**St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church**

**Year B Proper 10**

**2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19**

**Ephesians 1: 3-14**

**Psalm 24**

**Mark 6:14-29**

**Bible Stories**

Just in case you thought the Bible is boring, too authoritarian, or perhaps, too judgmental or, may I say, too spiritual, today’s readings have worked to dispel any of those perceptions. Power, murder, lust, seduction, domestic strife. Who needs the movies!

As you noticed, we added an additional optional four verses to our reading from Samuel in order to bring more to David’s story today. These Bible stories are not the ones we heard in church school….they are the parts of the Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, which most church school teachers never mentioned. Apparently, they thought stories such as Jonah being eaten by a whale, or Daniel being thrown into jail with the lions, was ok for young, impressionable minds.

No. These stories for for grownups. Stories about the rich and powerful run amok, stories of manipulation, the mis-use of power, and hidden crime. Grownups know all about these stories. They weren’t new thousands of years ago, and they’re not new now. We live with them every day. They are not fighters in our urban streets, these are the titans of the Bible dishing all this up.

We can probably all remember when the disciples were jockeying for first place with Jesus….and we’ll hear about all of that later this year, when Mark comes to that part of his story. Let me sit on your right, let me sit on your left, me, me, me, me first. The disciples were all trying to be first, to be the favorite of Jesus. And we see this wanton need for power played out today. Everybody who’s anybody in politics, on a competitive career path, and within conclaves of fans and admirers, backers and supporters for all various reasons. All search to be first, to be the most admired, to be famous, to get the glory, to be the “one.”

David was anointed to be the “one,” the ancestor of Jesus. Since he has the power to do it, he is moving the Ark to his new home in Jerusalem. The Ark, built by Moses himself, was the deep and profound focus of the Divine Presence of God to the Jewish people. So David, filled with overwhelming joy at this blessing, honors God with dancing and music. In the process, by his public display of abandon, he endears his people to him even more and they are even more blessed by David as he feeds them with abundance. David has the power to treat his people according to his will. He can treat them well to keep them loyal or he can use his power in other ways to gain his own ends.

The time will come when Jesus will point out to the disciples that the ones they think of as rulers, or ones with authority, really want to lord it over them…and be tyrants. In other words, they are out to grab power and if they have to step on their people to get it, they will. Jesus was talking, of course, about those rulers much like one of our star characters today. Herod.

Well, we have to have someone to head up government, we have to have someone to run the company, the store, the church, So we have kings and presidents, CEO’s and COO’s, the store owner or manager, and the Presiding Bishop Michael Curry or the Archbishop Justin Welby. All are given the responsibility to uphold the values of their chosen constituencies and most probably work hard to do that, keeping the common good in mind. All this being true, however, they also know that their visibility depends on how powerful they are perceived to be, and that to uphold a position power takes work. They stake their future success on how they are perceived, and their legacies have more to do with how well they reach the pinnacle of success than how much they truly loved their neighbor. Of course, I’m generalizing, but I think we grownups might agree that retaining power is a full-time job and that rulers, be they kings or presidents, or bosses of whatever, will sometimes, may I say, do what they feel must be done, in order to maintain and protect their position of power,

Each of today’s Bible stories bring home the point. David was married to Michal, who was a princess of Israel, the daughter of another power-guy, Saul. She knew her way around powerful men.

She was David’s first wife and at first she loved him. As King of Judah, David five more official wives, each of whom bore him a son. I’m not counting unofficial wives and concubines, and all this in a little over 8 years. But I digress… that’s a whole other story.

Michal was Saul’s daughter, and here’s another mini-story about power. Saul wasn’t thrilled about David, but just to show who was in charge of the situation, he ordered David to bring a bride-price from his deep enemies, the Philistines. He ordered Davide to bring one hundred Philistine foreskins, The push for power is on, and David can taste the role of king. He accomplishes the deed I’m glossing over that part of the story.) Michal helps David out of several plots Saul has planned in order to kill David, and so the relationship between Saul and David is split and they and their descendants become entrenched in the struggle for power and the kingdom. Saul breaks his word to David and marries Michal off to another. Saul is killed and David makes a deal with her then husband to return her to himself. The soon-to-be poor ex-husband is devastated but David doesn’t care. He wants Michal and Michal he will have. He sends her first husband away, and Michal’s heart becomes hardened against the man she once loved. Is this what Bible soap operas are made of, or what!

It does seem fair to say, however, that knowing this, one can understand Michal’s feelings as she saw him take all his clothes off in full sight of all the slave girls. She couldn’t stand seeing him, in what to her eyes, seems undignified and unworthy of the King of Judah. She was disgusted, even though David was glorifying God by dancing with abandonment and joy. So, as Samuel tells us, she despised him.

David was king, and David was blessed by God. If that’s not a power-packed ego booster, I can’t think what is. He was on top of the world, possessor of all he could touch and see. He was a blessed man, alright, and I’m sure we can find people in our own time who would consider themselves blessed with power. The problem is that when people think of themselves as blessed with the powerful position they have, they begin to think it is because of who they are, rather than someone who has received the blessing or trust from another, especially when that “other” is God. They begin to forget the source of their power.

In David’s case, he celebrated God in a most visible and unforgettable way, using his power to do anything he wanted in the name of God’s glory. But, as we shall hear in he weeks to come, privately he forgot that all he was, and was created to be, depended on God. The slippery slope David climbed upon, was his forgetfulness about God’s part in his success. The slippery slope grabbed David, as if it were the devil itself, and down he went into an abyss of sin and shame. There’s the cliff hanger. Come to church over the next few weeks to hear the rest of the story.

Enter Herod, a far less likeable character than David, and not blessed so much by God. Herod became king as an accident of birth, not by God’s blessing. Here again, are two stories embedded in this scenario from his story revealed today. Mark reminds us that Herod was hearing more and more about Jesus, and his popularity with the people, and he found himself surrounded by differing opinions about just who this Jesus was. He became convinced this person was John, whom he beheaded. We can supposed this is what what guilt can do to a person.

Then Mark tells us how this came about and presents us with one of the most grisly stories in the Bible. The background story has Herod taking a kind of liking to John the Baptist at first. He is impressed and not a little awed by him. All was well, until John voiced the problem of Herod marrying his brother’s wife, Herodias, illegally. So, of course, Herodias is not a great fan of John’s. She waits for just the right moment, when the king is a good mood, with his court around him, and enjoying a lovely dance by his daughter, another Herodias. And what well-pleased and proud father has never said to his beautiful daughter, “Ask me for whatever you wish and I will give it?” I would venture to say that if their daughters asked for the head of the local priest, those fathers would stop short and send the child to bed without further ado. But not Herod. The difference is power, or the warped sense of need for power. His need to save face after making the oath to give his daughter whatever she wanted, in front of his wife, his court and anyone else within earshot, leaves him little choice but to play to the crowd, in order to do as he swore to do.

You can’t help thinking of Pontius Pilate in another story. He handed over an innocent man to be crucifed in order to hold on to power. He, too, had a public to satisfy.

So, one is left to ask. When will any of this kind of thing end? It isn’t showing much sign of easing up any time soon. And yet. Here we are, witnessing the same thing in Haiti and all over our world today. Just as we begin to think this is what life is all about, a game of struggle for power, for fame, status, and visibility, we are called by God to remember the One we call King. Our One God. Our Alpha and Omega, before whom we would willingly dance for joy, would willingly play music and sing again, as soon as we are able.

Our king is the one who gives us power, rather than taking that power upon himself. Our king brings the power of love into our hearts, so that our joy may be complete. That we may not fear any adversary. Our God is the One who chose us as His own adopted children, from whom we inherit eternal life, and from whom we receive all the spiritual blessings and who covers us with the comfort of His grace. It just doesn’t get any more powerful than that! It is that call for celebration and dancing.

Who do we know, or see, or watch on the evening news, or on whatever social media feed you prefer, who dare to” dance before the Lord?” How often do we see anyone letting it all go with abandon in order to celebrate a new beginning, a new and special blessing in life due to their awareness of God’s presence? What part of you, or who is your David, longing to leap and shout for joy for the blessing of your God? And what part of you do you know to be Michal, holding back, not wanting to recognize, or enjoy another’s response to God’s blessings?

We are left to ponder, when we have, like David, allowed our hearts to leap and dance for joy. When have we ever allowed ourselves to let go and let God. And when we have, and we notice a Michal staring at us disapprovingly, we stop. When has your Michal prevented another from fulfilling their urge to celebrate.

Herein lies the secret to our own stories. What do we know of the David and the Michal that dwell within each of us? Who is your Michal speaking to when she sees your David yearning to dance to the music before God?

I thnk we are called to dance like David. We are not called to dance for our God, we are called to dance because of God, through God and with God, with our feet and with our hearts. And, thus, as God’s own children we are blessed, and like David we are forgiven for our mistakes, our mis-directions and our forgetfulness, and God loves us when we try, try again.

David was blessed, and he celebrated that blessing. But I’m not so sure about Herod, yet I’m pretty sure he shouldn’t have messed with John the Baptist like that, and that, for once at least, he could have put his need for power aside, showing wisdom rather than cruelty.

Too bad, Herod and Pilate, too. You may have felt powerful at the time, but anyone, even the local folks could tell you, you need to get your facts straight put someone’s head on a platter just to impress everyone with your power to do it. And, you’d better get your facts straight, especially when you give in to popular trends to crucify someone’s body and soul. After all, for all the thousand of years to come, you won’t look powerful at all. The way history tells it, you’ll look exactly like the Herod’s: past, present and future….powerless, petty, and pretty darn pathetic.

End.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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