He and his friends had no television or video games to entertain them. If they complained about boredom to parents, they were given the option of more chores to do. So they decided to create their own diversion—they decided to build a spaceship.

He says they spent three full days gathering up cardboard refrigerator boxes and other odds and ends, constructing the spacecraft in the backyard, and organizing their team into a respectable space mission. He says he doesn't remember how many of the long summer days and weeks were spent exploring space in their cardboard capsule, because while their spaceship was operational, they were completely oblivious to time.

"Every morning," he writes, "we could hardly wait to get done with our chores and be back in the spaceship. For most of the summer our world was our spaceship, where we miraculously survived meteor attacks, intergalactic battles with alien enemies, internal explosions, attempted mutinies, and mysterious forces of evil."

And then, with school just two weeks away, and facing a parental ultimatum, it took them five full days to dismantle and clean up the accumulated cardboard and junk they had collected over the life of this space mission.

Yaconelli writes: "What I remember most about my days as captain of our neighborhood spaceship is the wild abandon I experienced. While the spaceship was active, our schedules, our relationships, all of our personal responsibilities fell under the shadow of our imaginary space voyage. Our every waking moment was consumed with the spaceship. Our old life had been abandoned for a new life, and we didn't care whether others thought we used our time wisely or even if they thought we were crazy. We were children, and for a few short weeks we were allowed to abandon ourselves into the world of our imaginations. In all the years of my childhood, I was never as alive as I was during those weeks.

"In the summer of 1952, in the unlikely sanctuary of refrigerator and washing machine boxes, I was given my first taste of abandon, my first experience of giving myself over unrestrainedly to an idea larger than myself. God was gifting me, preparing me for that moment when I would bump into Jesus and He would beckon me to come, abandon all else, and follow Him." (Michael Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder*, pp. 54-56)

What David's naked dancing before God reveals is this same kind of abandoning yourself not to the world of your own imagination, but to the imagination of God. And the life of faith, as Yaconelli goes on to describe it, is not just about a brief, ecstatic experience of wild abandon. He says it is more about a life-long habit of abandoning. It is about letting go of self in order to give yourself over to God. And letting go of self, he points out, often consists of letting go of other things. He reminds us that the rich young ruler who quizzes Jesus about eternal life goes away grieving and empty precisely because he could not abandon his wealth. The Pharisees are often befuddled by Christ because they cannot abandon their religious rules. And then he asks some troublesome questions, that apply to us not only as individuals but to us as a congregation as well.

He asks: "What is it you and I are afraid to abandon? Our comfort? Our schedules? Our careers? Our money? Our possessions? Our security? Our theology? Our need for certainty? Our fear of making a mistake?" What kind of self-abandonment do we need to embrace—again,

not only individually, but as a congregation moving into a new era—what do we need to abandon in order to dance with God?

The stories of the two dances are not really about dancing, which is a relief to an old guy who was raised by Baptists. Rather the contrast between these two dances illustrates that paradox of our faith, that those who seek to secure their lives through their own power and control, lose the vitality of their life; but those who abandon control of their lives and give themselves over to God and to the world, are most alive and ultimately find life in its fullest.

May it be so.

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