

Sermon - The Dance of Change

Scripture Readings: II Samuel 6:2-18, Mark 4:35-41

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Our first scripture reading, II Samuel 6:2-18, is the story of David moving the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, the city 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 but has become an organized nation with a king. 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.

² 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. ³ 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 ⁴ with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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 lurched. ⁷ The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him there, and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah, so that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. ⁹ David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?" ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, David sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. As 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. They 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. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, Mark 4:35-41, is another story about change and confrontation of the new with the old. Mark announces in chapter one that the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth initiates a dramatic, in-breaking of God's reign. As we cross the Sea of Galilee with Jesus and witness his calming of the waters, we get a glimpse of what this means. This One, like Yahweh who divided the waters of chaos in the crossing of the Red Sea, has the power to rescue us from the fear and disorder that are a part of life's storms, especially the storms of change. Hear now the word of God.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." ³⁶ And leaving the crowd behind, they took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷ A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸ But Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion, and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" ³⁹ And waking up, Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Be silent! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. ⁴⁰ Jesus said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" ⁴¹ And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Amen.

The title of the meditation: "The Dance of Change"

The text: *“David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might... II Samuel 6:14*

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us the grace to accept the change life brings. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

One thing I did not expect at the General Assembly in Salt Lake City two weeks ago was the opportunity to join the Co-Moderators in the electric slide as commissioners danced across the front of the plenary hall between discussions and votes. There was a feeling of exuberance among those gathered, perhaps because we have not been together since 2018 and perhaps because of the joy of being a part of change. As Presbyterians in the reformed heritage, we embrace change. Dr. Jack Rogers, seminary professor and Moderator of the General Assembly in 2001 sums it up like this:

We are rooted in the past. We must not lose touch with tradition. At the same time, we are a church always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Spirit. Open to the future, we must be able to change and to adapt to new situations and challenges.

Change is never easy, never without loss or pain. Perhaps that’s why we resist it intuitively. Yet, change is also exhilarating and liberating. In II Samuel, both characteristics are a part of the dance of change.

Our reading includes a 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 to grasp. Loving Gods do not strike people dead for offering a helping hand. However, we must remember two things: First, all tragic events in this time in history were attributed to the wrath of God...a very simplistic, literal view of the world. Second, people’s understanding of the nature of God has evolved throughout 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 threatened the independence of this holy symbol ...domesticating Yahweh.

The death of Uzzah reminds David that this change, this shift in power, this move of Israel becoming an organized nation with a king must not be taken lightly. Uzzah’s awesome death evokes an awestruck question on the lips of David. *How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?* David becomes freshly afraid of Yahweh. Theologian Walter Brueggeman reminds us *When people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God’s holiness, the community is put at risk.*

And so, we hear and heed the warning in change; the need to respect what has been. When David resumes the movement of the ark... dancing once again becomes central; however, the context is less casual. Sacrifices are offered after the Ark is moved just six steps and again in Jerusalem.

There is an element of being out of control in the joy and celebration of this new beginning, which symbolizes the transition between the restraints of the old tribal order and the possibilities of the new royal order. It is a moment of release and an occasion for creative response. Peter, my pediatrician husband reminded me on our bike ride yesterday, children learn to dance before they learn to speak. Dance is a powerful expression, communicating delight, gratitude and deep joy.

Yet we are quickly reminded that not everyone joins in the celebration. David’s wife Micah, depicting the voice of the old house of Saul, her father, despises this change. When change occurs, we see that those who resist are often those who have the most to lose; whose identity is more closely linked with the old. Likewise, those who welcome change are often those who have the most to gain.

Several hundred years later when Jesus proclaimed, “the kingdom of God is near,” it’s not surprising that the Herodians and Pharisees resisted the political and religious changes he introduced. Jesus continually reversed the structure of power, asking those who want to be first to become last and those who want to be great to become servants. Jesus broke the cultural norms of the day by speaking in public to women, eating with tax collectors and healing lepers.

When Jesus invited his disciples on that symbolic journey across the Sea of Galilee, the storm that threatened their lives symbolized the resistance they would experience if they chose to be a part of “the kingdom of God.” The wind and the water dancing around their heads seemed larger than life itself until Jesus woke, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace, Be Still.” Then they realized that the One who

was with them, the Lord of the Dance, was larger than life itself. The Scriptures tell us *“They were filled with great awe and said to one another ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him.’*

By identifying Jesus with the lineage of the House of David, our biblical writers make it clear that although Jesus introduced something radically new, he was a continuation of the old; a part of an evolving, reforming tradition that continues to enlighten our understanding of who God is I AM THAT I AM. The Triune God: the inter-woven, inter-dependent, sacrificial God of Christianity has come a long way from the independent Holy warrior of the Ark of the Covenant. The self-giving God who gave the Ark of the Covenant to David is the same self-giving God who danced on the cross bringing life out of death.

Our church is reformed and is always reforming. My Christian, my Presbyterian friends, as we are called to adapt to new situations and challenges in our individual lives and in the political and social changes in the twenty-first century, may we be open to change while also heeding the warning in change. May we embrace the new without abandoning the old. May we be sensitive that not all will be able to celebrate change with us, and with courage, may we continue to forge new frontiers of mercy and inclusivity in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the dance. Amen.