

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

July 12, 2009

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Worship Theme: Dancing For God,

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19, Ephesians 1:3–14, Mark 6:14–29

In the summer of 1960, when I was 13, my mother signed me up for “step sessions” at our local high school gym. “Step sessions” were a euphemism for “dancing lessons.” My mother commanded me to go and my father stood by silently; for my mother wanted me to learn to dance because my father could not. I prayed that God would help me break a leg with a minimum of pain so I would not have to go. God stood silent in this matter, too. As a further betrayal, one of my favorite male gym teachers had teamed up with a female gym teacher to lead the lessons. An almost fatal blow came at the first session when they matched me up with a partner who was one of the least popular girls in the school. She was 14, skinny and about five foot-ten. I was chubby and about five-foot five. We were a pair to behold. In the first lesson, we learned that the male was supposed to be the lead in a dance. That became questionable in our case with the girl having the size advantage. By God’s grace, I survived the first lesson—barely. But, there were more stress-filled sessions to come.

Every lesson after the first one, I was swooped down upon by this older girl as I entered the gym. Normally, there were six ways into that gym, but in the summer, all but one was locked, so my doom was sealed. Also, I was teased nearly to death by the other boys who were also sentenced to this dance torture by their mothers. We learned the waltz, the cha cha, the rumba, the samba, a very tame and primitive form of rock and roll, and square dancing—which I enjoyed. Thank God, they did not want us to learn the tango. I am not sure I ever became the lead partner, but I survived and learned just a bit about dancing. Thanks, Mom, I guess.

My appointed dance partner, one of the “most unpopular girls in the school” in 1960, graduated in 1964 and was voted the female most likely to succeed. And, she did.

Thanks to my wife, Holly, whom I met in high school in 1963, I enjoy dancing now. But according to Holly, my fast dancing style leaves so much to be desired that my 1960 dance partner would probably sooner seek witness protection if she saw me on the dance floor today, than try to dance with me.

All kidding aside, each of today’s scripture lessons involves a dance and raises the question about who is to be the lead. But these are dances that go way beyond the angst of a 13 year-old boy. They are dances that have made a huge difference in faith and world history.

As we heard in 2 Samuel, King David danced wildly and freely for God as the precious Ark of the Covenant was carried into his newly conquered city of Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant represented the very presence of Yahweh himself. Humans were forbidden to touch it so it was carried on poles. Yes, the warrior king, who as a young shepherd killed lions and bear with his bare hands and the mighty giant Goliath with a slingshot and stone, could really dance. He might have won “Dancing with the Stars” if it had been held in his day. His dancing for God was considered to be inspired

by the Spirit of God. "That is, he and others gave way to a strong inner impulse to express their euphoria over all that Yahweh had so recently done in their lives and in the life of the nation," It was a dance of thanksgiving and praise for God was with them in the City of Jerusalem. In this dance, Jerusalem was established as the religious center for the Hebrew people as it has been for 3000 years.

This was also a political dance. By moving the Ark to Jerusalem David established that God would rule Israel and Judah through him and no one else. David then threw a great party, a communion of sorts, where he dressed the part of a priest and king as if to reinforce that he and God were working as partners. With this kind of dance going on, it would be hard for anyone to oppose David, even his wife, Michal. Again, great reasons for David to dance with grand enthusiasm. David indeed danced a dance of power. He danced for God and to some degree for himself! David was very wise in his dance, he knew that theologically and politically God had to be the lead partner.

Today, the dance of God and human politics is often displayed when we inaugurate a president in Washington, D.C. Regardless of the party who wins; prayers are sent out to God by selected clergy, special Bibles may be used for the taking of the vows, grand speeches are given, famous soloists sing, bands from all across the country play, and countless parties, communions of sorts, are held. All this represents the establishment of a new power base in the capital. In a way, all this fanfare is an intricate dance between God and political forces, some for good and some for bad, but an interesting dance, nevertheless. Who dances for God and who dances for themselves always seems to be in question. The bigger question is will the politicians recognize that for the dance to be successful, God must be the lead.

This dance between God and human political leaders went on as we heard in the tragic story of John the Baptist in Mark. What a dance that was. One partner in that dance was John the Baptist. He was a lowly locust and honey eating, camel hair wearing prophet "who sneaked in from the wilderness." He was also a relative to the Jesus of Nazareth Herod had heard about. "Much attention was paid by people in those days to seers and foretellers who could define the future before it happened. John was certainly understood by those people as a voice of God and a window of revelation. Although marginalized by pedigree and lifestyle, John's voice was a commanding presence, especially when crowds began to pour out of Jerusalem to hear him preach" and call for repentance. John the Baptist certainly danced for God. John knew God was the lead in his dance. "Emphasis," July/August 2009

The other partner was King Herod Antipas who on behalf of Rome ruled the area that included Jerusalem. Herod recognized that God was working through John the Baptist with his popularity and all. Herod wanted to be part of that dance, but Herod wanted to be the lead for several reasons. The most serious one was that Herod was involved in an adulterous scandal where he divorced his first wife to marry his brother's wife, Herodias. Herod wanted to lead the cover up on this part of the dance. John the Baptist who was preaching the repentance of sins was all over Herod about his adultery committed with Herodias. Fearful of John's popularity, connection to God and his truth telling, Herod had John jailed to shut him up. This was an interesting dance

between God's prophet who told the truth and the corrupt King who wanted to hide the truth by trying to take the lead, and who was really dancing for himself.

Ah, but there turned out to be a third partner in this dance. Herod's wife, Herodias, wanted John dead, not just arrested for revealing the family secrets. Herodias' rules for dancing were, "Do unto others before they do it unto you." She tricked Herod into beheading John by having her daughter, Salome, dance very seductively before Herod. Of course Herod was taken in and promised Salome whatever she wanted. Her mother told her to ask for John the Baptist's head. So, Herod was forced to behead John. Just about three years later, King Herod Antipas also was greatly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus who was also a theological and political threat to him. Herod could not dance well with men of God who told the truth. Dancing with Herod theologically and politically was a very dangerous thing to do.

When God's truth meets moral and political corruption the dance can become brutal. It is a dance that is more of a sword fight ballet than any kind of waltz. The sinful side will stop at nothing to lead. It is a dangerous dance that continues today. We may not have prophets in the style of John the Baptist, but we do have whistle blowers who call out the truth of God: Who are willing to dance for God and let God lead in the face of moral and political corruption. Some of them have lost their jobs, even their lives while dancing for God. The fact that we must have laws to protect whistle blowers is a judgment upon our society for not respecting the truth and the dance for God. Even then, the laws might not be enforced. The tragedy is that those who want to tell the truth are often denigrated by the phrase they "ratted out" someone when they turn in those who are corrupt. Too often crimes are not solved nor criminals punished because our society looks down upon those who call out the truth and dance for God. When God's truth meets moral and political corruption, the dance can become brutal. This fight over who is to lead in this dance can be uglier than my fast dancing style.

No one knew this more than Jesus Christ. A thousand years after his ancestor David danced into Jerusalem and established Yahweh as the lead dancer, God in Jesus Christ entered the same city to become part of a dance that had universal and eternal consequences. Who was to be the lead dancer for the future of this world was in question. This dance was also the uncomfortable intertwining of theology and politics. In this dance, God in Jesus Christ took on the powers of sin, Rome and the leaders of the temple in a dance to the death. As we well know, the powers of sin, the leaders of Rome and the temple tried to claim the lead by turning this dance into a torturous rumble by nailing Jesus on the cross to die. But Yahweh, the same God who was the lead as David danced into Jerusalem, the same God who led John the Baptist to call Herod and all people, even you and me to repent of our sins and live an honest life, defeated all who tried to claim the lead in the dance by raising Jesus from the dead to everlasting life. A thousand years after David danced into Jerusalem, Jesus danced out from his grave in Jerusalem to claim the lead in the dance.

Because of this victorious resurrection, we can look to God in Jesus Christ to be our lead in the dance of theology and politics in our lives. Like I could not escape my 1960 dance partner, we cannot avoid these aspects of our lives coming together, but we can step back and let God be the lead in the dance. If we but follow God's lead in

Jesus Christ, we too, can be a part of the joyful dance of life God created us to have in the first place.

This dance for God is what the Apostle Paul enthusiastically celebrates in his poetic song in today's Epistle lesson from Ephesians. He invites us to join him in this dance that celebrates the fact that God took the lead "from before the foundation of the world!" Paul proclaims, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Hear again these blessings that are a part of God's dance: "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." With all wisdom, insight and good pleasure "he revealed his will that he set forth in Christ" to show us how this dance will end, with all things, including you and me redeemed and gathered up to join him in heaven. This is an inheritance God promised to us and all we must do is set our hope on Christ, let him lead the dance of every aspect our lives, so that we might live for the praise of his glory. What an exciting dance on earth and into the heavenly Jerusalem for God, my friends! As the refrain in our second hymn "Lord of the Dance" sings, "And the dance goes on!" Amen

For those of you who are like me who need the dance steps set out in a pattern in the floor, I invite you to join me in the answer to "The Westminster Catechism Question 104. What are the duties required in the First Commandment?," as we let God take the lead in the dance of our lives and to say aloud each step God wants us to take as we dance for him.

A. The duties required in the First Commandment are: the knowing and acknowledging of God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify him accordingly; by thinking, meditating, remembering, highly esteeming, honoring, adoring, choosing, loving, desiring, fearing of him; believing him; trusting, hoping, delighting, rejoicing in him; being zealous for him; calling upon him, giving all praise and thanks, and yielding all obedience and submission to him with the whole person; being careful in all things to please him, and sorrowful when in anything he is offended; and walking humbly with him. Amen.