

Dance of Life/Dance of Death

(2 SAMUEL 6:12B-19 NRSV) ... So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. ¹⁶As 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. ¹⁷They 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. ¹⁸When 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, ¹⁹and 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.

(MARK 6:17-29 NRSV) 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. ¹⁸For John had been telling

Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for 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. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When 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." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." ²⁵Immediately 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." ²⁶The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, ²⁸brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

Never have I encountered such a wide diversity of characters and circumstances as when, several weeks ago, the lectionary put the stories of these two dances together on the same Sunday. David's dance may be the wildest, most uninhibited expression of joyful worship recorded in the Bible.

The Ark of the Covenant had lain in storage for forty-seven years, while the land was secured militarily under Saul and David. Then, David united partisan factions within the kingdom, and moved his headquarters to Jerusalem. David intended to make Jerusalem not only the political center of the kingdom, but also the spiritual center, and so he led a large contingent of soldiers down to Abinidab's house to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. On the way back, David and those with him were so overcome with emotion that they engaged in wild, festive dancing along the way.

Scholars differ about the dance. Sacred dancing had been associated with

ancient Israelite prophets. They sometimes would be seized by a spirit of ecstasy—an overwhelming inner urge to express wild euphoria over all God so graciously had done for them. Maybe this was David's dance.

But there are nagging questions. First, David was near naked as he danced, a practice more common to the ritual fertility dances of Baal worship. Second, David's wife was embarrassed because David "exposed himself before the housemaids." The whole thing seems out of character for Jewish ritual dance. But, David defends his behavior, and declares that he was dancing for the Lord, not for the domestic help.

The other dance comprises one scene in a tragedy which grew out of one of the lowest depths of disgrace into which humanity can sink. Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, threw a party on his birthday. During the festivities, Herod's step-daughter [*first century Jewish historian, Josephus, says was an early teenager, and her name was Salome*] performed a dance, which tradition calls a "dance of seven veils": very erotic and suggestive. Mark says it "delighted Herod and his guests". The results of that perverted scene defy the imagination. In his state of "delight", Herod offers the girl anything she wants; so, she asks her mother, "For what shall I ask?"

Herod had divorced his first wife and had taken Herodias (who was his niece, and mother of Salome) while she was still married to his half-brother. John the Baptist had denounced the whole arrangement, and Herodias harbored a grudge from that time on, and sought to have him killed; so, Herod kept John locked up in protective custody.

What follows is a grim and gruesome story, totally foreign to our experience; yet the question asked by the girl represents a vital part of every parent/child relationship. Every child somehow, sometime, asks, "What shall I ask of life? What is it you want me most to do and to be? I'll take my cue from you." And that's what Salome does.

Herodias had no concern for her daughter. She was self-seeking; hate-filled and unforgiving; and she was willing to use her daughter to achieve her goals. Apparently without the flicking of an eyelash she made her daughter an accessory to murder: "Bring me the head of the Baptizer!"

Salome is the most tragic of all the characters in this drama, her youth and innocence manipulated by her scheming mother. And early in life Salome learned to use her assets to exploit the weakness of others.

Many a parent has played a part scarcely less tragic. "What do you want me to ask of life?" "Why, I want you to be a social success. I want you to be popular, complimented, envied. I want you to be a source of pride for me." So the child takes the cue, and one more life is mangled.

Of course, we don't say these things in so many words. But children have terribly penetrating eyes and ears. Forget the cliché: "Do as I say, not as I do." Those are *totally worthless words*. Jo Lynn and I have reared three sons and participated in the rearing of eight grandchildren. We've been reminded over and over of how—even at two- three- four years of age—children see our day-to-day behavior and know what we really care for most. They know when dancing lessons or soccer or baseball are more important than church activities. They know when furniture is more important than the spiritual climate of the home; when image is more important than character; when appearance is more important than integrity.

There is high tragedy in the concluding line of Salome's story. A soldier brought the head of the Baptist, "and the girl gave it to her mother." Perversely, it was Mother's Day in the palace of Herod. "Here, Mother, is a present for you. It's what you wanted most of all." What a critical moment when a child looks to us and asks, "**What shall I ask of life?**"

Then there's Herod: politician; into power and influence. Herod was intimidated by John—puzzled and troubled; yet he liked to listen to him. Apparently Herod had principles and convictions; but those principles and convictions always seemed, somehow, to get set aside when they got in the way; when he wanted Herodias as his wife while she was still his brother's wife; when, in a moment of drunken weakness, his lust for his teenaged step-daughter overcame him; and especially when she asked for the unthinkable.

How many others have set aside principles over one desire that blots out everything else: wealth, power, fame, a particular image, sensual pleasure. "Ask anything you wish, and I will give it to you. Integrity, peace of mind, reputation, self-esteem-- I'll give it all up for you."

In the whole sordid scene, the only admirable character is John the Baptist, who, for his integrity and faithfulness was beheaded.

I have to tell you, my work with these two scriptures this past few weeks has been pretty intense! There seem to be no redeeming features in either story. Even David—ecstatic worshiper of God, author of many of the Psalms—turned out to be an adulterer and a conspirator to murder, just like the characters in Mark's story. Ecstatic, heart-felt religion is not necessarily a sign of righteousness. ["Not everyone who says, 'Lord! Lord!' ('Praise the Lord!') will enter the kingdom."]

And yet, there is good news. Among these wretched characters, I suspect each of us can find some point of identification: if not in blatant adultery or criminal action, then at least in misplaced and misguided values, wishy-washy principles and convictions, unforgiving grudges, selling our souls for personal gain...

And here is David: adulterer, conspirator to murder; no better than the rest.

Later in his life, when confronted by the prophet, Nathan, David admitted and confessed his sins; he repented, and changed his life. And the scriptures tell us that he became "a man after God's own heart."

And that's where we find "Good News". Here is a man who has sunk to the lowest level of human depravity—no better than the obscene characters in Herod's palace. And yet, through the grace of God he is able to rise above it all to become "a man after God's own heart". And to this day, among Jews who still look for the coming of God's Messiah, when the question arises, "What will Messiah be like?" There is no hesitation in the answer: "He will be like David."

If David can rise from the depths of depravity to become the model for the "Son of God", then nothing we can do or intend will ever place us beyond the grace and forgiveness of God. ...makes even me want to dance; but I'll spare you.

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