

Just a Closer Waltz with Thee

¹² Now King David was told, “The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.” So David went to bring up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. ¹³ When those who were carrying the ark of the Lord had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. ¹⁴ Wearing a linen ephod, David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, ¹⁵ while he and all Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets. ¹⁶ As the ark of the Lord was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, she despised him in her heart. ¹⁷ They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord. ¹⁸ After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord Almighty. ¹⁹ Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes. ~ 2 Samuel 6: 12-19

(1 Samuel, chapter 4)

We remember this story about David - if we remember it all - because of the indecency David displayed by publicly leaping and twirling in what amounted to a very short skirt. In jubilant dance, **David flashed all of Jerusalem**. When it was pointed out to David what he had done, he pretty much shrugged and said, “**I’m the king. I’ll do what I want.**” This was an unfortunate attitude because David was not supposed to be that kind of king. The ancient Israelite kingship was not a one man dance, but a beautiful waltz between God and king. As God gracefully led David, David was to lead the people.

I want to read our text today, then, like God giving David a dance lesson. It is **a two-part lesson** that follows a repetitive pattern. First, David makes a misstep, stumbling on his own feet. Second, he makes a theological blunder, stepping on God’s toes. Third, David learns to follow in the steps of God by observing the graceful dance of a faithful family whirled and waltzed by the hand of the Lord. Just as David learns, perhaps we too might learn a few steps for ourselves.

To begin, we will have to return to **1 Samuel chapter 4** where David has not yet learned to let God take the lead. In his attempt to dictate the dance, David makes the misstep of war and the misstep of tragedy before finally witnessing the blessing of accepting God’s lead.

(1) The misstep of war

The dance lesson begins in the war-torn valley between Aphek and Eben-ezer. A victorious Philistine army settles into their encampment at Aphek, a battle-beaten Israelite army limps back to Eben-ezer. The moods in each camp reverse in an instant. On the ridgeline above Eben-ezer, **a mighty wind swirls, ominous clouds gather, and the cry of the Israelite army literally shakes the earth!** It is the Ark of God, the seat of YHWH’s presence, descending the hill like **an ancient warrior god**. The priests of YHWH have brought it to the battle. With the Lord of Hosts Enthroned Upon the Cherubim on their side, surely the Israelites will defeat the Philistines!

But no. The next morning, the Philistines route the Israelites, kill 30,000 soldiers and capture the Ark of God. Israel expected YHWH to be a triumphant warrior, a victorious leader, **but God is not a weapon in the hand of Israel.**

The defeat in battle shocked to the ancient theologians of the day. We call them the Deuteronomists. They believed that God was in control of everything, that anything that happened in the

world, even war, was caused by God. So after the horrible loss to the Philistines, the Deuteronomists struggled to understand why God would have allowed it.

(2) This theology leads to the misstep of tragedy

The story following the battle scene rationalizes the apparent impotence of God in battle. The Ark's capture and subsequent journey into enemy territory is not a failure of God; rather, it is an opportunity for YHWH to dismantle the Philistine god and to plague the people with tumors and deadly growths. Wherever the Ark traveled in Philistia, the plague surely followed. The Deuteronomists assumed that God had allowed the Israelites to lose the war, so that God could carry out God's purposes through disease.

We should be wary of this misstep. You and I know that the tumors were probably an outbreak of the bubonic plague, a disease that thrives in warm, moist, rodent-infested port cities like those of the Philistine region. We know that pandemic disease, disease, does not go forth with regard for persons, but spreads brutally with no regard for religion or rank. The story suggests that YHWH caused a deadly blight among the enemies of Israel, but no... **God did not use the disease to accomplish a greater purpose.**

As the Deuteronomist tells the story, the Philistines realize the power of YHWH and return the Ark of God to Israel.

(3) Now we see the blessing of accepting God's lead.

The house of Abinadab receives the Ark, and Abinadab's son Eleazar is consecrated to keep the Ark. The Hebrew word is *shamar*, to keep, guard, or watch over. Eleazar and the household of Abinadab are to be **attentive to the presence of God in their midst.** They are to extend *hospitality* to the Divine in their care. For twenty years the text says, a notably long and peaceful time, Abinadab and his family tend to the presence of the Lord of Hosts and receive God's blessing. **Now these are the steps of the Lord, hospitality, loving care, and blessing.**

David, however, does not learn from the first half of the dance lesson. The story from first Samuel up to our text for today chronicles a civil war between the houses of David and Saul, David defeats Saul and is determined to claim kingship over Israel. The story comes to a point where David must defeat the Philistines before solidifying his place as king.

The second half of the lesson begins, and David is still trying to take the lead.

(1) The misstep of war.

David meets the Philistines on the battle field. The outcome, this time, is inverted. After *this* battle, the Israelites carry off the Philistine's idols, the Israelites are victorious. David declares that YHWH has "burst forth" against his enemies. **But if God is not a weapon in the hand of Israel, neither is Israel a weapon in the hand of God. A theology that suggests God is with us when we win or has some good reason if we lose has misunderstood the character of God. The Lord of Hosts is not an agent in battle.**

Tripping over his own feet, David organizes a parade for the victorious warrior YHWH. Unfortunately for David, it is only an occasion to step on God's toes.

(2) The misstep of tragedy.

David hoists the Ark of God from its resting place at the house of Abinadab and positions it in the company of his men. They are prepared for a loud and triumphant entry into the city of Jerusalem. In a moment of tragedy, **one of the oxen pulling the Ark of God stumbles**, the Ark falls from its perch, landing on Uzzah, son of Abinadab, mortally wounding him.

The Deuteronomist explains the deadly incident theologically, YHWH “burst forth” against Uzzah because Uzzah had impiously burst forth to the aid of the Lord, touching the holy seat of God and receiving death for such defilement.

But just because a tragedy occurs does not mean God was responsible for it, willed it, or even allowed it. **A theology of God’s constant causation is a misstep.** Uzzah burst into action to care for the Ark like his family had taught him...*shamar*, keep, care for, guard... YHWH did not cause the tragedy. If God “burst forth” at all in that moment, it was with tears of grief and out stretched hands ready to receive the child who had so caringly reached out for God.

Overcome by anger and fear, David declared, “How can the ark come to me?” Yet again, someone else would have to teach David the blessing of accepting God’s lead.

(3) The blessing of accepting God’s lead

David sends the Ark of God away to the household of an old friend who happened to live nearby, Obed-edom, a Gittite, from the *Philistine* city of Gath. The people the Israelites called enemies would teach them to receive God’s blessing. (*Always look for irony in the Bible; it is where God hides the greatest truths.*) Obed-edom, the Philistine, received the The Ark, and the Presence of God *remained* there. The Hebrew is *yashab*, to dwell or abide. Where David refused to house The Ark of the Lord, the household of Obed-Edom received it. And “the Lord blessed Obed-edom and his whole household”. For three months the blessing of God was on the household of Obed-Edom, and they tended to the presence of God in their midst. These are the steps of the Lord, **hospitality, loving care, and blessing**.

At last, having seen the faithfulness of the families of Abinadab and Obed-Edom, David got in step with the Lord. The story says, “David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing.” The dance lessons paid off, and David finally experienced the blessing of accepting God’s lead. This is the dance of the Lord:

(1) Hospitality.

David welcomed the presence of God into his home. The text says David made “burnt offerings and offerings of well-being”, which is like saying he did everything from A-Z. **David used every resource at his disposal to honor and worship the Lord**, to be attentive to YHWH’s presence.

We know we are in step with God when we discover the presence of God in the people and the places where we live. Awakened to God’s presence, we respond with generous acts that welcome strangers, receive people from far off places, and accept all members of our community for the sake of peace and mutual well-being. The Lord’s dance begins with hospitality.

(2) Loving Care.

David made space in his home for God to dwell and began to learn what the families of Obed-Edom and Abinadab knew well. To be led by God is to keep with tenderness those in your care, to care for the needs of others, to guard the lives of the marginalized and hopeless. Like God and God’s servant Uzzah, we must “**Burst forth**” to pick up those who have fallen, to grieve with those who have experienced loss, and to provide loving care to all who have need.

(3) Blessing.

“When David finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people and distributed food among all the people.” David blessed *all* the people with an abundance of food

and celebration. This is the blessing of God: peace and fullness. It is not a blessing for any one person or family; it is a blessing to be shared with all people.

Hospitality, loving care, blessing.

When we dance in step with the character of God, it is like the blessings of God pour right through us.

We become caught up in the graceful dance of God,

practicing hospitality,

extending loving care,

and pouring forth blessing.

Like David, may we pay attention to the steps of God,

and learn to be led by the hand of the Lord.

All glory be to the Lord of the Dance, our motion, our rhythm, our soul. Amen