

Dancing? Scowling? Watching?
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
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July 11, 2021

We have arrived again at the story about King David dancing naked, or perhaps not quite naked, but in a state of undress that made his wife, Michal, scowl. David's dancing is often used as a model of vibrant worship, and Michal's critique may be a poignant example of conflict over worship and decorum.

The arguments fueling disagreements about worship in congregations are often about music styles, levels of formality, the acceptability of certain instruments, whether there should be pews or chairs, clapping or no clapping, or just how quiet children are expected to be. These arguments are, for the most part over what one believes is dignified (and whether dignity is the point of worship), what one believes is relevant (and whether relevance is the point of worship) and what one believes properly honors God. A quick search for "worship wars" will reveal an entire genre of church help books with increasingly elaborate titles.

This story about David, dancing in front of the ark, is bursting with tension about what is appropriate worship. And when we press on the question about what is appropriate worship, we also make space to ask why we worship at all. And to assess what it means to evaluate our own experiences in worship.

What does David's dancing in front of the ark have to do with worship at all? Well, the ark was understood to house YHWH. So...everything.

The movement of the ark to Jerusalem is a critical moment in the ark narrative. The ark had been integral to the history of the People Israel after the exodus from Egypt. The ark had been the locus of YHWH dwelling among the people, and had not only accompanied the People Israel through the wilderness, but led from the front. The ark's power punctuated stories about Israel's progress, including crossing the Jordan into the promised land and fighting in the Battle of Jericho. (Cartledge 443).

There is no evidence that Saul tried to get the ark for himself when he was king before David.

But David. David desires to bring the ark to Jerusalem. One commentator said: "David knew that if he could orchestrate a working marriage of cult and state, he would be unassailable." (See Cartledge 433). And these efforts to gain popular support, and to operate politically, show up as the story progresses, raising questions about whether there was any integrity in his....worship.

David does not receive instruction from YHWH to move the ark.

In fact, David does not even seek guidance from YHWH about moving the ark.

And David's first attempt to move the ark ends in disaster: it is loaded on an oxen cart and, when it starts to slip, one of the helpers reaches out to stabilize it and is killed instantly. After some

months, David attempts again, more precisely following previous instruction about the ark. For instance, he uses golden poles to move it rather than setting it on an ox cart.

And as he attempts to move the ark he waits to see if it is disastrous. When, after the first six steps, no disaster strikes, David stops to perform a sacrifice - he takes on the role of a priest. (Cartledge 439). He wears a linen ephod.

In Leviticus, Aaron was instructed to remove his priestly garb and wear only a linen ephod when performing the yearly ritual sacrifice and sprinkling blood on the ark. The connection should not be missed. Removing royal garments certainly requires humility from David. Or, certainly humiliates David.

And David dances before the ark. And Michal hates it.

The motivation for David's dancing and for Michal's critique is ambiguous and variously interpreted, and so it prods us to think more deeply about worship.

This dancing can certainly be interpreted as joyful worship. This is a habit of interpretation that undergirds calls for passionate worship and paints David as fervently faithful.

Yet his dancing can also be interpreted as pandering to his base of support, to the common people. (Laymon 174). Or making a show of humility. (Cartledge 441). These interpretations are less flattering for David, and they challenge the idea that he is a model for our worship.

Michal's critique certainly rests in her belief that David's behavior is not befitting of a king. (Mays 292). But it is not clear that David was actually naked, or that nakedness was the root of her critique. Rather, he could simply be "flaunting himself" or "showing off." (Mays 292). Perhaps she was dissatisfied that he removed his royal garments – not because of nakedness, but because he no longer has the markings of a king. Perhaps, her "issue was not moral scruples but royal pride." (Cartledge 441).

And so we wonder how David's dancing and Michal's scowling might help us rightly think about worship.

What do we do with the habit of using David's dancing as model of spirited and unguarded worship? To the extent that King David removed the royal trappings of his attire so that he could dance humbly before the Lord – to the extent that he gave up markers of his import and royalty to dress as a priest offering a sacrifice - this is a model worth noting. When our worship is limited by that which we deem to exemplify dignity in the eyes of others, then it is not worship of God, but of decorum.

But the questions raised by this story also matter.

What did Michal's anger have to do with decorum?

Was David dancing because he was moved by the Spirit - or was he putting on a show for YHWH – or for those watching – those who would be his subjects?

Why was the king, the political leader, doing the work of the priests? Was he faithful or opportunistic?

This story reminds us that worshipping God can be complicated because of the fine line between performance on the one hand, and humility and praise on the other. It allows us to consider what from David's story we will invite into our lives of worship, and what we will assess with suspicion.

Many of those practices that we associate with worship of God can create moments of clarity and intimacy, moments that take us outside of ourselves and allow us to rise above those things that bind us and break us. They can help us to connect with the deep and abiding love of the one who created us and who keeps us even to this very hour. Songs can give us words when we do not have our own. The prayers of worship leaders can name precisely those things from which we seek release. And soaring music or dancing candles or streaming banners can seep into our brokenness and awaken our hearts.

But particular ways of worshipping God can also trap us in performance and in habit.

And then there is this bit of powerful wisdom I came across this week on Facebook rather than in scholarship - I had trouble hunting down the source, but I think it is a worship leader named Chris Burns. But listen and see what these words prick in you.

"How was worship?" must be removed from our Christian vernacular.

"How was worship?" is a question only the object of worship can answer.

Our answer then to this question is revealing of what was REALLY worshiped. Our experience has become the gauge, thus revealing that we in fact don't worship God, we worship our experience of worship. In essence, we worship ourselves.

Idolatry is a sneaky thing."

And so, I ask - Where did you find yourself in this story today? Were you dancing with David? Scowling with Michal? Watching the parade from the crowd? Where do you find idolatry sneaking about?

As we seek to worship, may we hear the word of truth, the gospel of redemption, may we all be moved by the Holy Spirit towards true and life-giving worship of the One God, God with us. And may do the hard work of unlearning worship practices that entertain, and the crucial work of tending to practices to worship God.

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