

You know what an *ephod* is, don't you? It's an undergarment.

Whatever one does in the privacy of one's own home, it is generally agreed that there are very few occasions when it is appropriate to publicly dance in one's underwear. And, according to Michal, David's wife that scant number of occasions decreases exponentially when one is a king.

Generally, I try to be a rather open minded fellow, but I must confess that in the rather sharp exchange that David and Michal share following the public underwear dancing incident, I find that my sympathies, and certainly my sensibilities, lie with Michal. Now, generally, I find it wise to avoid too much pontification upon what people should do in order to enjoy wedded bliss in their own marriage. As a general rule, it's best to avoid excessive commentary on other people's marriages. Leave that to the tabloids. That said, I do have some friends and I have observed them in social settings, and occasionally, one of them will do something that simply makes me shake my head in bewildered bemusement. I have also observed that for most married folks, when this is the case, the person most likely to point out the clear stupidity of one's actions is none other than one's devoted spouse.

So our scripture reading this morning contains all of the classic elements of a domestic dispute. David made a public idiot of himself, or so Michal observed, and as his wife, she felt it was appropriate for her to sharply rebuke him for the practice of dancing in the streets in his underwear while she looked out from above. And as his wife, she takes it upon herself to let him know that however inappropriate *she* may feel her husband's behavior is, in fact, she sees that he has far bigger problems than that. Her observation is directed to him as a *king*. As a *king* he has humiliated himself, and she ought to know. She, after all, is the daughter of a king.

And so it is that as David returns home to his royal palace after carousing before the Ark of the Covenant, he finds himself met at the door and berated for his behavior. And in a rapid-fire exchange between husband and wife, king and queen, David returns his defense that his dancing was *before the Lord*, and whether Michal found it contemptible or not, whether she thought that he had lost face before the people of Israel or not, he defended his actions with the simple words that his dancing had been before the Lord. And, as if to rub salt in the wound, he added, *and I will make such a bigger fool of myself than this, I'll even embarrass myself*. And the narrator adds, that Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death.

And that is David's vindication of his reckless abandon. Friends, I think this story is a bit peculiar. And if the exchange between David and Michal is not odd enough, there is another short story embedded within the story of the return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. It is the story of the death of the priest Uzzah, and it is disturbing to me.

A little background is in order, I think. David's decision to return the Ark to Jerusalem was perhaps not a completely religious one.

David was an upstart king. You remember, perhaps the story of his ascent to the throne, of how Yahweh, the holy one of Israel, whom we call God, had yielded to the people's desire to be like the rest of the nations with a king, and had anointed Saul to be their king. And then Saul had displeased Yahweh in several ways, by disobeying Yahweh's direct command, by consulting a medium from the spirit world, and keeping for himself what belonged to God. And in God's – Yahweh's – displeasure, Saul was abandoned and the old prophet and priest Samuel was sent to find a new king. After interviewing numerous other candidates who were all brothers, Samuel settles on the youngest of sons, the least likely candidate and anoints him as king. It seems pretty straightforward, we know the story of David and Goliath, and who won, and that by winning that battle he won the hearts of the people of Israel. He also entered the royal court of Saul and became Saul's son Jonathan's best friend and finally when both the king and his son were killed in glorious battle, David became king. That's the official version, a sort of *I'm King David and I approve this message* sort of way of telling the story.

The truth however, is that David was a wily politician, who planned and moved, and had to go on the lam from King Saul, and who united the tribes of Israel through sheer military might and made Jerusalem his capitol after he had kicked out the intruding forces united the people together by extinguishing all opposition. David was a sharp politician who knew that he had to have the assent of the people in order to govern, and after the Ark of the Covenant had been absent from the people of Israel for a very long time, decided to bring it to its new home in Jerusalem. Then even his opponents, *if they wanted to worship God*, would then have to make the trek to David's city, to *David's capitol* in order to worship the living God. The people of Israel understood that God dwelled where the Ark was. It was the symbol of God's presence, and when David planned to bring it to Jerusalem, it would have the effect of solidifying his power base. He controlled the economic center of the country, the governmental center of the country, and with the Ark, the religious center of the country. There was no separation of church and state - it was a smart move.

It was all planned out: A solemn procession to bring the Ark into the city. David's master plan was going well. Soon, even his enemies would have to come to his city in order to worship God and in so doing they would tacitly give their approval to David as king. It's frankly, brilliant politics. If you can co-op the name and the presence of God, you are golden politically, we know that very well. It reminds me of the time a congregation near me hosted a televised Fourth of July concert, and at the very culmination of the concert as the choir sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, a flag was raised in the chancel, slowly covering up the cross with its ascent.

It didn't go as smoothly as planned. Along the parade route, just when David's coup is almost complete, there is a wrinkle in the plan. As they are winding their way through the city, the priest Uzzah reaches up to steady the Ark because the oxen who were dragging it hit a bump and it shook. *He was struck dead on the spot.*

David became angry first. How could God do this to him? How could God strike dead his priest who was only trying to steady the Ark, to be sure that it approached its new home with decorum and dignity? And then David became terrified. David became so terrified that he put aside his plans to use God and sent the Ark away. David was afraid to let the Ark come near him. *David became afraid of God.*

And so the Ark didn't come to its home that day. Instead David sent it to a friend's house. (I'm not sure that I would consider that a friendly gesture... This thing already struck one guy dead...you take it...)

And finally, after three months, the Bible tells us, when God has blessed the home where the Ark was given a resting place, David's fear subsided...just enough...to resume the procession. But this time, it was different.

This time, the procession went a little differently. This time, after they had gone six steps, David stopped the procession and made a sacrifice, there on the spot, and then he made a fool of himself, dancing in the street before the Ark of the Covenant with all his might, in his underwear.

We have a story of a priest struck dead, a woman struck barren, and a king dancing in the streets in his underwear.

Now, at least theoretically, there is some guidance for us in this story. And, given what has happened to everyone else in this story, it would seem to me that perhaps we ought to approach any commentary on it with appropriate humility. The author Annie Dillard has been often quoted that if we knew what was really going on in worship, we would wear crash helmets as we entered. I find that particularly appropriate regarding this scripture. The irony of all this is that as a preacher, I ought to be terrified to say any more. Let the scripture speak for itself, after all. But there is a potential contradiction that must be dealt with. One might ask, doesn't the New Testament teach us to approach the throne of Grace with boldness? Doesn't Jesus tell us to come to him child-like? Doesn't the New Testament teach us to trust in the mercy of God?

Without question, it does. But let's stop and fence out a heresy: *The Old Testament teaches us the same thing.* The God of the Old Testament is the God of the New, and yes, we are taught to approach the throne of Grace with boldness, we are taught to approach it, yes. *But to sit on it? NO!* Even in the *New Testament*, we need approach God understanding that it is *GOD* whom we approach.

We need also approach the Scriptures seeking understanding, not seeking glib repetition. To tell David's story and not to acknowledge that there are theological and even political axes being ground throughout it is to be unfaithful to the same Spirit we seek to invoke as we pray, "may the words of my mouth and the *meditations* of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight..."

There are myriad bad interpretations of this text. This is not a story about Liturgical Dance. This is not a story about a bad marriage. This is, at its heart a story about *an attempt to control God's holiness*. And it is also at its heart a story of David remembering once more that God is holy, and that God gives his holiness to no other. This is a story of David remembering that God will be taken seriously.

To dance before the Lord with all one's might presumes the freedom of God to decide whether or not the dance is pleasing in God's sight. To dance before the Lord presumes the freedom of God to decide whether or not blessings will be given or withheld. To dance before the Lord is to seek God's blessing upon us, rather than to tell God how and when we should be blessed.

I hesitate to tell this story, because I fear that I might find myself in it, or you might find yourself in it. My mother was talking with a close friend and she invited her friend to come to church with her. The friend was new to town and had not yet found a church and my mother invited her to come to her church. As a means of sweetening the pot, if you will, my mother added that the preacher was good. (Just so you know, this was a different church and a different preacher. We are not talking about me.) My mother's friend paused a moment, then replied, "Well, that's important. If I'm going to get up on a Sunday morning and put on my best pantsuit, well, I want to hear something inspirational. I want to get something out of it."

While I do know that preaching is important and I do think that it is not a bad thing to want to leave worship enriched and prepared for the week ahead, I do find in this response a troubling view of worship and the human relationship to God. Worship is not about us and our preferences or propriety. **It is about encountering the holy transcendence of God.** It is about dancing before the Lord with all one's might and not seeking to steady the Ark to our sensibilities and praying that it may be found pleasing. Any Christian should be able to worship in any house of the Lord, because worship is about God and none other...

Which brings me to the modern era. If perhaps the ancients who recorded the story of David's attempt to bring God's holiness into his city were steeped in superstition and fear, then conversely our modern approaches to God run the risk of losing this sense that God is greater than our machinations and plans and even our worship.

I've foamed at the mouth on occasion about what I perceive to be politicians' attempts to hijack the language of faith in order to win political capital, (which by the way is not a new concept, (it has been going on since Caesar), and in reflection, I ought to have been as scared to speak on God's behalf as I proposed they ought to be.

I've been known to chastise folks for mouthing the hymns rather than singing, for sleeping rather than praying, and on occasion, for thinking the preacher doesn't know what he is talking about, despite the fact that we have prayed that God will speak through him or her. I ought to be as scared to speak on God's behalf as David was to bring the Ark the rest of the way into the city.

I question on occasion if in the modern era we have lost the sense of God's otherness, of God's transcendence. Our scientific age has deprived us of the ability to see wonder. One of my favorite novelists, Robertson Davies puts it thus in World of Wonders: "We have educated ourselves into a world from which wonder, and the fear and dread and splendor of wonder have been banished."

Have we? And if we have, can we recover that wonder of the pre-scientific age without doing that thing we Presbyterians purport to despise, that checking our brains at the door as we enter to worship?

If we are to learn from the dancing fool-king, it might be nothing other than to take God seriously! The psalmist reminds us that the Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The Lord's! Take God seriously. The letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we have redemption through the *blood* of Christ, and that we are to live for the praise of his glory! I'm not much of a dancer, but I could tell you a story of a time that the goodness of the Lord was so near that it was palpable, when I was so filled with unexpected gratitude that I could have danced in the house of the Lord. I could tell you a story, and I know exactly which one I would tell, about a joyful feast of the Lord that was truly joyous, but I suspect you have your own story; your own moment when goodness and mercy flowed from God and you knew it, and you could have danced in the house of the Lord. Or perhaps you are waiting. Perhaps you are seeking from God that freedom and grace and goodness to be able to dance in the house of the Lord. Perhaps it will find you when you least expect it and most need it. I cannot say. I would not dare say. God's holiness belongs to God and none other.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.