

The Choice to Sit it Out or Dance
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 & Mark 6:14-29

Betty Haneman was a distinguished looking older lady in my former parish. She always sat in the same seat about 3-4 pews back from the front and I thought of her as one of the *pillars* of the church. Betty was eccentric, deeply devout, a charismatic yet also a free thinker. She was loving, involved, pushy and always opinionated. One All Saints Day we decided to sing the jazz classic, "*When the saints go marching in*" as our closing song. Just 2 minutes before the worship service Betty buttonholed me. "*Jim,*" she said, "*I really think you should lead the congregation in dancing down the aisle when we sing 'When the Saints go marching in.' You really have to do it Jim. It will be a hoot!*" Well I didn't think it would be a hoot. I didn't want to embarrass anyone who didn't want to get up out of the pews and dance down the aisle. Most of all I didn't want to embarrass myself by leading what might look like a recessional conga-line. So I didn't do it. Betty was mad at me for weeks.

King David danced before the Lord with all his might leading the procession of the Ark, the seat of God's holy presence, into the new capital city of Jerusalem. In a very different kind of dance Herodias' daughter Salome, the king's stepdaughter, danced before King Herod. It must have been quite the dance because the king was sufficiently wowed to invite her to ask him for anything she wanted up to half his kingdom as a reward for how much he enjoyed it.

Different kinds of dancing are just one of a number of similarities and contrasts between these two famous biblical stories. Both are vivid and memorable stories. Most illustrated Bibles and Children's Bibles include both stories, even though both tales should be considered PG13.

Both stories are about kings: King David and King Herod. We think of David as the good king and Herod as the evil king, but the contrast is not quite that simple. Make no mistake both kings were oriental despots. Herod is pictured within this story as deeply conflicted, drawn to John the Baptist, yet willing to murder him in order to save face. King David was very shrewd in moving the Ark (the holy seat) of God's living presence into the new capital city of Jerusalem. David had recently conquered Jerusalem renaming it "*the City of David.*" He hoped to unite the 12 tribes and consolidate his power. Making Jerusalem the religious as well as the civic capital of Israel was a bold and clever move.

Finally, in both stories we see a response to an opportunity to come before God. David's response is incredibly faithful as he dances with all his might before the Lord. Herod has the opportunity to respond in faith to John the Baptist. He is drawn to him. But in the end he refuses to repent and he has John brutally murdered in order to save face with his dinner guests.

But what do these two vivid stories about ancient kings (a pretty good one and a not so good one) have to do with you and me? None of us are kings. Few of us wield any

significant power in the world. But each of us has an ego. There's a place of self-importance and pride within each of us – our ego's. My ego is like a little king that likes to get his way, that likes to be recognized, that likes to feel important. That ego part of ourselves chooses who we will be, how we will regulate our competing desires and interests and choices. The contrasts between the choices of the two kings in these Bible stories relate very much to the choices we have within ourselves. There are choices I'd like us to examine, 1) the choice to be involved or remain aloof, and 2) the choice of arrogance or humility.

Both King Herod and King David have a choice of being personally involved or to distance themselves and remain aloof. Herod chose to remain aloof. Despite John's attack on his marriage to his brother's widow, Herodias Herod was drawn to the preaching of John the Baptist. He could have chosen to have John killed or banished. He could have asked forgiveness and chosen to be baptized and repent. He could have acted in some way on John's teaching. Instead he chose a kind philosophical detachment. It reminds me of the aloofness of Pontius Pilate when he asked Jesus, "*What is truth?*" Truth itself was standing right in front of him and he allowed that *truth* to be murdered as he attempted to wash his hands of all personal responsibility in the matter.

King David could have had a more formal position in this procession. He could have been seated in his chariot. He could have remained robed. He could have hired dancers. But no, he chose to take a priestly role and lead the procession. But he not only led the procession, he danced in front of it. And he danced before the Lord with everything he had. He danced with joy before the Lord.

We also have a choice to be involved in our faith or to remain aloof. Would you say that Episcopalians are better known for their passionate involvement in worship or their calm detachment? "Liturgy" means *the work of the people*. In the liturgy we are invited to be involved, to sing, to pray, to kiss our neighbors, to receive the bread and wine, to participate in body, mind and spirit. But we can choose to participate passively or more actively, dispassionately or with our emotions and heart. We can let our minds wander or we can connect and think about what is being said.

I like the words of the country hit song by Lee Ann Womack, *I hope you dance*:

*I hope you never lose your sense of wonder,
You get your fill to eat but always keep that hunger,
May you never take one single breath for granted,
God forbid love ever leave you empty handed,
I hope you still feel small when you stand beside the ocean,
Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens,
Promise me that you'll give faith a fighting chance,
And when you get the chance to sit it out or dance.*

I hope you dance.... I hope you dance.

*I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance,
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're worth takin',
Lovin' might be a mistake but it's worth makin',
Don't let some hell bent heart leave you bitter,
When you come close to sellin' out reconsider,
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance,
And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance.*

I hope you dance.... I hope you dance.

We can choose to risk our faith or we can choose to compartmentalize, to separate, our faith from our actions. Risking living our faith means that we put into practice what we say we believe. We risk our faith in the practice of daily prayer, by participating in Christian community, by giving a significant portion of our income to God's work, through Bible study and reflection, through serving others in need, and through worshipping God with our heart, soul, strength and mind in worship.

A second choice these stories of King David and King Herod contrast is the choice of arrogance versus the choice of humility. Herod was arrogant. He would rather not lose face with his dinner guests than do the right thing and spare a holy man's life. King David danced with all his might before the Lord. He didn't need to do that; he was the king. But David got so caught up in worship that he danced with all his might. As he danced before the Lord David didn't care about what he looked like or about preserving his kingly dignity. His first wife Michal did, though. As the story continues she chewed him out: "*How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!*" But David was unashamed.

David was not always so humble. He acted arrogantly when he had an affair with Bathsheba and then when she got pregnant arranged for her husband to be killed in battle. But when confronted with what he had done by the prophet Nathan, David admitted his wrong and repented. David continued to wrestle with the choice between arrogance and humility throughout his years as king.

The last in the long line of Davidic kings, the long awaited Messiah, the Son of David, clearly chose humility. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:6-8,

though he was in the form of God (Jesus) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.

I pray that God helps you and me to see the ways – all too often – that we choose to be arrogant in our treatment of others, in putting ourselves first, in failing to love, in being defensive, with our loved ones, at work, with our friends. Give us the grace to have the

same mind that was in Christ. “*Grant,*” as in the words of St. Francis, “*that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*”

My friend and former parishioner Betty Haneman died later that same year. The next All Saints Day and for many years after I led the congregation in dancing down the aisles to “*When the Saints go marching in.*”

I hope as we look at the contrast between King David and King Herod we will all be reminded that when we get the chance to sit it out or dance...

- *In letting go of our own self-importance*
- *In saying “Yes I believe.”*
- *In putting our faith into practice*
- *In serving and helping others*
- *In worshipping the living God, not just with half-hearted devotion, but with real joy*
- *In risking looking like a fool to some for the sake of God and God’s love*

I hope you’ll dance.... I hope you’ll dance.