

ON THE WILD SIDE

A Sermon by the Rev. Janet L. Abel
Preached on Sunday, July 12, 2015

Getting over Inhibitions about Dancing

Today's scriptural story is very interesting. It made me think about dancing, and I wonder how you feel about it. It's one thing to watch, and we will have the pleasure of seeing some real dancers right after my sermon. But how do you personally feel about dancing?

I'm a very poor dancer, but over the years I've learned to enjoy it more and more. I've gotten over the feeling that everyone's watching me because surely in a group of dancers no one's watching me. They might look at me for a couple seconds and realize that, well, there are other people with whom they can dance.

So I've gotten over that inhibition because dancing has turned out to be fun for me. It really is. But I have danced at many parties and weddings with other women because their husbands are sitting back at the dining table, not dancing. These women always complain that there are a lot of men who don't dance. More men than women, but there are some women who don't dance.

I'd like to see a show of hands from those who enjoy dancing. Okay, that's a lot of you. Good. I know Barry Downing has taken lessons because his mother was a dance instructor. So Barry can dance. And Bianca Podesta too. I'm glad that she is here this morning. She has preached here

many times. And maybe some of you remember the time she did a liturgical dance here in our church. You don't see that kind of thing a lot, but when you do it's wonderful. We thank you for that, Bianca.

Can Dancing Be Considered Wild?

I knew there would be some comments about my sermon title, so I decided to be a little wild today. It's a luau day. Some of us are wearing aloha shirts, and we have guests, so why not? Let's live it up. That is, live it up as much as we Protestants get.

I picked our first hymn on purpose. I thought we'd start with that, and then work our way into being just a touch more wild without getting too wild.

The church of my youth definitely thought dance was out of the question. As you know, I was raised a Baptist. We weren't supposed to dance, but even so my parents liked dancing.

Many years ago – I'm dating myself by telling this story – I heard the Andrews sisters come on the radio. When was the last time you heard the Andrews sisters on the radio? Anyway, my mother said, "Get up. I'm going to teach you how to jitterbug." So we jitterbugged in the kitchen, she danced well and I badly, but I learned the basics of the jitterbug, a really exhilarating kind of dance.

But we didn't mention it. It was one of those things, as my mother said, that we didn't mention to the Reverend Shoemith. Like the fact that mother was a very good bridge player. This was not discussed on Sunday morning. That was for Saturday night, and the next morning we went to church. We weren't supposed to dance or play cards, but yes, our church actually did teach that and all kinds of other prohibitions.

Through the years, I never agreed with that from a theological point of view. Look at our scriptural passage for this morning if you think dance is against God's will (2nd Samuel 1-5, 16).

Dancing in a Church

A couple years ago, I went to a church in Ethiopia. It's a big mission project for our local Presbyterian churches, and there they think that dancing is bad. This particular church is in Addis Ababa and Dembi Dollo, the village where I was. It has banned dancing unless you're in church, where they allow ethnic dancing. I thought, "What a shame." So we argued about it, the pastors and I.

Then I went to the Sunday service, and I'm here to tell you, speaking of wild. After the service was over, out came the drums like this African drum I brought with me, and they danced like you wouldn't believe. The whole church got up and made a big circle dancing around the main drummer. It was unbelievable. No one sat out. So for God it's okay. They do a lot of dancing in that church, although it's not the ethnic style of dancing.

Here in our country, we have an American cultural touchstone in *Footloose*, that fabulous movie. Remember? It has just been remade. It's about a young guy who moves into a town where the local pastor has forbidden dancing. His daughter just happened to be the wildest girl in town, and she and the young guy fell in love. He taught them all how to dance.

Another movie that I've seen many times is *Dirty Dancing*, another great movie I love. It's all about dancing, both dirty and not dirty.

Let's Turn to Our Story of David.

David, that fabled king, was one of the greatest kings that Israel has ever had. He ruled about the year 1000 BCE, a long time ago, and you probably know the aspects of his story that made him so famous.

I want to mention at the outset that there is a legendary aspect about David. For many years we thought he might have been made up of a combination of several people. However, proof of his existence has been found outside the Bible. Scholars have discovered inscriptions to the house of David, so they now think there really was such a person. Whether he was exactly like our stories in First and Second Samuel, we don't know.

But David, of course started life as a shepherd boy, one of many brothers living in Bethlehem. That's a village we know. The current king, Saul, wasn't doing so well in God's eyes, so David was picked. The people wanted a king.

God Said, “You Don’t Want a King”

The Israelites of that time were like teenagers who want Nike sneakers. They said to God, “Everybody has a king but us. You know the other countries, they all have kings, and we don’t. What a gyp. We want a king.”

And God said, “You really don’t want a king. This is not a good idea. A king is going to tax you. He’s going to take your sons for his armies. He’s going to take your girls and put them in his harem. Not good. I’m a good king. Earthly kings are bad.” But the people said, “No, no. We’ve must have a king. We have to have one, just like Nike sneakers and everything else.”

People wanted Levi jeans when I was a kid. That’s what they had to be – straight-legged Levi’s. They couldn’t be Wranglers. “I cannot go to school if I have Wrangler jeans,” I said to my parents.

So God gives in. He sends this guy Samuel to pick a king. First, it’s Saul. He’s nice and tall and good-looking, but he turns out not to be a good. He was paranoid, making lots of mistakes. So God decides on a do-over, and next he sends Samuel out into the countryside, where he meets the shep-herd boy David, who, we learn, is really good with a slingshot.

Remember that famous story? The giant Goliath of the Philistines is challenging the Israelis to a one-on-one duel, and David’s the one who brings him down with one rock from the slingshot that he used as a shepherd boy.

David was many things. He was a poet and a musician, and he composed and sang songs. Many of the psalms in our Bible are ascribed to David. Who knows? He probably did write a lot of them, the Twenty-Third Psalm being one.

He also, unfortunately, became greatly popular, even with the king’s son, Jonathan. Everybody except Saul loved David. So Saul started to get really jealous and angry, and decided to kill him. David had to run away, and he amassed followers as he ran around hiding from Saul. He became a warlord with his own army, a real threat to Saul. And there was an occasion when David could have killed Saul, but he didn’t do so.

David Takes the Ark to Jerusalem

And so the story comes to our point. He becomes king after Saul and Jonathan are both killed in battle. David has the Ark of the Covenant. We remember this from another fabulous movie, the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. That took a little liberty or two, but do you remember that very fancy box that Moses and company had to build to hold the Ten Commandments?

It had cherubim on top, which is why God, the Lord of Hosts, is seated on the cherubim. It’s called the mercy seat, and the Israelite people really thought that that was God’s throne. There was God. And if you took that Ark into battle, you were assured of victory.

So for David the Ark was extremely important. Couldn’t touch it, it was so holy.

You had to build a cart for it. And they decided to make a big procession with the Ark. David picked Jerusalem as his capital, and they took the Ark into that city.

David Dances Wildly

And what does David do? He's the brand-new king, with the Ark of the Covenant and all his soldiers and his followers and they're parading into Jerusalem with his new wife, Michal, who happens to be the daughter of Saul. She was married to somebody else, by the way, but was forced to marry David, so she despised him.

David is dancing. He is dancing with all his might, and with all kinds of instruments. (Hence our instruments for this morning.) The lyre and the tambourine and the cymbal and the drum. And David is dancing so hard that he actually takes his clothes off. Our particular passage didn't tell us this, but he is wearing a linen ephod, which is like a big diaper.

While he is vigorously leaping and dancing, Michal looks out the window at her brand-new husband, the king of Israel, and she thinks, good lord! What have I been married to? This guy leaping around in his underwear is my husband, and I've been forced to marry him. You have to wonder. She is not into wildness.

Where does David's wildness come from? He is a passionate man. He is a musician and a poet as well as a war leader, and he has been on the run for years. He's lucky to be alive. And he is filled with many different emotions – utter relief, complete and outright joy, and total abandon. Also, a

little fear and anxiety about being a new king. But he is releasing that emotion too. He feels so much that he has to dance. And he does so with great excitement.

That's the wild side of us, isn't it? The emotional side. The soul side of us.

Camping in Comfort Is Glamping

I also called my sermon wild because the Wild Goose Festival concludes today. It's a festival that Art has told me about, so I've looked into it. The Wild Goose Festival has taken place every July since 2011 in Hot Springs, North Carolina.

And speaking of wild, you can glamp there. A lot of you know that I'm now a glamper. What is glamping? Maybe it's a little wild, but it's glamour camping, so it's not very wild. You get close to the animals but not really. I heard coyotes in the distance, but I'm gonna be honest with you, that's as close as I want to get.

As much as I love camping and the beautiful outdoors, I have to tell you, glamping is a nice tent with a raised wooden floor and a nice big bed with real sheets and pillows. I slept like a baby, and in the morning I awoke in this big beautiful bed and heard the birds. All I had to do was to undo the zipper to get out of the tent and walk to the bathroom. That's as wild as glamping gets.

That's my kind of camping. Do I hear an Amen? I hate sleeping on the floor. I'm not wild like that. And the staff builds a fire for you and serves gourmet s'mores. In addition, there's a wine and beer tent. Glamping is the way to go. Since you can

glamp at the Wild Goose Festival, I thought I really should look into it next year.

This festival celebrates spirituality, justice, music, and the arts all together. This year's theme is the Beauty of Peace.

Source of the Wild Goose Festival

Where did this notion of Wild Goose come from? Why that name? Well, in 563 AD, the Irish monk Columba founded a monastery in Iona, Scotland, which became highly influential in Christianity and spread the faith throughout much of Scotland and northern England. In the Middle Ages, It became a Benedictine abbey.

The monastery eventually fell into disrepair, and a rebuilding was begun in 1938 by the Reverend George MacLeod, a Protestant. He decided to found the Iona Community, which is still there. Rev. George had a vision of putting people to work but also having a community of peace and unity. This was in the midst of the Great Depression, and he corralled a whole bunch of unemployed craftsmen and workers who started work on this monastery, which continues today.

Out of Iona and Celtic spirituality came the wild goose image or symbol for the Holy Spirit that for them best evokes God's unpredictability, beauty, and grace in our

lives. God's wild side, if you like, is, in other words, like the wild goose.

Carved around Saint Columba's pulpit are these famous words, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The wild goose and these words remind us that the Spirit of God can never be tamed or contained. When it comes to divinity, we should always expect the unexpected.

Geese are wild, but they are very devoted to each other. We can observe that when they fly in diamond formation. One at a time one goose after another takes the lead, bearing the heaviest burden of the flying, and when it gets tired, the lead goose drops back, and another takes the lead. If one gets sick or exhausted and drops out, another goose will stay with it.

Let Love Be a Little on the Wild Side

So the Wild Goose Festival celebrates wildness, yes, but in beauty and art, song and dance. Here's a quote from last year's festival: "Whatever else Wild Goose was, it was a place where people danced without inhibition." Like David, who danced before the Lord with all his might.

We celebrate what the wild goose stands for today and every day, God's love, peace, and community. God's music, art, and dance. So let us be a little on the wild side this morning, the side that loves.

Amen.