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Proper 10B
Peace, Seattle
July 15, 2012
2 Samuel 6:1-19, Mark 6:14-29

WHO'S IN CHARGE?

My first thought, after reading the texts for this today, was: WOW – it's no wonder our Lutheran pietist forbearers thought dancing should be banned!

Our first testament and gospel readings supply plenty of evidence for the argument that dancing can lead to all kinds of inappropriate, unseemly, excessive, and even violent behavior!

In the first instance, David dances in front of the whole nation in little more than his underwear.

And in the second, King Herod's stepdaughter performs a dance that sets Herod's head spinning and leads to the death of John the Baptist.

If we got "G" rated material last week, this week it's "R" rated material, for sure!

But let's take a look beneath the surface and see what we find. First, at 2nd Samuel.
[PEW BIBLE, p 284]

David, we've discovered when we've dug into his backstory over the past several weeks, is a much more complex and ambiguous character than what we may first have thought.

- The handsome shepherd, anointed by Samuel, becomes the unlikely hero in a face-to-face showdown with Goliath.
- Afterward, he enters King Saul's service and become best friends with Saul's son Jonathan, but is forced to flee for his life from the jealous, depression-prone King he's sworn to serve.
- He and a group of young warriors become soldiers for hire.
- Twice, when being hunted by Saul, he's in position to take Saul's life, and twice he says NO.
- Finally, after Saul and Jonathan fall in battle, David commands the whole nation to share his lament, whereupon he returns home to take the reigns of the newly united kingdom.

If David is anything, he is a complex figure.
- Charismatic leader, unquestionably.
- Devoted man of faith, indeed.
- Violent and ruthless warrior, undoubtedly.
- Astute politician, for sure.

And today we see him solidifying his political power in the newly adopted and newly renamed "City of David" by moving the ARK OF THE COVENANT from its quarters at the house of Abinadab into the new capital of Jerusalem.

The ARK OF THE COVENANT, the preeminent sign of God's sovereignty and presence among the Israelite tribes as they journeyed into the promised land, had been out of sight for twenty years.[1]

[1] M. Skinner, *New Proclamation*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006)

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Why does David want it brought to the new capital?
Is he motivated by the desire to breathe new life into the notion that it is the LORD who truly reigns as king over this newly united kingdom?

Or is he attempting to co-opt the ARK's potent religious significance in order to shore up his own political ambitions and bless the vision of a human monarchy?

From what we've learned about David, it seems to me there is room, in the text, to read it either way.

To help us with those questions I want to begin by focusing in on a few of the verses from 2 Samuel chapter 6 which our assigned lectionary reading skips over: Vv. 6:6-12a (pp 284-285 in pew Bible.)

As David and this great marching band from Israel are dancing before the LORD on their way from Baale-judah to Jerusalem, verse six tells us:

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. 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.

DAVID WAS ANGRY BECAUSE THE LORD HAD BURST FORTH WITH AN OUTBURST UPON UZZAH; SO THAT PLACE IS CALLED PERIZ-UZZAH TO THIS DAY. DAVID WAS AFRAID OF THE LORD THAT DAY; HE SAID, "HOW CAN THE ARK OF THE LORD COME INTO MY CARE?"

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.
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.

Now, what is this all about?

It seems that whatever may have first motivated David to get the ARK and bring it into the new capital city, David learns that the ARK OF THE COVENANT IS NOT SIMPLY AN ARTIFACT.

In a scene straight out of an Indiana Jones movie, David learns that the ark IS A REAL AND POTENT REMINDER THAT THE HOLY ONE WILL NOT ABIDE BEING TRIFLED WITH, WILL NOT ABIDE BEING MANIPULATED BY THE POLITICAL POWERS THAT BE—whether David or any one else—TO BLESS A PARTICULAR POLITICAL AGENDA.

The God that David—and we—come face to face with in this text is a God who rejects all attempts (whether ancient or modern) to have his holiness and his power usurped in order to bolster religious or political ideologies.

When Uzzah, whose family had been custodians of the ARK for 20 years, is struck dead after he reaches out to steady the cart, it becomes crystal clear to David that God's presence is not something he was going to control. God is in charge, not David.

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The text tells us DAVID WAS ANGRY because of what the LORD did to Uzzah; and he was also AFRAID. So much so, that he was unwilling to go any further with the ARK in tow! The risk was too great!

So for three months the ARK was placed in the custody of Obed-edom the Gittite.
It was only after David learned that the ARK had become a source of blessing to Obed-edom that David went, once again, to bring the ARK of God back to Jerusalem, and the parade and celebration continue [verse 12b.]

Now, as I've said before, the Bible is a book of gaps. What's been written down are the action sequences, but between those action sequences there are gaps and those gaps can cover a period of days or months, or years—even decades.

The gap that intrigues me this week is this gap of three months between the time David left the ARK in the stewardship of Obed-edom, and the time he came back to complete its journey to Jerusalem.

What do you suppose David thought about during those three months?

Do you think maybe he had to re-think his relationship to God? To rethink who was in charge of his present and future? To rethink whatever ambitious plans he had for his kingship platform?

The alliance of religious and political powers is risky business.
Political leaders and parties and interest groups—and we'll be seeing and hearing a lot more from them in the next months leading up to the fall election—who resort to the language of religion, who invoke God's name to undergird their political agendas and objectives are playing with fire.

The God we finally meet here in this text, whose presence is veiled in mystery and whose power inspires fear, is a God who will not be manipulated or used by his creatures.

Now, fast-forward 1,000 years to the banquet hall of King Herod, where the uneasy alliance between political power and religious truth continues.

John, who dared to tell King Herod that stealing his brother's wife was wrong, loses his head when Herod's wife exacts her revenge. But if John had not died at the hands of the executioner that night, it would have been some other night.

And Jesus, who is called MESSIAH, and SON OF DAVID, for whom John was the forerunner in more ways than one, Jesus himself will one day stand before the political powers that be, accused by the religious establishment, and will declare MY KINGDOM IS NOT FROM THIS WORLD, and he, too, will suffer death at the hands of the state.

Success and power, as the world measures it, is seen in the court of Herod and in the judgment hall of Pilate and in the White House briefing room and in the halls of Congress.

And political leaders ancient and modern have proven they are willing to use whatever means is at their disposal—including appealing to the symbols of the community of faith—in order to achieve their ends.

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Those of us who follow Jesus in any age would do well to remember that fact.

The road of discipleship is rocky. The resistance of the world—which we know within us and see around us—is real. And the capacity for evil can flourish in any human heart.[2]

After John's death, when word of a powerful new preacher and troupe of disciples found its way to Herod's ears, it seemed to Herod that the man whom he had beheaded had come back to life.

And though Herod could not grasp it, and the world <u>still</u> cannot conceive it, the power of God was bursting forth in a way that would bring the whole human enterprise to a new realization:

> "That it would take more than a decapitation to stop the truth of God,
> more than a crucifixion to stop the Son of God,
> more than persecution to stop the mission of God."[3]

Amen.

[2] See Joanna Adams, *The Christian Century*, 7-13-2003
[3] Ibid.