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The Dance

July 16, 2006

~ 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. Susan Morrison

2 Samuel 6: 1 - 5; 12b - 19 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 David 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. 3 They 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 4 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5 David 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. So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; 13 and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. 14 David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. 16 As 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. 17 They 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. 18 When 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, 19 and 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 14 King 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." 15 But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." 16 But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." 17 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. 18 For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." 19 And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, 20 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. 21 But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. 22 When the daughter of 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." 23 And he solemnly swore to

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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. * * * * * It was the dances that caught my eye and captured my spirit in this morning's scripture readings. Literal dances and more subtle, figurative dances. First there's David, dancing the ark of the covenant from Baale-judah into Jerusalem. With sons and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals, David dances the ark of God into Jerusalem. This is not a sedate waltz, my friends. David and all the house of Israel are seen leaping and dancing with joy before God. With the arrival of the ark in Jerusalem, this city becomes the center of worship as well as the capital of ancient Israel. Soon, with Solomon's wisdom, a magnificent temple will be built to house this portable religious shrine, the symbol of the presence of God. What better way to express one's joy on this occasion than to dance? David's wife Michal didn't think so. She ridiculed David for his public display of exuberance during the procession into Jerusalem. But this did not please David nor God and Michal remains barren for the rest of her days. Oh! that we could all learn how to mightily dance and sing God's praises each and every day so that all whom we encounter could catch a glimpse of the joy it is to belong to the Lord! The Dance. A second obvious dance in this morning's scripture lessons belongs to Salome, Herodias' daughter. At Herod's birthday bash, she entertains Herod's important guests, the movers and shakers of the day, with her exotic, seductive dancing. Reminiscent of Eve's metaphorical dance with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Salome's dance begins with the downward spiraling events that lead to John the Baptists death. So pleased is Herod with his daughter's dance that he spurts out a foolish, outlandish offer. "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you. Whatever you want, even half of my kingdom." Oh, how easy it is to sell our souls when the dance of life tempts us, allures us, dazzles us. We spoil our children; we pamper ourselves; we indulge our friends and neighbors with so much, with too much, too often. Intoxicated with ourselves and our possessions, too much is never enough. The Dance. David's dance of joy. Salome's dance of temptation. And then there's Herodias' dance of evil. Herodias was angry at John the Baptist for criticizing her marriage to Herod (which was, by the way, incestuous in that she was Herod's niece and it was also in violation to the Levitical Law (20:21) which states "If a man take's his brothers wife, it is impurity.") Out of anger, Herodias wanted to kill John for interfering in her life and marriage. She seizes the opportunity to take revenge as she advises Salome to ask Herod for the head of John the Baptist on a

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platter. The dance of evil. The dance of sin. We read about, see it, hear it daily, sometimes we even engage in it. Senseless. Bad judgment. Every time I read yet another story about the situation in Gaza my stomach churns. Neither side is blameless. Yet how can the Isareliis allow hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to suffer dehydration and sickness and even death as they control the supply of water and electricity into that wasted land? And how can Hamas continue to hold such hatred for the Israelis? leaving the negotiating table again and again and engaging in such deplorable acts of violence? And now, this has led to yet another confrontation between Lebanon and Israel. Oh, how it must disappoint God and at the same time, how God must suffer with those who are the victims of our sins and evil deeds. The Dance. David's dance of joy. Salome's dance of temptation. Herodias' dance of evil. And then there's Herod's dance with truth. Herod's dance is a tentative, flirting dance with truth - the truth about morality, the truth about sin, the truth all about himself. "The king was deeply grieved" writes Mark. "Yet out of regards for his oaths and for the guests he did not want to refuse Salome's wish." Whether it was a matter of saving his honor or simply saving face is open to debate. Whatever his true motives, Herod made his choice. He chose murder over mercy, wrong over right, evil over good. And off came John's head. And yet Herod cannot let go of what he recognizes as truth, for even after the fact, he is bold to proclaim that John the Baptist is resurrected in and through the person of Jesus. Mark tells us that "by this time the name of Jesus was on everyone's lips, Herod remarked 'This man, Jesus, has to be John the Baptizer come back from the dead - that's why he's able to work miracles!'" Like Herod, we all do our own flirting dance with truth. We want it near enough to shed light on our life but not so close that it changes us in any real or lasting way. What are the truths, around which we dance? For each of us, "the truth" might be different. Writes one commentator: Perhaps it is our attachment to money or status or security, keeping us from loving God with our whole heart and mind and soul. Perhaps it is an anxious propensity toward amassing more and more that we can label "mine," instead of the conscious recognition that all things come from God and belong to God. Perhaps it is a tendency to judge others by standards we have set up, standards that often have little, if anything to do with what God values. Maybe it ist an inability, or an unwillingness, to forgive, to share, to love in the ways God calls us to do so. It is no wonder that we, like Herod, flirt with the dance of truth. Anything more might require our very life. And that leads us to John the Baptist's dance - a dance of integrity. John lived and died with integrity. All of the gospel writers testify to the major importance of John who called for repentance, who prepared the way for Jesus, who baptized Jesus in the River Jordan and who died a martyr's death. John's ministry, says Mark, was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. No wonder each Advent the readings for two of the four Sundays deal with the message and ministry of John! John's dance is a foreshadowing of Christ's dance - the final and ultimate dance - the dance of salvation, the dance of abundant life, the dance of resurrection. For

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even though the gospel passage is about John's dance, it is really intended to cast light on Jesus' story. The word of political power will strike again, and Jesus will be it's victim the next time. The burial of John anticipates the burial of Jesus. And Herod unwittingly testifies to the greater and final truth: that God's power will ultimately triumph as Jesus Christ is resurrected from the dead. John's dance of integrity. Jesus' dance of triumph. "Dance, dance, wherever you may be. I am the Lord of the dance said he. And I'll lead you all wherever you may be and I'll lead you all in the dance, said he." Ultimately, ours is the dance to choreograph. There are many movements, many different steps, many possibilities, many rhythms. The dance takes a lifetime to complete. There are dances within the dance - dances like David's of sheer joy; dances like Salome's of temptation; dance steps like Herodias' that bring us face to face with evil; and dances like Herods where we dance around truth. At times we dance with integrity like John the Baptist and always, at all times, Jesus is our partner in the dance. Using Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, Joyce Rupp pens this poem: There I am in Ezekiel's valley, one heap among many, just another stack of old, dry bones. Some Mondays feel this way, and Tuesdays, too, to say nothing of Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Lost dreams and forgotten pleasures, sold like a soul to a gluttonous world feeding on my frenzy and anxious activity. But just when the old heap of bones seems most dry and deserted, a strong Breath of Life stirs among my dead. Someone named God comes to my fragments and asks, with twinkling eye: "May I have this dance?" The Voice stretches into me, a stirring leaps in my heart, lifting up the bones of death. Then I offer my waiting self to the One who's never stopped believing in me, and the dance begins. So be it! Alleluia! Amen.