

Dance Then

(During the Children's Sermon just prior, pastor and the children do the Chicken Dance.) Is there any dance more awkward than the chicken dance? I think the awkwardness of the chicken dance might be its secret superpower: it ensures memorability, is so basic that anyone can do it, and is all about groups doing it together. So if you look odd while doing it, well, so does everybody else. The awkwardness is inherent to the dance and you're not alone, so no use worrying how you look. It's a counterpoint to the fear that dancing can prompt, the fear that people will see you moving your body in ways that are clumsy, or unbecoming. No one wants to be seen looking like that. That's why people linger in the margins at dances, in the dim edges, where less light offers some protective cover. I've read about a gathering that takes this even further, a quirky little dance movement called "No Lights No Lycra." It's just what it says. At a "No Lights No Lycra" dance event there is no light, no lycra, no steps to learn, no judgement. The intention of this dance movement is to offer places where people can move freely, "releasing that urge to shake and doing it without dealing with the social nuances of dancing in public." Or, in the words of that saying, you can "dance, as if no one is watching."

King David danced liked that—and everyone was watching, as it says in today's first reading. This summer we're progressing through ancient Israel's monarchies and we've arrived at something of a crowning moment, in many ways a high point for David. The stories of David's youth: watching sheep and playing the harp, slaying giants with slingshots; those stories are behind us. The stories of David's late adulthood: his adultery and deadly cover-up—which covers nothing, his rebellious son who breaks his heart—and his kingdom; these stories are yet to come. But right now, in today's reading David is, in many ways, at the top of his game. He has proven himself a skilled military commander and an adept manager of geopolitical groups; he has public works projects underway, he is recognized and respected as king by all of Israel. People flock to see him, this former shepherd boy. Masses gather for a grand parade that David has organized, a parade in which the most sacred object of ancient Israel, the arc of the covenant, is going to be brought into the capital city, now known as the city of David. King David takes his place in the parade—and starts dancing, with everyone watching.

Including Michal—who is the daughter of the former king, Saul. Michal is watching out of a window and she sees David frolicking in "a linen ephod." An ephod is an item of clothing ancient priests wore, but it was not as voluminous as this alb I have on. An ephod might more resemble this stole, on the skimpy side, if that's the only thing David had on, the text is unclear. But it is clear that Michal finds it unseemly, unkingly, the text says that Michal "saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart." The fact that Michal is the daughter of the king David deposed might explain her response. But what is not mentioned here is that Michal is also David's wife. Complicating her response yet further are stories prior to this one, stories of their younger years, when David was just a youth hanging around the palace. Michal watched David then, too. The Bible does not have a lot to say about romantic love, so it is all the more remarkable to note what it says about this—twice: "Saul's daughter Michal loved David." Meanwhile, Saul, who was becoming increasingly jealous of David, this rising star, Saul thought if he allowed David and Michal to be married Saul could find a way to have David killed. Michal and David married, but David survived all of Saul's murderous plots, including one in which Michal herself intervened. Michal learned that that on a certain morning there would be an attempt on David's life, and so that night—we can only infer after a night spent together—Michal helped her beloved, David, escape out the window.

Now Michal watches from a window, as he dances, and she despises him, David, who

cannot help but express himself, move, celebrate, praise. It is who David is. As one biblical commentator put it, “He wore his heart on his sleeve, even when he wasn’t wearing sleeves.” Michal loved this about David, once, before. But now, seeing him dance like that, where everyone could see, as part of a parade, out there amongst all the people, putting his body out there, dancing like a commoner, what kind of king does that? His joy is irrepressible—and she hates him for it. We don’t know when Michal’s feelings for David changed, but we can guess part of the why. Michal was not David’s only wife, he had several—and there would be more women to come. There is a lot about David that should not be celebrated. We should look down upon the ways that David twisted desire and distorted self-gratification. We should look down upon his falseness, his disturbing moral defeats, all his failures as a man. We do look down upon these—but not on that he danced.

This distinction has not always been made; in the course of Christian history, dancing has sometimes had a rough go of it. As with Michal’s reaction, dancing has not always been welcomed. Certain branches of Christianity have prohibited it, in times past, and not so far past. One of my friends from high school attended Wheaton College, and at that time it still banned dancing on campus. Or another relatively recent example, a pop culture reference, if you remember the movie “Footloose,” in which the local preacher denounced dancing, with religious fervor. There can be the sense that dancing is an exercise in lasciviousness, or may lead to it, or may lead to death. That was the implication in “Footloose,” that dancing caused a death. Today’s gospel story from Mark may seem to say just that—except that misses the point. A young girl’s dancing didn’t kill John the Baptist. King Herod did. John the Baptist was killed by a king who, instead of being a leader, was ruled by other people’s opinions, a king who cared more about his own appearance than another man’s life.

King David did many wrong things, too. Still, throughout scripture, David is considered the highpoint of ancient Israel’s monarchy and a precursor for a yet greater king to come. Why? I think part of the why is right here, in today’s story, in David dancing for the Lord, with everyone watching. With all he got wrong, David got this primal and primary thing right: that praise is the first and best step we take; that the joy of the Lord is our strength; that the victory belongs not to us, but to the Lord; and that those who would be great are to be found among the people, the plebeians, the commoners. Those who would be great dance with the least.

What kind of king does that? A king who does not despise what is lowly, does not consider it beneath him, but instead comes among them, as one of them. God does this, in Jesus. That God does this, that God became a human being, may be one of the most awkward tenets of Christianity—and one of the most moving, most gracious. In the incarnation, God is unafraid to make a seemingly unbecoming move: to be found in awkward places with awkward people, to take on the awkwardness of flesh. In the incarnation, God makes an incredible endorsement of flesh, of bodies and how they move, of emotions and how they move us, how we are moved to love. Time and again the Bible tells us of how Jesus was affected by the suffering around him, how he spent time with the vulnerable, how he himself was vulnerable.

And the Bible tells—even more incredible—and our salvation—this willingness to be vulnerable is power, true power, not a secret superpower, the Messianic secret is out. It danced out of the grave on Easter morning and it is inviting us to dance, too, to dance, then, wherever you may be, whoever you may be. You do not need to be flawless, physically, morally. You do not need to be suave, or know special steps, because you’re not in the lead. You can dance, you are dancing when you know who is Lord, who is king; when you follow in his footsteps, when you keep company with the vulnerable and are vulnerable yourself. You dance, when your feet take you here, to this gathering, and our hands move together, in prayer, in communion, in peace. It’s how we dance, all of us looking odd together, praising God together, with everyone watching.