

“The Dance”

Rev. Andrew Harris · July 11, 2021

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12-19

Once again David assembled the select warriors of Israel, thirty thousand strong. David and all the troops who were with him set out for Baalah, which is Kiriath-jearim of Judah, to bring God’s chest up from there—the chest that is called by the name of the Lord of heavenly forces, who sits enthroned on the winged creatures. They loaded God’s chest on a new cart and carried it from Abinadab’s house, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, Abinadab’s sons, were driving the new cart. Uzzah was beside God’s chest while Ahio was walking in front of it. Meanwhile, David and the entire house of Israel celebrated in the Lord’s presence with all their strength, with songs, zithers, harps, tambourines, rattles, and cymbals.

King David was told, “The Lord has blessed Obed-edom’s family and everything he has because of God’s chest being there.” So David went and brought God’s chest up from Obed-edom’s house to David’s City with celebration. Whenever those bearing the chest advanced six steps, David sacrificed an ox and a fatling calf. David, dressed in a linen priestly vest, danced with all his strength before the Lord. This is how David and the entire house of Israel brought up the Lord’s chest with shouts and trumpet blasts.

As the Lord’s chest entered David’s City, Saul’s daughter Michal was watching from a window. She saw King David jumping and dancing before the Lord, and she lost all respect for him.

The Lord’s chest was brought in and put in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it. Then David offered entirely burned offerings in the Lord’s presence in addition to well-being sacrifices. When David finished offering the entirely burned offerings and the well-being sacrifices, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of heavenly forces. He distributed food among all the people of Israel—to the whole crowd, male and female—each receiving a loaf of bread, a date cake, and a raisin cake. Then all the people went back to their homes.

Mark 6:14-29

Herod the king heard about these things, because the name of Jesus had become well-known. Some were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and this is why miraculous powers are at work through him.” Others were saying, “He is Elijah.” Still others were saying, “He is a prophet like one of the ancient prophets.” But when Herod heard these rumors, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised to life.”

He said this because Herod himself had arranged to have John arrested and put in prison because of Herodias, the wife of Herod’s brother Philip. Herod had married her, but John told Herod, “It’s against the law for you to marry your brother’s wife!” So Herodias had it in for John. She wanted to kill him, but she couldn’t. This was because Herod respected John. He regarded him as a righteous and holy person, so he protected him. John’s words greatly confused Herod, yet he enjoyed listening to him.

Finally, the time was right. It was on one of Herod’s birthdays, when he had prepared a feast for his high-ranking officials and military officers and Galilee’s leading residents. Herod’s daughter Herodias came in and danced, thrilling Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the young woman, “Ask me whatever you wish, and I will give it to you.” Then he swore to her, “Whatever you ask I will give to you, even as much as half of my kingdom.”

She left the banquet hall and said to her mother, “What should I ask for?”

“John the Baptist’s head,” Herodias replied.

Hurrying back to the ruler, she made her request: “I want you to give me John the Baptist’s head on a plate, right this minute.” Although the king was upset, because of his solemn pledge and his guests, he didn’t want to refuse her. So he ordered a guard to bring John’s head. The guard went to the prison, cut off John’s head, brought his head on a plate, and gave it to the young woman, and she gave it to her mother. When John’s disciples heard what had happened, they came and took his dead body and laid it in a tomb.

I love to dance. But I must confess that even though I think I'm quite a good dancer, my dance career bears much more resemblance to the former story, where David's daughter loses all respect for him, despite the frenzied passion and energy of his dance. I dance like David: wildly, passionately, improvisationally, and, some might say, embarrassingly. So be it.

Like a sermon, dance can be an honest and heartfelt expression of faith, joy, praise, and devotion, but instead of using words, the dance uses the body and movement. Several times this week, I have wondered if one could preach through the dance instead of the spoken word. I won't try today, so as not to lose all of your respect, but I have thought, what if? Could it be done - to express some message, some divine Word, without using any words at all.

There's a famous quote, often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." He probably never said this, but he did say something similar: "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching."

This is the language of the dance: communication and expression through movement, through the body, through action. Words could not adequately convey David's feeling of joy, praise, and glory, so he spoke through the dance. Herodias, in a decidedly less divinely inspired dance, moves Herod so, to the point that he offers to give her anything she wants. Her dance moves him to the point where he is willing to order the violent and gruesome death of a man that he considers to be a righteous and holy person. I doubt Herodias could have been so convincing if she had used mere words. The dance speaks to a world beyond the logical, rational, reasoned, and written; a realm of perception that cannot be reached by our culture's preferred modes of communication, reading, writing, and speaking; a depth of expression that cannot be achieved through didactic explication using mere words.

The dance moves us, transforms us, in ways we can't quite explain. And because we can't quite explain it, because we cannot reason it away, or describe its effect in calculated detail, we tend to push it to the side; relegate it to the wastelands of children's sing-a-longs, teenage emotionalism, or drunken dancefloors.

I used to not get dance. I thought it was like the Rockettes. Superficial spectacle, a visual accompaniment to music, something for the actors to do in a musical while they're singing, a way for boy bands to sell records. I brushed it aside as a lesser medium of expression. I just didn't get it. Not until I met my wife.

I may fancy myself a dancer, but she's a real dancer. She has taught dance for 10 years, choreographed musicals for high schools and community theatre productions. She has performed in pieces by some of New York's most famous and respected choreographers. She has devoted years of her life to mastering movement and technique, balance, flexibility, conditioning. Because I love her, I spent years slowly learning the nuance, the history, and the artistry of dance; gaining and developing an appreciation for an art form that had once been strange and foreign to me.

This week I asked her about dance and, specifically, where it intersected with spirituality and with the divine. What does dance have to do with God, I wondered. She said to me, in her infinite wisdom, "Dance is life. Dance is breathing. Dance is movement. Dance is everything."

Unlike a dance, a sermon cannot spin you around, cast you down to the ground, or lift you up into the air like a dance. A sermon cannot touch you hand to hand, cheek to cheek, hip to hip. Unless a sermon is truly great, it cannot make your heart race, take your breath away, or leave you sore, aching, and bruised. The dance does all of this without needing to utter a single word. And yet we relegate it to its status as an imperfect and inexact mode of expression and communication.

We resort to words and questions. What does it mean? Instead of letting the dance answer the question, “how does it feel?”

Isadora Duncan, the creative genius and titan of modern dance, called dance “a religion, an expression of life.” Clearly, dancers see the connection between the dance and the divine. She revolutionized artistic dance, eschewing the rigid rules and formality of ballet to create a wholly new trajectory for artistic movement and embodiment. In the words of dancer and philosopher of religion Kimerer LaMothe, “she made a claim that was unique relative to other performers in her day and to people throughout history before her: as a woman performing dances of her own creation alone on stage in public, she was renewing religion. For [Isadora] Duncan, dance renews ‘religion’ by generating new ideals of a human relation to the constitutive forces of the universe — ideals of god, beauty, and love; and it does so when a dancer moves from an awakened ‘soul.’”

The dance challenges convention and always has. From Elvis Presley to Nijinsky’s choreography in *Rite of Spring*; from break dancing B-boys to Martha Graham; from the Charleston to the Foxtrot to the Robot to the Hustle dance has always freaked out the establishment and titillated those on the cutting edge. In this way dance really does, as LaMothe says, generate new ideals of a human relation to the constitutive forces of the universe, moving a culture overly focused on piety to embrace the sensational, turning our bodies from sources of shame into sources of celebration, liberating art from the opera halls and bringing it to flattened cardboard boxes on street corners. The dance invites us to break free from old ways of living and to move in new directions.

The dance moves us back and forth, up and down, left and right, in and out; the dance moves with joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, hope and despair, faith and doubt. The dance articulates tension and release — like living and breathing. It forms antitheses into synthesis. It

brings many dancers into one dance, or sometimes one into many. Even a solo performance isn't performed alone, but in time, in space, inspired by something, and communicating something to someone. The dance is invitational, responsive, engaging, relational, and participatory. The dance is about vulnerability, expression, communication, and creation.

Many times this week, I found myself humming the Leonard Cohen song, "Dance Me to the End of Love." It goes:

"Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin
Dance me through the panic till I'm gathered safely in
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove
Dance me to the end of love"

Leonard Cohen has said that the inspiration for this song and these lyrics was, shockingly, the string quartets that played beside the crematoria in the Nazi death camps of the holocaust. He said, "they would be playing classical music while their fellow prisoners were being killed and burnt. The same fate that awaited the musicians themselves. So, that music, "Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin," meaning the beauty thereof being the consummation of life, the end of this existence and of the passionate element in that consummation. But it is the same language that we use for surrender to the beloved."

The dance is not only David's joyful reverie before the ark, but also the faithful, tender march to reunion with the beloved that took place in the horrific death camps. Leonard Cohen expresses the notion that the dance is not for one time and place. The dance does not dance only to the music of our choosing. The Holy reaches out and invites us to dance with the world in all times and all places, to move with the rhythms of love and harmony even in times of agony and pain. The dance goes on and we can either drag our feet, stumbling against the spinning of the

world, or we can take the hand of our creator and dance with grace and hope into mysterious eternity.

Leonard Cohen practiced Zen Buddhism for periods of his life, going so far as to live in a Buddhist monastery for a time, and it seems that his expression of the dance may have been informed by Buddhist teachings. Zen Buddhist writer Robert Aitken asks, “How do you handle challenge? You have two options: one is to defend, and the other is to dance.” To defend is to put up walls, to deflect. To dance is to draw near, to counter challenge not with antagonism but with grace and harmony.

Aitken tells a story of a time he spent teaching. He tried to get his high school students to act out parts in the novel they were reading. Despite their assignment to prepare their parts, they stood at the front of the room, books in hand, and read aloud with no intonation at all. “They had not learned to be free of themselves,” he said. “They had not learned to unite with the matter at hand. Look at Marcel Marceau,” he continues, “the great French mime. There is no Marceau to be seen, only a kite flyer, only a butterfly catcher, only a prisoner with walls closing in. He dances with the circumstances, forgetting himself...The dancer is the one who forgets herself in the dance.”

This message is echoed in our scripture today. Look how David forgets himself in the dance. He dances like a fool, with reckless abandon. He sheds any sense of shame or embarrassment. He couldn't care less what people think of him. He is completely present in the dance, in his outpouring of joy and praise, in union with God.

It's quite the opposite in the other story. Herodias and Herod both capitulate to others. Herodias defers to her mother to decide what she should ask of her father. And Herod doesn't want to kill John the Baptist, but he does it anyway in order to save face in front of his guests. Both

Herodias and Herod care very much about what others want, expect, and think of them. They haven't forgotten themselves in the dance. Like Robert Aitken's students, they read from the script without flourish or flair, captive to their own preconceptions, and deferring to what others expect of them. After Herodias's performance, she remembers who she is, who her parents are, what her role is in her family and society. Once her performance is over, she ceases to dance and goes back on defense. Unlike David, a ruler who sheds his ego in the passion of the dance, Herod armors himself in his ego, in his status as a ruler, in his pathological need to appear powerful, to be feared and respected.

Let us not make the same mistake. God invites us to the dance. God invites us to forget ourselves, and, in so doing, to find our rightful place in the beautiful and Holy dance of creation. Often, it seems to me that God speaks to us more through the dance than through words. How many times have we strained to hear God's voice, speaking words of peace and comfort? How often have we prayed for a message as clear as a letter that never comes? And how often have we been so absorbed in ourselves, in our problems and challenges, in our distractions and preoccupations, that we have missed the occasion to dance?

We want so badly for everything to be clear, and rational, and laid out logically with graphs and data, that sometimes we forget that there are other ways to communicate, that there are other ways of expression. A look, a movement, a dance. If we can learn to dance with God the way David dances, then maybe we can find a new way of not only communicating with God, but of engaging with God, embracing God, moving with God, following God, feeling God.

As you go forth this day, may you get lost in the dance. Dance freely without shame or fear, dance without worry or care, dance with God to the end of love and back again. Amen.