

July 21, 2024 Bonni-Belle Pickard

Pre-service music:

I will sing unto the Lord
Come on and celebrate
The Lord of the Dance
Teach me to dance

==ORDER OF SERVICE==

Call to worship -- Exodus 15:1-2, 11-13, 19-21

I will sing unto the Lord MP 316

Prayer
Intro to the Dance
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Come on and celebrate – StF 41

Mark 6: 14-29
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Teach Me to Dance StF 477

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Lord of the Dance StF 247

Prayer

God of Miriam and Moses,
You invite us to dance, to sing and celebrate
To move and include others in praise to you.

In recognition of the creative juices within us,
We acknowledge the love that moves us to your rhythms and joy.

Help us to set aside our reservations
To get to our feet and dance
 With you and with each other.
For your glory!
Amen.

Exodus 15

¹⁵ Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

‘I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

² The LORD is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

¹¹ ‘Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendour, doing wonders?’

¹² You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.

¹³ ‘In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

¹⁹ When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea,
the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them;
but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

²⁰ Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand;
and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.

²¹ And Miriam sang to them:

‘Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.’

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As I started working on this week's service,
I realised that there was an interesting link between some very different readings –
They also involved some sort of dance!

There are many sayings about dance:
 'Dance like no one's watching'
 'Dance like your life depends on it'
 'Why walk when you can dance?'
 'Dancers don't need wings to fly.'

I love to watch dance – I'm not very good at it myself,
 Though I had dance lessons when I was a child.
I love the rhythm, letting my body move and flow...
 I'm not very good at all the coordination,
 But I love to watch good dancers dance.
We've already heard one scripture about dancing –
 With Moses leading the people in dance
 After the Lord had cleared the Red Sea
 And delivered the Hebrew people from Egypt.
Interesting that the scripture first tells us that Moses led the people in dance,
 But then it says that Miriam did...
Some scholars say it was probably Miriam in the first place,
 But the Moses cult was so big, that he got all the credit!
Whichever one started the dance, it was clear that everyone was to join in.
 And that's important for us to remember even today –
The dance is to include everyone.
 Circle dances are the best way to make sure no one is left out.
Perhaps the real task of the church is to devise a circle dance
 Simple enough
 Yet sublime enough to include us all.

Listen now to another story of dance from 2 Samuel...
 And a certain 'Ark of Covenant' or the 'Ark of God',
 Which was dear to the hearts of the Hebrew people.
It was a huge wooden box, ornately decorated,
 A simple of God's presence in their midst....
And it was on its way to Jerusalem for a celebration....

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

⁶David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand.

²David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God,

which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim.

³They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill.

Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark.

⁵David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

¹²It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God."

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing;

¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling.

¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might;

David was girded with a linen ephod.

¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it;

and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD.

¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts,

¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

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Another account of joyful dancing at what the Lord had done!

The Ark of the Covenant! Symbol of God's presence in the midst of the Hebrews!

It was a large box made of acacia wood and covered with gold inside and out –

It had statues of cherubim attached...

Inside were three items: Aaron's staff (which had sprouted new leaves), a box of manna,

And the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inscribed on them...

It wasn't an idol, as was customary in the other Middle Eastern faith traditions,

But a symbol of God's *presence*...

It had been with Moses in the wilderness;

It had accompanied the Hebrew army that marched across the Red Sea –

With the river parting as they passed through...

It had been with them when they marched around Jericho

Before the walls collapsed...

Even if Moses was no longer around,

the Ark still symbolised God's presence with the people.

When they went into battle, the Ark went with them.

At one point, the Philistines had seized the Ark during a battle –

and had installed it in one of their own temples,

But it had brought disaster upon them, and they were soon eager to return it to the Israelites!

They sent it to the home of Abinadab,

And, in the story we've just heard, that's where it was coming from...

Finally getting back to Jerusalem...

And David wants to everyone to celebrate!

[Come on and celebrate!]

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We have still another story about dancing today in our scripture readings –
This one is considerably more gruesome...

Mark 6: 14-29

King Herod heard [about Jesus' teaching], for Jesus' name had become known.
Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead;
and for this reason these powers are at work in him.'
But others said, 'It is Elijah.'
And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.'
But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'

For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison
on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her.
For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'
And Herodias had a grudge against him [JB] and wanted to kill him.
But she could not, for Herod feared John,
knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him.
When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday
gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee.
When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests;
and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.'
And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you,
even half of my kingdom.'
She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?'
She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.'
Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested,
'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.'
The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests,
he did not want to refuse her.
Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head.
He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl.
Then the girl gave it to her mother.
When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

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This is not the easiest scripture to unpack!

We've been concentrating on dancing as a celebration of all that is good
All that is holy and life-giving...

But sometimes the 'dance' turns unholy and deathly....

A celebration of the goodness of body and creative movement
Becomes an enticement for evil and destruction....

As when Herodias' daughter, Salome, danced before Herod –
to please his guests, most likely all men –

What sort of dance would she have done to 'please' them?
Something beautiful and uplifting?

Though it doesn't say so explicitly,

we get the idea that Herod was very intent on sexual prowess....

Like so many other rulers, he was intent in establishing and confirming his power,
And that often came through commandeering the most wives and concubines.

Even – or especially -- if they were already committed to others.

In this case, the girl dancing was the daughter of the wife he'd taken from his brother –

And John the Baptist had had the temerity to call him out on that!

That calling out of morality had not sat well with Herod or Herodias, his wife.

And so, when the opportunity to 'silence' the prophet came,
John the Baptist's head was required...

Perhaps the dance involved reminded Herod of his need

To present himself as the strongest person in the vicinity.

Even though we're told – to Herod's credit –

That he himself was personally a bit in awe of JB.

The dance – and the opinion of his wife – and his public reputation was powerful enough –

To convince him to ignore his own better judgment.

Is a prophet's word only valuable when it agrees with your own desires?

We're told the story in the context of warnings given to Jesus --

Take care about what you say in public –

About your prophecies – because you can see what it did to John the Baptist.

If people don't agree with you, they will try to get rid of you...

And we're told that when Herod heard about Jesus and his prophetic sayings,

He's immediately reminded of what he'd done to JB –

Herod begins to wonder if JB had actually been a holy man

So killing him wasn't the end...

Perhaps Herod is concerned that JB might have come back to life to haunt him...

Like the Ark of Covenant had haunted the Philistines who had stolen it in battle...

Thinking a bit more about the dance itself....

it was a public act of titillation...

a way of getting people all stirred up –

And it was public – so when Herod's guests got stirred up,

Herod felt he had to oblige the public demand... and reward Salome.

What would it be? Gold? Silver? Silk? Pearls? Half my kingdom?

No, a bloody severed head...

That supposedly would get rid of the problem of adultery...

Even Herod sensed it was wrong,

But in the glare of the public outcry... he gave in...

In this case, the dance was the prompt for Herod to do something very ungodly.

That's a lesson that the church has sometimes adopted for the wrong reasons.
Sometimes we've sought to outlaw certain activities

That in themselves are not evil – like the old bans on playing cards
And going to the cinema or women wearing trousers –
Or even dancing

Because we've seen in each a potential for evil and so made the act evil
Rather than recognising that nearly anything innately good
Can also be corrupted into evil.

When I was about 12-13 years old, I had a Sunday School teacher
Who was also a dance teacher

His name was Buddy Sherwood, a short Italian guy who had enormous enthusiasm
And loved to dance – and had opened his own School of Dance.
His speciality was tap, though he also taught ballet and jazz.

Except, he'd always been told that dancing was sinful –

And so, when the urge to dance –

and later to open the Buddy Sherwood School of Dance –

The only way he saw to do that was to avoid the church...

Except somehow, he and my father met,

And my father, being a Methodist minister,

Assured him that God loved him and loved dancing...

And soon, Buddy Sherwood found his way back to church,

And all my four siblings and I became eager students

At the Buddy Sherwood School of Dance.

And Buddy Sherwood became my Sunday School teacher as well.

As I've said, everything Buddy Sherwood did, he did with great enthusiasm.

I remember one Sunday School class in which he asked each of us in turn

If we knew we were Beloved of God.

We weren't quite sure what he meant by that,

So we each mumbled out an answer –

To which Buddy Sherwood then exploded:

“OF COURSE, you are all a Beloved Child of God! Never forget that!”

That story reminds me of another I heard a few weeks ago

at the connexional ordination service.

The preacher at that service was Rev Richard Andrews, who, a few days later,

Was elected as President of next year's Annual Conference.

He told a story that Desmond Tutu often told.

It was about a man taking an old-style scripture exam.

The man hadn't prepared very well, so when he sits down to the exam,

He come to a question which reads,

‘What did John the Baptist say to Jesus when he baptised him in the Jordan?’.

Not knowing the answer, he writes down,

‘Remember you are the Son of God. Now behave like one.’

When Tutu would tell the story, he would turn around to his congregation and say,

‘Remember you are princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God.’

Now behave like one.’

Richard Andrew, in telling the story at the ordination service
Also recalled his mother’s funeral – she, who loved to dance –
And hearing this story with an embellishment:
“Remember you are all dancers in life. Now behave like one.’

Dancing not to titillate, but to express our love of God with our bodies and our spirits!
Are we too often too embarrassed to worship God with our bodies and our spirits????

The careful listeners among you might have realised
That I missed out a verse from the reading about the Ark of Covenant.
It was verse 16, and it gives a different insight into what was happening
When the Ark of the Covenant came back into town...
“¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David,
Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window,
and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD;
and she despised him in her heart.”

So David is out there dancing in the street with the Ark of Covenant –
And Michal, his wife, looking out the window is objecting strongly...
I’ve heard a few sermons – and even a later part of 2 Samuel implies –
That Michal was wrong to object –
That David was dancing to praise the Lord!

But I think Michal may have had a point –
In her eyes, David was dancing only partially clad –
In his linen ephod, which is often explained as a ‘liturgical garment’,
But was more probably little more than his underwear...
And Michal thought he had crossed the line.
Especially dancing there in front of the whole town,
In front of God and everybody –
I’m reminded of a few ‘worship leaders’ whom I’ve known –
Who, rather than leading a congregation in singing praises to the Lord,
Have embellished the whole production
So the congregation becomes the back-up singers to their own performance...
Love of the spectacle has overtaken love of the Lord...

It is a pertinent reminder – what are we doing when we worship?
Are drawing attention to God or merely drawing attention to ourselves?

In the case of Miriam and the women dancing after the crossing of the Red Sea,
The words are specifically about singing unto the Lord –
Because *God has triumphed*,
not because we are such wonderful singers or dancers –
And Miriam *led* all the people in this worship –
Not drawing attention to herself, but finding a way to involve the whole congregation
The whole community into an act of worship and praise.

There is something in this even for those of us who don’t feel ourselves particularly gifted

In song or dance – or even performance...
When we're praising God – or working for God –
It's not about US, it's about God
And about finding ways to 'dance' so that *all* can participate together...

In essence, this is the role of the leader – the one who invites all to dance together...
I've heard 'leadership' described as empowering all to use their gifts for the greater whole
For moving the whole group together – forward –
And if the leader is only walking at the head -- however gloriously --
But not encouraging the *group* to move together,
Than the leader is only 'walking in the park'...

Are we worshipping ourselves? Or are we worshipping God?
Does our leadership encourage others to worship as well?
Or does it just encourage them to let us do it all?

What can each of us do for God's work -- that might inspire others to also join in?

Richard Andrew's sermon was also touching on the fact
That in recent years many of the ways that we 'do church' has changed –
In fact, even the fact that you are joining in online worship
Would have been virtually inconceivable five years ago.

Richard Andrew pointed out that in his mother's lifetime,
Nearly all the dance halls around town had closed –
Even faster than the churches!

And yet there is that desire to dance – and to worship –
To even to worship through dance.

How are we to do it?

How are we to live so that the dance of our lives

Encourages others to celebrate the God of love and joy and movement?

It doesn't have to be a polished performance that would score a 10 on Strictly,

It merely needs to be a bodily expression of our love for God

An expression of love and joy and creativity

An image of the God who created us to be good and right and true.

And it must include others...

THAT is the true 'dance' God calls us to!

So be it with us. Amen.

God of love and joy and creativity
God of movement and delight
Who set the cosmos into a jubilant swirl
And inspires us with your Spirit to join in movement...
We want to learn to dance with you.

We want to be able to love you with our bodies as well as our minds –
To celebrate your movement within us
To celebrate that fact that you came to live with us
In a body that moved and swayed and leaned in close
When the time was right.

Dancing Jesus, in our mind's eye, we see you doing a little skip
As you follow the rhythm of other feet on the path
Walking from town to town to share the news of God's love...
And encouraging their feet to skip as well....
We notice how your body sways to the breeze like the flowers in the field.

Bodily Jesus, we watch you crouch over the lost one –
The beggar, the outcaste, the despised one
And invite them into the dance.

Angry Jesus, we see you flinging arms wide to push back the sellers in the temple
Those who would defile the sacred space
With less-than-sacred purposes.

Passionate Jesus, we remember you comforting those who were misunderstood –
The woman who had dared to wash your feet with her tears
And dry them with her hair.
You didn't send her away.
You invited her to dance as well.

Undaunted Jesus, we watch your determined march to the cross
Carrying the most unwieldy prop – the very object used to kill you.
You do it with strength
You do with grace
You do it for us
And again, you invite us to join you.

Because you know – and you want us to know –
The dance of life and death and resurrection
The dance that reconnects us with you and all that is good and right and true
That dance is open to all who dare to join in.

Be with us, Lord Jesus of love and joy and anger and passion;
Be with us and teach us to dance
Like our lives depended on it.

Amen.