

Sermon – A Time to Dance  
Scripture Reading: II Samuel 6:1-15  
Sunday, July 11, 2021  
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Springfield, Illinois

Today's scripture reading is II Samuel 6:1-15. It is the story of David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. There are powerful underlying implications in moving the Holy Ark of the covenant (which represents God's sole leadership of Israel) to the city of David, the place the new king has established as central politically and now religiously. This is a story about change, the social and religious change that began for the Israelites when they first requested a king in I Samuel 8. Israel is no longer a loose tribal confederacy. It has transitioned to an organized nation with a central leadership. David's decision to retrieve the Ark sets the stage for a confrontation between the old and the new. This is the Word of God.

*David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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 <sup>4</sup> with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. <sup>7</sup> The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. <sup>8</sup> David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day. <sup>9</sup> David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?" <sup>10</sup> So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. <sup>11</sup> The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household. <sup>12</sup> It 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; <sup>13</sup> and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. <sup>14</sup> David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. <sup>15</sup> So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. Amen.*

The title of the meditation: "A Time to Dance"

The text: *David danced before the LORD with all his might; II Samuel 6:14a*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for those momentous occasions of change in our lives which call for dancing. As we reflect on scripture, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Two years ago on Founders' Sunday, former senior minister Dr. Lonnie Lee shared the story of his granddaughter dancing in the aisle of the Presbyterian church he and Barbara now attend in Kansas City. The next Sunday, six-year old Caroline Bryans danced up and down our center aisle as the Westminster Choir sang a jubilant anthem. Her dad sent the video to Lonnie with an affectionate note.

Dancing is an expression of joy and has its roots in religious ritual as indicated in this week's scripture reading. Today, I would gladly dance down Westminster's center aisle in celebration of the commissioning of our youth to the 2021 mission trip. Following a year and a half of "a time to refrain" as these young people persevered the limitations of COVID-19 with grace and strength, today is "a time to dance." Today, we are symbolically retrieving the ark of something that is very precious to us and instrumental in the faith formation of our youth. Today is a time to celebrate the return to mission, to outreach, to service, to fellowship, to traveling, to worshipping together, to dancing down the aisle of a bus and delighting in friendships.

As we retrieve this symbolic ark, we do so with reverence and a bit of caution recognizing there is some risk traveling into a state that has a low vaccination rate. We do not take this privilege casually. With a healthy amount of fear for the virus, our fully-vaccinated team, led by Reverend Choi, has made provisions to keep those traveling safe. We will step lightly in our dance together, pausing often along the way to give thanks to the God who sends us and who joins us in the dance of life.

Along with the work on behalf of the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance ministry, our youth will visit the National Civil Rights Museum to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the momentous change within the twentieth century—a move toward greater equity and inclusivity in the hard fought battle to end segregation in our country. This will be a powerful reminder to the truth that change is never easy—never without loss or pain. Those in power with the most to lose pose the greatest resistance to change. Yet, change is also exhilarating and liberating, especially for those who were previously denied access to the dance floor.

Sometimes in our emphasis on the racial injustices, we forget the momentous change for women in the twentieth century. In 1961, Mary Tyler Moore's role as Rob Petrie's wife Laura in the sitcom "The Dick Van Dyke Show" was considered groundbreaking because she wore pants and expressed her opinions. It took the Presbyterian Church over 400 years since its founding in the sixteen century to elect their first women Moderator, Elder Lois Stair, in 1971.

The changes toward a greater equity and inclusivity in the twentieth century are a continuum and extension of the change recorded in II Samuel when the Ark of the Covenant was moved to Jerusalem.

The Trinitarian God; the inner woven, inner dependent God of Christianity has come a long way from the independent Holy warrior of the Ark of the Covenant but the two are not unrelated. The self-giving God who gave the Ark of the Covenant to David is the same self-giving God who danced on the cross.

Today's reading includes the difficult passage about Uzzah's death and David's fearful response placing the Ark in the hands of the Gittite for three months. This is an incomprehensible incident for twenty-first century Christians. It is almost an embarrassment. Loving God's do not strike people dead for offering a helping hand.

However, we must remember two things here. First, all tragic events at this time in history were interpreted as the result of the wrath of God in a very simplistic, literal view of the world. Secondly, people's understanding of the nature of God has evolved through history. At this time Yahweh was still considered a Tribal God, Israel's sole holy warrior and protector. Bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and placing the Ark in the temple symbolized a change in the people's understanding of who God is.

The death of Uzzah reminds David that this change, this shift in power, this move of Israel becoming an organized nation with a central leadership (a human king) must not be taken too lightly or with too much ease. Uzzah's awesome death evokes an awestruck question on the lips of David "How can the ark ...come to me?" David becomes freshly afraid of Yahweh. Presbyterian Theologian Walter Brueggeman reminds us "When people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God's holiness, the community is put at risk."

When David resumes the movement of this ark, dancing once again becomes central but the context is less casual. Sacrifice is offered after the Ark is moved just six steps and again in Jerusalem.

As we celebrate the momentous changes in this time and place with dancing, may we never lose our sense of awe, respect and reverence for the God who makes change, recovery, and new life possible. May we embrace the new without abandoning and learning from the old, and with courage, may we continue to move forward serving others while forging new frontiers of equity and inclusivity in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Dance. Amen.