

“Dancing in the Dark: David, Herod, and Us”¹

Sunday, July 12, 2015

I

Well, those readings this morning! Looks like there's a whole lotta' dancin' goin' on here – neither dance leading to a particularly good end. In David's case, his wife Michal saw him dancing with abandon, and she despised him for it. And apparently the feeling was mutual. And of course, in Herodius' daughter's case, John the Baptist lost his head as a result of her dancing entertainment.

So what are we going to make of all this? Well, for simplicity's sake, I'm gonna concentrate on our Old Testament story. But I'm not going to narrow our look to just this scene. No, I'm gonna set this scene – this scene of David dancing before the ark – into the story of David's life. 'Cause it's quite a story. And as it turns out, in some very basic sense, it's a story about us all. So let's look.

II

Now King David was one of the greatest heroes Israel ever had – united the whole kingdom under his rule. Yes, the Bible says “David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that the Lord commanded him all the days of his life ... except ... in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.”

Oops! Oh dear. But that's getting ahead of our story. First, the dance.

See, after winning a great battle, David decides to move the ark – this symbol of God's presence that had long been stored in some obscure place – decides to move the ark to his new City of David (named for himself, of course). Now this gives David's military victory – that had led up to this moment – gives it the stamp of Divine approval.

So he trots out that holy box of acacia wood overlaid with gold, had it loads onto a custom-built cart and then makes a regular circus parade out of it – complete with horns, and harps, and cymbals, and psalteries, not to mention David himself high-stepping out in front.

Now so far none of this is anything but a good public relations display. But I mean, the next thing is something else again. 'Cause as someone nicely puts it, David strips down to his skivvies, and then with everyone looking on including his wife, Michal – Michal the daughter of the late king Saul – Michal who gave David's administration some class – in front of all these people David did his dance.

And apparently he dances with such frenzy – with head thrown back in a trance-like state – that Michal looks on him ... and as I said earlier, looks on him and despises him. And I guess makes no secret of it afterwards. Well anyway, that's today's scene.

But what about this matter of Uriah the Hitite? What's that about? Well you know, even if you don't know your Bible too well, you've probably heard of the story of David and Bathsheba. Oh yes, that one. How one day David is walking on his roof gazing out at the scene below, and he spies a married girl – to

put it delicately – taking a bath. And right then and there he decides he has to have her. And so he does. I mean, he's king, right?

Unfortunately, she gets "with child" – another delicate phrase, yes? And so in the end, David arranges for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. So Uriah the Hitite is disposed of, David marries Bathsheba – I guess Michal had been set aside somewhere along the way. And then – soon after Bathsheba gives birth – David's confronted by the prophet Nathan and has to face the evil he's done.

Well, it's a brilliant scene. Do you remember it? See, Nathan doesn't confront David directly with his sin. No. He tells him a little story instead. Tells him the story of two men – one rich, the other poor. And the poor man has one little lamb that he loves and even lets it sleep at the foot of his bed at night.

Then one day, the rich guy has a friend drop in for a meal, and without a thought, sends someone out to commandeer the poor man's lamb, then cook it, and serve it to his guest with some potatoes and peas.

Well! When David hears this story that Nathan has just made up, I mean he hits the roof. He's outraged that such injustice could be done, that someone could pull a stunt like that in his kingdom. And so he demands to know who the greedy perpetrator of that evil deed is. So Nathan pauses ... maybe for effect ... and then says softly, "Take a look in the mirror the next time you're near one. Because you are the man!"

So David looks with horror, seeing clearly now the evil he has done. And he repents. "I have sinned against the Lord," he cries – not because Nathan has told him so ... but because he's discovered it for himself. And that is the beginning of his coming back to life again.

So after David condemns himself, Nathan says, "The Lord has put away your sin. You shall not die." That's the good news. But despite his repentance, some sad consequences do follow. The bad news is that David and Bathsheba's child will die – because in conceiving that child, David had utterly scorned the Lord. Now I can't explain this hard part of the story – why a child should die for his father's sin – but that's how David's story goes in the book of Samuel, the story of this great king, the story of this great sinner. In a way, the story of us all.

III

Well let's stand back a bit from both of these stories we heard this morning – these episodes of David's life, of the story of Herod, of the dance at his party, of the beheading of John the Baptist, and so on. Let's stand back and reflect on these, as well as think about other stories of the Old and New Testament.

See, I think one way you can think of all these stories is this. That they're an especially intense shining of revelatory light on the meaning of being human through the characters they portray – a light reflecting hidden meaning, a grand narrative in a world shot through with grace – a grand story of us all told from Genesis to Revelation – this story that begins where time begins and ends with the end of it all.

So. What is this grand narrative? Well I think one way to grasp the underlying story within the Bible's pages is to see it as the story of God's dealing with the humans God has created as free agents. And

within this frame, the authors of the Bible try to show God's purpose through historical events, but a purpose deeply complicated by human disorder, complicated by our freedom, complicated by our finiteness. So in this sense, the biblical writers tell your human story and mine, through these particular cases, through these characters. And just think about it. Think about all those various stories we read in scripture, Sunday after Sunday.

For example, take Herod's story this morning. Apparently he's intrigued by John the Baptist, puzzled by him, not willing – not wanting to hurt him. But he's also a puppet, a puppet of the government, caught, stumbling between ambition and fear. And in the case of David, outwardly a strong, capable character – but inwardly an unstable vortex of greed, of ambition, of jealousy, of lust – as well as piety, courage, compassion, and much more. In short, all these stories – stories of thieves and traitors, of Good Samaritans, and Prodigal Sons – all these stories serve the Bible's authors as points of insight into these troubling complexities of our human condition.

But also consider this. I think the Central Character, as well as the Ultimate Author – the One who hovers over and behind the text is of course ... God. As someone has said, "The Bible without God is as unimaginable as Moby Dick without the whale." This is finally God's book, the One who's not seen directly but who's glimpsed in the lives of these characters – like David and Herod here – the characters who encounter him ... God – who's glimpsed in the imaginations of those inspired to set down these stories – the stories that shaped their lives and that ultimately shape our own.

Alright. Now I'm gonna shift to finish making my point – shifting to someone who I think is a contemporary prophet. Leonard Cohen was a Canadian poet and songwriter who died this past year. And one of his most famous songs was titled "Hallelujah" – that sacred word found across scripture and meaning to praise joyously – a word ingrained in your brain with sacred meaning – whether you're particularly religious or not. I think you can't hear the word "Hallelujah" without sensing God.

And here's the point I'm trying to make. Once before a concert Leonard Cohen told the audience this: "We're broken human beings, all of us. So stop pretending. Just stop pretending." He says, "and then you can all use the word 'Hallelujah,' because what I think it means is being open and transparent before God – being open and transparent before the world and saying, 'This is how it is, mate.' This is how it is." He says, "see, there's a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in."

And in that wondrous song, "Hallelujah," Cohen sings, "and even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of Song, with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah."

There is a crack in everything – that's how the light gets in.

So God lets in the light through the storytellers, through the prophets, through the singers and poets in our lives. And through them, I believe God has described for you and me the way our world works – “that’s how it is, mate!”

But also this – brought home by David’s story this morning. God lets us know that this is not only a material world we live in but also a moral one – one in which moral acts have consequences. And please note: I don’t believe for one minute that people die because God smites them. But the basic point of David’s story is that there are consequences to our actions. ‘Cause after the matter of Uriah the Hitite, things were never the same for David. There were lasting consequences to what he’d done and he had to live with them for the rest of his life.

But the point is ... he lived. God took him back, and gave him new chances to exercise his God-given freedom. He and Bathsheba had a second son named Solomon who ruled Israel for forty years with unprecedented wisdom. And David’s line survived some long, long time later to produce a boy named Jesus.

Finally ... my take-home point. All I know is that we live in a web of relationships, and none of us is morally autonomous. There are realities governing our lives together that we cannot go up against without sooner or later discovering the consequences. And when you do discover them – when you discover the consequences as an individual – like David looking in the mirror – or as a community – like the folks in Charleston waking up the next morning and really facing, maybe for the first time, the effects of evil long simmering in their midst – even so, God doesn’t turn away from you. No, God sends you prophets to let in the Light, prophets to tell you stories that show you who you really are.

And I believe that the moment you know who you really are, kind-of maybe ... broken, and then say so out loud – like David did – God can hear you ... and so find you. And in that moment of truth when you look in the mirror and recognize who you are, as God said to David ... he says to you ... and to me ... “Come on home.”

Amen.

1. Resources used: Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation series); Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*; Barbara Brown Taylor’s “You are the Man,” in *Bread of Angels*; Synthesis for July 12, 2015.