



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

16-Jul-2006

SCRIPTURE: 2 Samuel 6:1-5,12-19 Mark 6:14-29

SERMON: Shall We Dance? (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

Flags, hats, scarves, banners, songs, chants, shirts, wigs, mascots, face paints; all of these were much in evidence in Germany and in fact around the world as the World Cup proceeded. All of these things, and likely many others, were used as signs and symbols of support that the fans had for their particular team.

Today's bible reading in our series on King David discusses one part of the story of Israel's most important symbol: the Ark of the Covenant. Between the conquest of Canaan under Joshua and Samuel's anointing of Saul as king, Israel had existed as a tribal confederation. Through all those years, the Ark of the Covenant was the chief symbol of God's presence and tribal unity in Israel. Now, David is king and has established a new political capital for Israel at Jerusalem. So David sets out to bring the Ark to the city, seeking to employ this symbol of God's presence and Israel's unity to consolidate the realm.

By bringing the Ark to Jerusalem, David hopes to unite the two centers of power in Israel, the secular and the religious. In the reign of Saul, these two centers did not always work well together. So now David, a successful and popular king, initiates a very public, high-profile rapprochement, hoping to bring the nation together not only politically, by uniting the northern and southern kingdoms, but also culturally and religiously by this powerful symbolic act.

The Ark of the Covenant was regarded as the most important religious symbol of God's presence with the people of Israel. It had been the container for "*testimony*", God's words and instructions to Israel. Whether it been preserved since the time of the wilderness wanderings or whether this was one more copy we do not know. But that hardly mattered; it reminded all of all that God had done and said. As Israel secured its place in the promised land, the ark still had no permanent home. It was still in use by the Israelite armies who carried it into battle with them, believing that because of this, God was with them and brought them victory.

This desire of David to unite the secular and the religious is understandable at the human level, but I must question how it looked to God. Throughout history, when the name of a god has been invoked in support of one nation's policies, trouble has always followed closely behind. Even this week, even today, our world still suffers from regimes and fanatics who have co-opted a "god" or a religion in such a way as to give cover to intolerable acts done in the name of that god or that religion. So, I am not sure that God was in favor of David's actions. Maybe this sounds real strange to many of us, for weren't we always told from the Old Testament that Israel is always the good guy and that their enemies are God's enemies? But even with Judaism, this is not the universal view or even the majority view. To Orthodox Jews, the existence of a political State of Israel is in fact a blasphemy. To them, Israel can never be lines on a map, or a political entity. True Israel is a spiritual community of those who read and obey the Torah, the Law of God. No concessions must be made to this even and especially any that are asked for by the political state.

As a people, we are extremely biased towards democracy and freedom rather than oppression and despotism. We lean heavily in supporting the democracy that is Israel. As a people, we agreed with other nations that never again should the Hebrew people face a Holocaust because they lacked a place where they could call home. And so we support Israel's right to exist. But, *and it is a very important but*, we must not imagine that God does not have concerns, *deep concerns*, when Israel, political Israel, acts in ways that may be unjust. To criticize political Israel is not to support terrorism. To criticize Israel is not the same as criticizing God! Unjust actions in support of what may be a just cause weaken and can eventually destroy the justice of any cause. God's

commitment is to the world, to all the world, *to all people*. God's bias is to the world, *all of it!*

Back to the details of the story. There is music, singing, and dancing. We look back on David and perceive him to be free in spirit, free in his praise of God. But what David is doing was not normal. It was not appropriate for a leader of his stature to be publicly dancing, especially in a religious ceremony. His exuberance offends some people. David's wife is offended when she looks from her window and sees him dancing. It seems he is breaking away from tradition.

The text ends on a note of blessing and homecoming. David responds to the ark's new home with the blessing of offerings. The people of Israel who gather to celebrate likewise find blessing and offerings from David's hand. David was called to be their shepherd. The root meaning of this Hebrew word means "to feed" and so David does just that; he blesses them by giving them food.

God's presence here among us certainly invites celebration. God's presence assures us of meaning and purpose in life; offers us hope and forgiveness for the things that seek to tear us down; brings us to a unity that transcends all that would otherwise divide us; God's presence defies all that is wrong in the world and defines how we are to live. God's presence invites us to celebrate these truths and promises, to offer our allegiance to God and God's will for the world, and to be prepared to live so that God's will is expressed in our lives. *God's presence always awaits our response.*

Over the past week, the children at Vacation Bible School have seen different ways in which different cultures recognize and respond to God's presence. Each unique, each reflective of all that God has done for us and for the world in Jesus Christ.

David's response to the Ark, born out of his belief that its presence would bring blessing and prosperity to the people, was to dance and to distribute food. Now Presbyterians are not known for dancing, for being holy rollers. But the same kind of exuberant response is called for. To dance, to distribute food, was to act out of the *extraordinary* rather than be conditioned by the ordinary. When Germany won their game against Poland with a goal in overtime, the crowd went wild with excitement. And not only the people in the stadium, but the many thousands who were on the streets of the city of Dortmund. People in shops and stores, in bars and restaurants, people on the buses and trains, people walking the streets or watching out of their windows or balconies, all of them sharing in the joy of victory and certain qualification for the next round of matches. This was what they had been hoping for and now, at last, it had come true this was no ordinary night, no ordinary game, no ordinary victory. This was the path to something very, very new.

When we realize that God is with us, always and forever, when we accept that God is with us to bless us, to guide us, to sustain us, when the love of God seeps into our innermost parts, then we can exult in God. We can dance, we can sing, we can give away the wealth we have knowing that stuff doesn't matter. compared to God, *stuff is of no value*. As we share what we have with others, we express our growing trust in God!

There is a word for worship, which we don't use very much, perhaps because it is word that touches on the unknown, even on the sensual. That word is *ecstasy*. We probably think of this as a name for an illicit drug, or in terms of passions that seem removed from things being done decently and in order! Our lack of connection to ecstasy is tragic. The word ecstasy comes from the Greek, meaning literally to "*stand outside one's self*." Over the last few weeks, so many fans of soccer all around the globe have tasted ecstasy. As they exulted in the triumph of their team, the fans felt part of something larger and greater than themselves. They are part of something much grander and greater. Visiting some of the great churches and cathedrals of Germany with their towering spires, their high vaulted ceilings, their great works of art, their candles and sensors for incense, it was easier to be reminded of wonder and ecstasy than in say the theater style auditorium that passes for much church architecture today.

To be in ecstasy is to stand outside ourselves. That is a very hard thing for us modern and post-modern people to do. Our culture has encouraged us to focus on ourselves; who we are, what we look like, what we wear, how we can get ahead. Our society urges us to delve ever deeper into ourselves; to constantly monitor our personal feelings, our highs and lows; to continually worry about questions like, "What am I feeling now? What am I thinking? What am I supposed to be doing?"

Sunday worship is a blessed opportunity to look beyond ourselves, to get outside of ourselves; to go out of ourselves. Not as any form of escapism, but to go out of ourselves, to engage with God and God's reality and God's plan for the world. Such worship, such ecstasy, is not about us, *it is never about us*. Such ecstasy will include humility over the ways in which our lives fall short. It will include joy over an assurance of forgiveness. It will include gratitude in the presentation of our offerings. But, it may also *and should also* include anger at the divisions and oppression and hunger in God's world; anger against every power and all principalities that seek to diminish love of God or love of neighbor.

Ecstasy is not an escape from reality, but an engagement with the real God and the real world. This is the worship that God looks for and which God enjoys. Such worship begins long before the organ strikes the first note and continues well past the doxology. It is the worship that is expressed in our willingness to live each and every day as disciples of Jesus Christ, the One *who embraced all of God's hurting children*.

Shall we dance? Shall we dance in joy and in welcome? In the somewhat more planned order of worship required when the community is gathered as we are right now? And in the freer and less scripted dance of everyday discipleship? Shall we dance as David danced? As a protest and a celebration that only as God comes first and center can all other things every hope to come into their proper perspective. *Shall we dance? Shall we dance God's dance?* Shall we, shall we dance? *Take your partners! Amen.*

2 Samuel 6:1-5,12-19

1David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2David 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. 3They 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 4with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5David 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. 12It was told King David, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." 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 6:14-29

14King 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." 15But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17For 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 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." 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.

The New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.