

DAVID AND THE LORD

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2 Samuel 6:12-16, 20-22

Romans 12:1-2

As soon as the Philistines heard that David had become king of all Israel and Judah they mobilized for war. They realized David had chosen a path that would make him their enemy instead of their ally. A great battle was fought at the valley of Rephaim, southwest of Jerusalem, and David's forces prevailed. Though David would fight the Philistines again many times, this first battle since his coronation was decisive. David's rule was confirmed. The nation's borders were established, at least for a time. And David could now focus on being a king instead of a warrior.

David decided his first priority would be to establish Jerusalem, his new capital city, as a center of worship. He would bring the Ark of the Covenant into the city, and Jerusalem would receive the divine stamp of approval. The action unfolds in chapter 6 of 2 Samuel.

The ark, remember, had been built during Israel's sojourn in the wilderness nearly three hundred years before David. God had dictated to Moses his precise instructions, and a chosen band of workmen had executed the project. The ark was essentially a rectangular wooden box. It was gold-plated inside and out, and had a solid gold lid.

The people needed to have the ark with them as they traveled through the wilderness so it was built to be portable. Gold rings were attached to the four corners of the ark, and poles were slid through those rings so the priests could carry the ark from one camp to another without touching it.

The top of the ark was the most significant part. This area was called the mercy seat. God had promised he would meet with his people above this mercy seat. God had been careful to explain to them, through Moses, that the ark was neither an object of worship, nor God's holy sanctuary. Rather, God was present, hovering above, so to speak, wherever the ark was present.

The ark was carried off by the Philistines after the battle of Ebenezer, during the period of the Judges. But from the moment the ark was placed in its new home in the Philistine city of Ashdod the people had nothing but trouble. The Philistines figured that Israel's God had it in for them, so they hauled the ark off to the nearest Israelite city. The ark remained in that obscure location, forgotten and neglected, until David decided to bring it to Jerusalem.

Try to picture the scene. A huge parade of soldiers stretches along a dusty road. Everyone is dancing and singing to the Lord. Some are strumming lyres and harps. Others are twirling around, banging tambourines and castanets and cymbals. Though they seem to be worshipping,

their song is more like a roaring chant than a sacred melody. There's nothing dignified about this mob. They look like moshers at a Motley Crew concert.

At the center of the action we see a large cart drawn by oxen. On the cart is a magnificent box. In front of the cart we see a man dressed in his skivvies. He whirls and leaps like a guy who has hot coals down his pants. We can hear his voice above the rest. It's as though all the energy of this vast crowd is pouring out of him. As we stare in amazement, it all begins to make sense.

That box is the Ark of the Covenant. That wildman is King David!

Suddenly, everything changes. The oxen stumble and the cart lurches. It looks like the Ark of the Covenant is going to tumble to the ground. Impulsively, a man reaches out and grabs the ark to steady it. Within seconds he's lying on the ground, stone cold dead. King David is angry. He calls off the procession. The ark is carefully unloaded and carried into the nearest house. The owner is a man named Obed-edom.

The story resumes three months later. Word has gotten to David that God has blessed the household of Obed-edom. David receives this news with joy because he interprets it to mean that his original plan regarding the ark is still workable. God is still present with the ark. He still blesses his people when they're near it.

By now David has figured out why God killed the man who touched the ark, and why David's previous effort to bring the ark to Jerusalem failed. He hadn't followed God's clear instructions about transporting the ark. This time David commissions priests to retrieve it. They carry the ark using long poles, just as they did in the days of Moses. The people twist and shout in praise to God. The trumpets blare. And, once again, David dances at the head of the parade. Frederick Buechner imagines him "high-stepping out like the mayor of Dublin on Saint Patrick's day."

Once the parade arrives in Jerusalem David takes full advantage of the occasion. He offers refreshments on the house. Then, acting in the role of the priest, David offers a bloody sacrifice to God. No wonder the people adore him! No wonder the evangelist finds himself thinking about David as he sits down, more than a thousand years later, to write about Jesus' ride into Jerusalem on a smelly donkey.

The story ends on kind of a sour note. Weary but content, David returns home. His wife, Michal, has been waiting for this moment all day. Michal is the daughter of Saul – a high-class girl who brings style and sophistication to the new court. She despises David's crude antics. She's steaming mad, and she can't wait to deliver the little speech she has cooked up. "How the king of Israel honored himself today," she says, "uncovering himself... before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" [2 Samuel 6:2

David is unrepentant. "If you think that was shameful, just wait 'til my next performance! I may be humbled in my own eyes, but the serving maids of Israel will look at me and hold me in honor."

Frederick Buechner summarizes the drama beautifully. He writes: “How they cut loose together, David and Yahweh, whirling around before the ark in such a passion that they caught fire from each other and blazed up in a single flame of such magnificence that not even the dressing down that David got afterwards from Michal could dim the glory of it!”

If you’re a Presbyterian you probably find yourself secretly sympathizing with Michal. We Presbyterians wouldn’t know what to think or do if some of us suddenly started to praise God by throwing off our clothes and leaping from pew to pew. We might put in a call to Verdugo Hills Hospital. Or we might recommend the Pentecostal church down the street. But I’m not sure such praise would be warmly received even there.

Many of us have learned to be suspicious of people who wear their passions on their sleeves. We’re mistrustful of people who cry, or shout, or thrash around in God’s presence. We know very well that many of those people are either immature, or insincere, or both.

But we should never conclude, as Michal did, that every passionate expression of faith is out of line.

Every church has a Michal. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that there’s a Michal inside every Christian. Michal is the voice that tells us religion should always be grounded in good taste. Michal is the voice that says we should avoid any expression of faith that might be offensive to others, or that might cause them to think we’re strange or off balance. With a long face, and a sour tongue, Michal says to us, “Don’t get too carried away. Don’t get fanatical. Remember: there’s more to life than God, and church, and walking the lonely path to the cross.”

I was talking on the phone the other day with a woman about faith in Christ. She told me she considers herself a Christian. That didn’t surprise me because she has attended church most of her life, and she’s now in her 60’s. But she wanted me to know that she wasn’t one of those over-the-top, *gung-ho* Christians. She said, “I believe Jesus has forgiven my sins. I read the Bible and pray and go to church. But to me, religion is a part of life that has to be held in balance with other areas of our lives. It seems to me, that’s the most sensible way to live. I get nervous around those people who are always talking about God, and what he told them, and how he’s blessing them.”

So many of us are like my friend. We like the idea of religion, but we’re suspicious of anything that demands total and complete surrender. So we insulate our hearts from the Holy Spirit while we practice a private religion of the mind. We’ve taught ourselves how to be Christians without making any sacrifices, and without raising any eyebrows. We’ve got it all figured out: “Because I know all about Jesus and his love for me therefore, I’m a Christian.” “Because I’ve asked Jesus to forgive me of my sins, therefore, I’m a Christian.” “Because I try every day to do the right thing, therefore, I’m a Christian.”

Some of us have become really good at intellectualizing our faith. We've severed the ties between our hearts and our heads. We've turned Christianity into a head game – one that helps us feel good about ourselves even when we're wallowing in sin.

Many people in the American church are flirting with gnosticism. Gnosticism comes in many forms, but in essence gnosticism is the heresy of believing we're saved because of what we know. It's the sin of turning Christianity into a pious-sounding theory of salvation, or a set of abstract doctrines about Jesus.

The Christianity of the New Testament is about a person, Jesus Christ, and the new life he gives us when we surrender our lives to him. It's about "Christ in you – the hope of glory." Jesus doesn't just shed light. He *is* the light. He doesn't just point the way. He *is* the way. His desire is to become the power of God at work inside us. He must be Lord of our hearts as well as our minds.

Gnosticism is a disease of the mind that suffocates true faith, and distorts the gospel of Christ. Gnosticism takes root when good church people allow Christianity to become regulated and compartmentalized according to the standards of the culture. Gnosticism thrives wherever people are ashamed of the gospel, and embarrassed about expressing their love for the Lord.

What have we learned so far from David? We've learned that, as we mature in faith, our love for God will grow hotter, and more consuming. We've learned that faith is a passion of the heart – one that we must cultivate even when the Spirit leads us to say things and do things that offend worldly people.

We've talked about the dangers of separating our hearts from our heads. But this story also explores the opposite problem. It shows us what can happen to a passionate man of faith when he separates his mind from his heart.

David should have known from the start that it was foolish to transport the ark by ox cart. Had he paused even for a second to think about the matter, he would have remembered that the ark was to be carried by the priests using long poles. But David's passion got the better of him. He was thinking with his heart instead of his head, and his heart told him he should get the ark to Jerusalem without delay.

Some people have built their faith on emotions, passions and feelings. Some people mistrust any form of thinking that contradicts what their hearts tell them to say or to do. Their personal faith journey is a kind of safari into the uncharted land of the irrational. They've stopped trying to understand God. Instead, they say, they only want to "experience him" in an intimate way.

Three years ago when I lived in Baton Rouge I attended an overnight retreat with the youth of our church. The leaders of the retreat were part of a nondenominational youth ministry team.

There were thousands of students in attendance, and the program was incredibly polished from start to finish. We were all caught up in the beauty of the prayers and songs. But the message that was preached disturbed me.

The speaker worked with two volumes: loud and louder. He paced the stage and worked himself into a sweat. At one point he pulled a student up on stage and got involved in a dialogue with him about his faith in Christ. The student was an actor, but that wasn't the part that disturbed me. What disturbed me was the attitude the speaker took towards the student's struggles.

The student was supposed to be an average church youth whose faith was weak. The speaker asked questions like, "How do you know you're a Christian?" And he got wimpy answers like, "Well, because I asked Jesus into my life last year at summer camp."

Pretty soon the speaker had himself worked into a frenzy over the kid's spiritual apathy. He kept saying to him, "You say you've given your life to Christ. But have you *really* done it? Did you get down on your knees and really *pour your heart out* to Jesus? Did you cry out to him, and grab hold of him with everything you've got? Or were you just going through the motions?!"

Of course, while he's asking these questions he's down on his knees. He's screaming into the microphone, his voice cracking with emotion.

The message our students got throughout the evening was something like this: If your faith is weak it's because you haven't experienced God. And experiencing God isn't something mundane. It's cataclysmic. It's like getting run over by a truck and surviving. Or like getting electrocuted with a billion volts and living to tell the tale!

The trouble with that approach to faith isn't exactly that it puts too much emphasis on passion. God wants us to be filled to our eyeballs with passions like faith, hope and love. He wants us to burn with desire for his kingdom and his righteousness! Furthermore, the speaker was right to say that when we give our lives to Christ we should do it with enthusiasm, and in a spirit of true repentance.

But still, there's something wrong when salvation has everything with our private experience of Jesus, and nothing to do with our daily decision to be faithful. There's something wrong when worship can't be real unless people are wailing or shouting.

God wants us to bring together the heart *and* the mind as we seek his will. As we respond to God in faith and obedience, the powerful ideas at the heart of the gospel story penetrate our lives. They begin to shape us into intelligent Christian disciples. We learn to interpret our private experiences of God in the light of biblical revelation, and church doctrine and tradition. And we learn to channel our passion into works that will make an eternal difference for others.

David's faith was rooted in the story of his people, and in the words of the law and the prophets. His passions often got the better of him. He could be impulsive and vain. He often burned with lust. But David learned over time to bring together his heart and mind, and to submit to the will of God as he understood it, so that towards the end of his life he could pray:

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them – they are more than the sand;
I come to the end – I am still with you.
- Psalm 139:17-18

Fathers, there's a message here for you today. The story of David and the ark speaks loud and clear to fathers of every age. Children need fathers like David. They need fathers who love the Lord with all their heart, and aren't ashamed to show it. And they need fathers who meditate day and night on God's word, and on God's will for their lives.

LET US PRAY

Lord, some of us have separated our heads from our hearts, and we aren't able to love you. You've become an abstraction to us. Yet deep in our souls we miss you dearly.

Some of us have separated our hearts from our heads, and we've become confused about who you are, and what you desire for us. We need the refreshment that only your word can provide.

Holy God, help us to bring together our heads and our hearts so we can feel deeply, and think clearly. Enable us to love you with all our strength, and to know your perfect will for our lives. Amen.