

THE SHEPHERD KING: DANCE LIKE A KING

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-23

In my opinion, there is one movie which is responsible for informing more people about biblical history than any other film. No, it not The Ten Commandments with Charlton Heston. Rather, it is Raiders of the Lost Ark. Yes, the film is goofy, but I can assure you from a biblical perspective, it is sound. For example, that scene where the bad guys open the ark and their faces are melted away. That is not in the Bible, but it is not out of character with stories that we do have about the ark.

In the Old Testament, the Book of Exodus tells us how God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt where they had been slaves for 400 years. God led them through the wilderness on their way to a promised land they could call their own. While in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai, God gave Moses the Commandments inscribed on tablets of stone. This was God's Law. Moses brought the tablets down to the people and they constructed a box—the Ark of the Covenant—to house these tablets. They also constructed a tent to protect the box when they camped. The tent was known as the Tabernacle.

The Hebrews carried the ark with them into the promised land and settled there. Then, as we read in the book of 1 Samuel (chapter 4), once in the promised land, the Israelites find themselves at war with the Philistines at a place called Ebenezer. The war was not going well for the Israelites and so they sent for the ark to be brought from the shrine at Shiloh. They would carry the ark into battle with them. The presence of the ark inspired the Israelites and terrified the Philistines. Nevertheless, the Philistines prevailed and defeated the Israelite army. The Philistines also captured the ark and took it home with them. Losing the ark caused brought despair across Israel. They had lost their God.

However, it wasn't much better for the Philistines. They discovered that wherever the ark was kept, it brought pestilence and death on their people. The Philistine cities played hot potato with the ark passing it from town to town as each city suffered its wrath. Finally, after seven months of this scourge, the Philistines decided that they needed to get rid of the ark. The priests devised a plan. They built a cart and yoked two cows to the cart. On the cart they placed the ark along with a large amount of gold as a guilt offering. They untethered the cows and let them walk away with the cart in tow. The plan was that if the cows and the cart remained in the land of the Philistines then the Israelite God was not responsible for their misfortunes. If, on the other hand, the cows left the land of the Philistines then good riddance. So, what happened? The cows made a beeline for Israel. When the cart crossed the border, the Israelites working in the fields rejoiced at the site of

their ark. They took it to Kiriath-Jearim and placed it in the home of Abinadab where it remained for the next twenty years.

Now, our sermon series is about David, and about the same time that the ark is entrusted to Abinadab, David is anointed by the prophet Samuel. It takes him about twenty years to become king. When David is finally crowned king of all Israel, his first order of business is to establish a capital. He selects Jerusalem. The problem is that Jerusalem is inhabited by a people known as the Jebusites. David leads his army to Jerusalem and captures that city. This was a strategic move. Jerusalem is on a hilltop, it was fortified, it was defensible, it was on trade routes, and, at the time, it was not part of any of the lands of the twelve tribes. It was neutral territory, much like Washington DC. David established his home in Jerusalem and the city became the capital of his kingdom.

But remember, Israel is also a nation that recognizes God prominently in their national life. When David becomes king, the worship of God was disorganized and scattered among various shrines across the country. David knew that he would be more effective if he could consolidate all religious activity and establish Jerusalem as both the political and religious center of his people.

So, David gathers 30,000 of his elite soldiers, and leads them in a grand procession to the home of Abinadab in Kiriath-Jearim. (In our reading for today, it is called Baale-Judah.) David and his men retrieve the ark and place it on a cart and drive it back towards Jerusalem. And it is here that we are offered this wonderful description of this magnificent event: *David and all the house of Israel were dancing before YHWH with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.* Can you imagine this site—a great parade of the faithful, led by their king, singing and dancing before their Lord.

However, David is not able to bring the ark to Jerusalem that day. There is an incident, and the ark is left at the home of a man named Obed-Edom. But three months later, David does return to claim the ark and finally deliver it to Jerusalem. And there is again great rejoicing. David makes the event a holy feast and a festival. At every leg of the journey, David sacrifices an animal. Along the way he offers food to the observers. And David danced. Boy, did he dance. He twirled and gyrated and jumped. He shook his hips so wildly that even Elvis Presley would have blushed. And he danced wearing only a cloth ephod. An ephod is an apron traditionally worn by the priests. It doesn't appear that David wore much more than that. Just imagine dancing the tango in a hospital gown. As David danced, he was accompanied by shouting and the sound of trumpets. Everyone joined in. The ark was led into the city and placed into a tabernacle that David had constructed for it. It would take a generation, but it would be King Solomon, David's son, who would be the one to construct the great temple in Jerusalem to house the ark and consolidate worship across the nation.

But going back to David and the ark. Just imagine the scene—the king dancing in a wild frolic before the throne of God in sight of all his subjects. The Presbyterian

writer Frederick Buechner describes the scene this way: “How they cut loose together,” David and God “whirling around before the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame” of magnificence.

But not everyone was pleased with what they saw. One of David's wives—Michel, the daughter of Saul—was disgusted by the display and told David that he was *vulgar*.

I don't know if David was vulgar or not but he certainly danced before the Lord with great enthusiasm. And that word enthusiasm comes to us from a Greek word which means “in God,” *en theos*. The Greek word describes someone who is inspired or even possessed by a divine spirit. David danced before the ark “enthused” because he was inspired (or possessed) by his love for the Lord. His enthusiasm explodes into dance and movement and shouting and worship. Some people speak in tongues; David danced in tongues. It didn't matter that he was half naked. This wasn't about him; it was about God and bringing God to the heart of God's people.

Although it doesn't seem obvious, what David was doing that day is what we do here on Sunday morning—worshiping the Lord. Imagine being so excited to be in God's presence that you throw care to the wind and dancelike fire.

Yes, in this church we pride ourselves on our orderly worship. And that is good. But we do lose something when we value our appearances over the Spirit. We do manage to get enthusiastic in our own way. For example, when the choir offers a rousing anthem, or JD regales us with Mozart in July, or we bag meals for the hungry, or provide shelter for the homeless. These are acts of worship. They are our own form of ‘dirty dancing.’

So, today, I want you to imagine this church as being rather like a dance. Our gathering for worship should be like, oh, say, a homecoming prom and our team just won the big game. We gather in the gym to celebrate. The band plays; the people dance and shout and sing. No one is a wallflower; all are welcomed and all participate. We are ecstatic and we show it.

But church isn't just about gathering for the big dance. It is also what we do in our smaller groups. And so that homecoming dance breaks up as groups congregate in different corners of the gym to perform their own unique dances. Sunday school classes gather in a square dance. Mission groups form improvisational jazz dance troupes. Back in the kitchen, belly dancers prepare food to be given away. We all participate in our own dances, in great enthusiasm, worshiping the Lord with our hearts, and minds, and bodies.

David was chosen by God to be king because David kept God first in his heart. He was *en theos*. He wasn't afraid to be footloose before the Lord. He knew how to worship. He knew how to dance like a king.