

Series: Worship with Rejoicing
Sermon: Gathering
Scripture: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

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1 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...

12.b ...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.

I was looking through photos I have taken of the inside of this sanctuary over the years, and I realized how many of the pictures were taken as I waited for you to get here. I have so many photos of this empty sanctuary and each one is captioned...waiting. I don't know how to describe to you the kind of anticipation that fills this room before worship begins...but it is palpable. It is like an electric undercurrent that has just enough charge to remind us that something is happening. I'm not sure I have always identified it as that but there is something about that moment that has spurred me to reach for my phone and try to capture it...the moment where empty space is waiting to become worship-filled space. It is a beautiful moment but what makes it beautiful is that you know that transformation is about to happen. The people are about to gather...and in gathering...something truly beautiful is coming.

I guess what I mean by that is, while praise to God can be an individual endeavor, worship seems to be the work of a gathered people. If we look at scripture where worship is described – it is rarely defined as an individual encounter with God. In

Scripture we find God saying, “Assemble the people,” “Call forth the elders,” “gather the assembly,” “They gathered and sang hymns and offered prayers,” Often in my conversations with people they will find out I’m a pastor and admit, “I don’t go to church. I believe in God but I can worship God anywhere. I don’t need church.” I know because I used to be one of those people. I was disillusioned with church, with corporate religion. I was determined that I could offer praise to God from anywhere. It wasn’t until I finally returned to church that I realized how small that praise seemed when compared to what happened when it was multiplied by the gathered people of God.

I found it true that I can sit on a rock on top of a mountain and sing How Great Thou Art and have a beautiful moment of joy with God. But there is something altogether different that happens when I’m at Lake Junaluska and stand in Stewart Auditorium and sing it with 2000 other people. There is something that happens that makes the song move us – spiritually and physically – when we gather to sing it.

Most of us, if we grew up in the church, know well the story of King David...a small, shepherd boy anointed King of Israel, who dared to face down the Giant Philistine, Goliath, with nothing but a stone and sling shot; King David who fought fierce battles and served the Lord with all his heart...other than a few horrible missteps that led to times of rebellion and, thankfully, repentance. What we also need to remember is that David was not only a political leader, a mighty warrior, a shepherd king, a man after God’s own heart...David was also a musician...he wrote songs ...a liturgist...a psalmist...he was a worship leader who knew the importance of gathering the people in corporate praise.

When the precious symbol of God’s presence, the Ark of the Covenant, is found...notice the first thing David does: **1** David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. **2** David and all the people with him set out. David could have sent a small contingent of soldiers and priests to handle bringing the Ark home to Israel...but instead the great King goes himself and takes a multitude with him and they have one intent: to worship God along the way.

The thing I think worth noting here is that David is King. Being a King is a demanding job, a high stakes career, an all-consuming identity...yet...he is committed to leading worship. This man who can call 30,000 to battle, calls 30,000 to worship. Can you imagine that task? Can you imagine that commitment? Notice as well that it says, he gathered them “again.” This isn’t the first time that David has gathered the people to worship, this is a priority for him as King. You might also notice that we skipped a few verses...the journey to bring the Ark home doesn’t go perfectly, there are missteps along the way and the procession is interrupted for 3 months...but it resumes with the same excitement and fervor as before. The people gather to worship...not to gloat over their political success...but to worship God’s presence.

We might also notice that worship is such a great priority for David that he forgets all about the pretense of being King...he throws all decorum and societal decency out the window. He dances. He dances in such a way that his linen ephod is showing. If my grandchildren were in the crowd watching I can hear their giggles and my grandson declare in amusement, "GiGi, I see his undies!" That is how vibrant David's dance was. Can you imagine a King willing to let all pretense go for the sake of giving himself to the joy of worship? His wife, the Queen couldn't. She came out to watch and was appalled by what she saw. It wasn't dignified. But I also want to point out that his poor wife had endured a lifetime of being used as a political pawn, offered by her father as a political show of unity. Her whole life has required the stifling her own passions and wishes for the sake of others...I imagine seeing her husband dancing freely in his undies was not going to sit well with her.

I love this story because it is a reminder that worship doesn't always hit the mark for us, it isn't always what we think it will be, it doesn't always run smooth, it doesn't always go as planned, it isn't always perceived in the way we mean to express it. We look at David's wife's reaction and know that worship, or at least the way we worship, doesn't always please everyone...and yet, King David doesn't care about what others might think of his motivation or his expression...he keeps singing, he keeps leading worship, he keeps dancing, because it isn't for his wife, or his constituents, or his nation that he dances...it is for the joy of being in the presence of God. It is for the joy of 30,000 people gathered as one people celebrating one God. Gathering is important for worship.

While the people of Israel had the Ark of the Covenant to symbolize God's presence, we have the stained glass windows that represent God's multihued story. We have the empty cross to remind of God's resurrection power over death and suffering. We have the altar to symbolize our need to repent and commit ourselves to God. We have the pews – the places set for us to gather and be present as God is present for us.

We come in this sanctuary week after week and while we might find comfort in the sameness of it and the routine of our order of worship, we must never become blind to its meaning or power. The place where we gather is a reminder of God's steadfast faithfulness to God's people.

It is in gathering that we are mindful of each other and of how God knits us together. It is in the gathered body that we learn how to practice love and hospitality. It is together that we learn how to live the blessing of the beatitudes found in our practice of encouragement, comfort, accountability, peacemaking, mercy, and grace. How can we learn any of those things as an island of one?

This story of King David gives us a model for worship. It begins with gathering and it makes clear that worship is joyful. Maybe that doesn't always dancing until our robes fly up, but it does remind us that joy can be a slower simmer or an overflowing spring, but either way it must be expressed. The story reminds us that worship includes repentance and a recognition that all we have is God's and is offered back to God in our presence and our offerings. It reminds us that worship is about gratitude to God. It is about worship carried out in ways that are a blessing to the people. And notice in verse 19, worship is even missional...it prompts us to meet the needs of the community around us.

At the end of the day, the people return home, they are full of joy, filled with a sense of belonging, a fullness of satisfaction, and a sense of God's presence that lingers until they are gathered once more.

We gather for worship because God is here...not in a golden box...not even in our brick and mortar sanctuary. God is here, among the people, within us as a community...a spark of the Holy Spirit in each of us that becomes a flame when we gather together.

So, dance with joy my friends...we are gathered...God is here.