

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

July 12, 2009

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

¹David 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.

^{12b}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.

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.

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.

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴King Herod heard of it, 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." ¹⁵But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." ¹⁶But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." ¹⁹And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, ²⁰for 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. ²¹But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. ²²When 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." ²³And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." ²⁴She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." ²⁵Immediately 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." 26The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, 28brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. 29When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

"Dressed with Reverence"

It was 9:30pm. Yes, 9:30pm and I was standing on the edge of town there on the great plains. The breeze was blowing and to my right in the western sky the sun was beginning to sink—yet it was still fully bright. The sinking sun was on my right. To my left as I looked up I saw the moon—a full or nearly full moon shining brightly.

I took it in. It is a sight never seen on the east coast. The sky just is not that big here, and we are at the beginning of a time zone so the darkness comes sooner than it does where I was at the edge of the Central Time Zone.

So I stood there taking it in—the moon at my left hand in the southeastern sky and the sun in my right hand sinking to the northwest. It was a moment of pure realization that I was part of this large universe that is beyond me and yet holds me.

I call such moments reverence.

Friday evening when I was in the grocery store I saw this little hunched over lady doing her shopping. We were in the same aisle. It was nothing more than one of those moments in Mars looking over the shelves. I caught a glimpse of her and realized how easily I zoom up and down the aisles grabbing the products I want but how clearly every can of green beans she was putting in her basket required some effort.

I in that moment of realization caught her eyes and she mine. I said, "good evening." She returned with the traditional Asaian greeting of

bowing. It was a moment. Paying attention to that moment—I call that reverence.

Reverence is that moment or glimpse when we have that clear recognition that there is something greater than the self. It is when we have that clear realization that we are only a part of that which is larger than we are. Reverence is that spark of a moment when we know truth as a larger, grander, and fuller than we can discern within ourselves.

It may be seen another way—reverence is that point in which we see that God is in all things and in all people. Gazing up into the sky there was that sense of all creation being alive with the presence of God. Seeing that elderly woman in the grocery store there was that sense of being in connection with each other that is the very presence of God.

Where is the reverence in this text of terror that is the story of the beheading of John the Baptist? This is not a story that transports us to a place of sanctuary where we are at one with the Holy Spirit. This is, rather, a terrible story of the potential cost of faithfulness.

But there is that place in the story where there is a choice that is made. It is a terrible choice and Herod makes the wrong choice—but there is a point in the story where a choice is made.

Flannery O’Conner says this: “There is a moment in every story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected even though the reader may not recognize this moment.”

O’Conner talks about that moment in terms of grace, and I will call that a moment of reverence where you have that realization that this event is bigger than you are.

Here was Herod, and we know very little about him in terms of Mark's description. This Herod was the son of Herod the Great and was far weaker, if you will, than was his father. He took his brother's wife as his own wife. Herodias was her name and her daughter's name was Salome (but Mark calls her Herodias too).

As the story goes—John the Baptist is in prison. We are told that he is in prison because of Herodias. Herod, we are told, “feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man,” and so he protected him. It is clear that the presence of John the Baptist called forth some sort of recognition of something worthy of attention for Herod.

According to the way the story goes—Herod throws a party and Salome—Herodias' daughter dances for the whole court gathered there. Herod is so impressed that he tells her to ask anything she wants and he will grant it to her. He tells her that he would even give her up to half of his kingdom. At this point her mother comes into play and convinces Salome to ask for the head of John the Baptist.

Herod grants the wish. And you see—that is precisely the point in which a vital choice is made. Herod could listen to that part of him that says there is something about this John the Baptist that needs his attention or he can deny that and protect his political power.

It becomes a story of the clash between protecting political power and prophetic faith. John has spoken truth to Herod and has been that spark of reverence where he recognizes it...and so he “fears him”/is in awe of him; he even reveres him. But in the moment of decision he clothes himself in worldly power rather than the prophetic faith that he has experienced in John.

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Herod did what he had to do. Or did he? Couldn't he have stood up and said to the women. No, I will not do that. Couldn't he have said that he thought John the Baptist was worth protecting that there had to be something to his prophecy? Couldn't he have done that?

He could have, but he did not. Why? Because it was far easier to wear the "its just the way things are" cloak than put on something else. It was far easier to just let things be, and if he had given his word that he would do anything for Salome then he had better follow through with it. It is what it is. It had to be as it had to be and there was not anything he could have done to change it.

I think we do that all the time. Not that we behead John the Baptist. No. But we give away those moments of connection and those moments of recognition that something is bigger than us in exchange for the comfort of just having things as they are.

We have learned to not look and not be involved even in our own living. We have learned to somehow be immune to the presence that there is life bigger than us around us all the time.

So in the grocery store we zoom passed the slow elderly lady. We have our own agenda to attend to. We don't notice the moon and the sun in the eastern and western skies—we have too many things to do. And it is bigger than that—we see our lives as given. We see things as fixed. It is what it is. It is as it will be. There are no negotiations. There are no real opportunities. It is how it is. And worse yet, we become the center of our own universe—we become the sun around which everything else had better revolve and evolve too.

And just that fast we have locked out the immensity of God's movement in our life and God's touch in the world and even the universe. We do that all the time. We lock out God's possibilities for us and for our world as we cloak ourselves in "its just the way things are" rather than allowing ourselves to be "dressed with reverence."

God is in the business of redeeming the world. I love the language of Paul and especially the emphasis of the Presbyterian Confession of 1967. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world." God's choice is that we are made whole—that we are saved. Why? For love. God's love is unlimited. God's love for us is never ending.

I love that description of Julian of Norwich—that she looks into the acorn and asks what is it all about? She looks into the acorn and realizes that God made it, and that God loves it, and that God preserves it. And what is that all about---it is about God's love.

That is what we see most clearly in the cross. God's love is clear and visible in the Christ there. God's love is stronger than all the powers of destruction and death—they cannot consume Jesus. God's love is so real, so strong, so powerful that it swallows up all the limitations of death and life is the answer. There is this life that flows out of the love of God that cannot be stopped or consumed or put to death.

And if we put that on—if we dress ourselves with that...then we see things differently. Then in the acorn we see love or in the sky or the elderly woman...in all of it we see the presence and power of God. But there has to be that moment when we take it in and say, "ah, this is of God. Ah, there is love in this. Ah, this is larger than I am. Ah, trust in the trustworthiness of God."

That is easier to do with big skies and little acorns than it is with people who push our buttons and issues that cause us so much heartache and pain. In all of it, however, we have to make that choice. We have to make that choice that Herod made. How will we see it? Will we sacrifice our hold over the way things are? Will we take the time to attend? Will we take the opportunity to see what God is doing? Will we make the passage from fear to awe?

Will we see the possibilities that God has for us? That is really what reverence is all about – it is about seeing the possibilities that God has for us.

David brought the ark to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to be the political center of power in the ancient world. And yet David takes the time and goes to great effort to bring in the ark of God. In fact in the description of David bringing that ark of God to Jerusalem he sounds less like a king and more like a priest. He dances and ritualizes the whole event.

David knows...that this God of his has limitless possibilities. David surely must have seen his own limitations—he made enough mistakes to know that he was limited. But somehow, he saw in the symbol of that ark of God a God who was not bounded. This unbounded God would be the very means through which he would succeed as king over all of Israel.

With joy and laughter and playfulness David danced the ark of God into the city. There was that reverence there—that moment where he knew that this was bigger than he was. There was that moment there when he knew that this was all about the awesome God and what that God would do.

He saw it. He got it. He understood it. He had it.

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Do you see it? Do you stop and look to the skies or notice her there? Do you wear reverence or the the cloak of “it is how it is?” Will you...will we...see the possibilities that God has for us? Will we see those possibilities that God has for us even this week?

Will we see that moment in our own story this week where we have a choice---will that moment of reverence be our moment or will we let it pass by.

Put that moment on—be dressed with it! Amen.