

December 19, 2018 (Advent Midweek) - 2 Samuel 6:12–23 & Luke 1:39–45

Kings don't run; they stride. Kings don't just throw something on; they're robbed. And kings don't grab a bite to eat; they dine. Kings are men of dignity and decorum. Of regal behavior and stately composure. Therefore, it would seem self-evident that kings don't dance.

But in our Old Testament lesson today, we see a king engaging in some not-so-regal behavior. King David is dancing. And it's not a formal ballroom dance or an official, ceremonial dance. He is dancing in complete and utter joy. Such that one of his wives thinks he is being completely undignified. But he doesn't care. He is overjoyed that the ark of the covenant is coming into Jerusalem.

The ark of the covenant was the place set apart for God's presence on earth, a special gold-covered box on top of which sat the Mercy Seat of God. David had tried to bring the ark to Jerusalem once before. But when God struck a man dead for just touching the ark, David became terrified of being near it and left the ark with a man named Obed-edom.

Now, three months later, David hears that Obed-edom had been blessed by God because of the ark's presence in his home. The ark brings God's wrath, but it also brings God's favor. So, reassured that God does not actually want to harm him, David decides to try again to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

As part of the procession, David changes into a priestly garment, makes a sacrifice before the ark, and enters into Jerusalem dancing and leaping for joy before God's presence. David's wife may not have found his behavior very fitting for a king... but God does. In fact, God strikes David's wife with barrenness for the rest of her life because of how she scorns David's joy that day.

"Rejoice" is the word that echoes throughout the Church this week. As we discussed on Sunday, this is the week that we light the pink candle on the Advent wreath and hear Paul's words: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." I talked at length in my sermon about why Zephaniah found cause for joy, but Paul's reason is even clearer: "The Lord is at hand."

That's what Paul tells us. Rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is at hand. And that is truly a reason to rejoice! We don't have to go up to heaven to search for the Lord and bring Him down to us. No, the Lord willingly comes to us. The Lord comes near to us. The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. It's right here! That news should make our hearts leap for joy.

But, as David's wife shows us, it sometimes doesn't. Sometimes our sinful hearts simply don't respond to Jesus' call and God's presence with us. King David leapt for joy. But King David was also a man after God's own heart. We are no King David.

And because of that, there's a phrase we hear several times during Advent: "Stir up your power, O Lord... Stir up our hearts, O Lord..." These are from the Collects of the Day for Advent. And they teach us an important lesson.

We pray that God would stir up our hearts because, on their own, they don't respond rightly to His coming. They never do. Instead of exploding in joy, our hearts are heavy with desires that have nothing to do with the Lord.

Stir up our hearts, O Lord... for our hearts are diseased with hatred and bitterness. Stir up our hearts, O Lord... for we are consumed by greed and jealousy. Stir up our hearts, O Lord... for we rejoice in the things of this world. In money and possessions and lust and power.

But do we rejoice in the Lord's coming? Our lips may acknowledge Him, but our hearts are far from Him. Unlike King David, we care far more about how we appear to others than how we appear to the Lord.

Don't try to fool yourself. God knows what's in your heart. And yet He still desires to be with us. He is still interested in us. In fact, He's so interested in us that He desires to draw near to a whole world full of people with sinful hearts. And he gives every one of us a reason to rejoice.

Even before he was born, John the Baptist understood the joy that the Lord gives by sending Jesus among us in human flesh. When pregnant Mary visited pregnant Elizabeth, the unborn John leapt for joy upon hearing the voice of the woman carrying the world's Savior. Because he recognized that something even more wonderful than the ark of the covenant had come.

How much more reason, then, for John the Baptist to dance like David. Mary carried in her womb none other than God's presence in human flesh. For those nine months of pregnancy, she was God's new ark of the covenant and she bore the new and greater Mercy Seat of God inside of her. God was drawing near. Not just to Jerusalem, but to the whole world.

Though we turn away from God, He still turned toward us on Christmas morning. He became incarnate so that He could be stripped and humiliated for our offenses. So that he could die on a cross to atone for our indifference toward Him. Though it may not look like it at first glance, the most joyous sight we could ever see is the promised Son of David drawing near to Jerusalem to die for us.

His joy in doing His Father's will was like King David's joy. But where King David sought only the temporary blessing of God upon Jerusalem, Jesus' joy in willingly going to the cross meant the forgiveness of our sins and our resurrection to an eternal life with Him. The Child who came forth from Mary's womb would also come forth one day from His tomb, in triumph over sin and death, to reign on the throne of His father David forever.

What Child Is This? The answer is enough to make our hearts leap like the unborn John the Baptist leapt. What Child Is This? This Child is the same God who drew near to King David and made him leap. This Child is the same God who drew near to John the Baptist and made him leap. This Child is the world's Joy-Bringer. Joy in the flesh.

Joy for condemned sinners. Joy for the heavyhearted and the oppressed. Joy for those who long for more than this veil of tears. Joy for those who wait anxiously for his second coming.

Until then, we rejoice that He still draws near. In His Word and Sacraments, He comes so near that the forgiveness He gives through the Gospel goes right down into your heart and stirs it up, revives it, and refreshes it. He comes so near that the Word that made John leap takes residence in your heart, and you can't help but leap with gladness overflowing in love to others. He comes so near that His Holy Spirit fills your body and your heart and makes you a new creation.

He will one day draw near from His eternal throne one final time, and we will be near to Him in the flesh forever. Rejoice, therefore, like David and John the Baptist before you. Rejoice in the Lord always. For the Lord is at hand. Amen.