

“The Life of the Party”
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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
Mark 6:14-29

Two very different celebrations: one centered around the festive arrival of the Ark of the Covenant into the City of David, and another party-- a banquet-- centered around Herod's birthday. In the first celebration, it is about new beginnings-- in this case, the beginning of a city that would be built around the presence of God and all God would do for them. The Ark of the Covenant contained tablets of the Torah, specifically, the Ten Commandments. The Hebrews believed the glory of God rested upon the Ark-- so bringing it into Jerusalem meant to them that God would be at the center of their newly forming city-- and that they then could be as powerful and mighty as God. Or at least, they hoped.

The other celebration was also about power, I suppose. Herod's birthday celebration was fit for a king-- although Herod himself was no king. Although he had petitioned Caesar multiple times to become king, this Herod only attained the title of Tetrarch-- that is, governor. Still, I can imagine the kind of party he threw, and how it would have impressed his guests, his courtiers and officers. The smoke from torch light and incense, mixed with the aroma of food. Can you smell the lamb roasting on the spit? The rich wine, generously poured? Hot bread, just pulled off the walls of the stone oven? Imagine the sounds of the harp and bells starting to play, the beat of a hand on a drum. A surprise: Herod's stepdaughter offers a dance for him. He is so pleased by her dance that he publicly offers to her anything she asks of him. The girl's mother coached her on what to say: “The head of John the Baptist on a platter,” the girl replied to Herod.

What could Herod do? Hmm, let me think... He could have said no! After all, the gospel reports that although John was Herod's prisoner, Herod had protected him up to this point from Herodius, his wife of an incestuous relationship. Although John-- the truth teller--had judged Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own wife, Herod *kept going* to John's cell to listen to him. Scripture says Herod was greatly perplexed by John; but it also said Herod liked to listen to John. So, Herod could have said no. In his house, at his party, he-- the governor-- could have used his power to say no.

But that's not what Herod did. He had made an oath in front of his whole party. To back down would make him look like a fool. And so, what began as a joyful and festive occasion ended up as a bloody political assassination.

Have you ever been to a party and enjoyed the joyous festivity and people, but then something shifted in the air, and the mood of the party changed to something that felt overwhelming or even downright dangerous?

I mostly avoided those kinds of parties in my years as a student, but when I was serving at my first ordained position, I lived in the church parsonage, and there was that one party... Chris and I had lots of leftover alcohol in the basement after our July wedding, so when our friends Julie and Dan became engaged we decided to throw them an engagement party to help get rid of it. On top of that, our friends Erich and Jimmy convinced us to let them make a haunted house in the basement of the church parsonage. Jimmy is the son of an Episcopal priest, and grew up in a church parsonage himself, and he and his best friend Erich spent each Halloween of their childhood making more elaborate haunted houses in the parsonage. But as adults, they had only lived in apartments. So, when they came to our house, and saw the century-old basement, their wheels started spinning.

It was a very successful haunted house. Super creepy and fun-- Erich and Jimmy recruited people from our friend group to act as ghouls and goblins. There was even a coffin. We invited our neighbors, some church people, and later, the newly engaged Julie and Dan, and their group of friends. Then, Part 2 of the party -- the engagement celebration-- began. We hadn't met most of Julie's and Dan's friends, who came in costume. But let's just say that these new friends partied in ways that the church parsonage was not accustomed to. Batman was vomiting in the bushes. I walked into one room and saw a blindfolded person trying to hit a pinata with an empty vodka bottle. In addition to the alcohol we had provided, our guests were enjoying other substances they brought-- on the front porch. Did I mention the house was right across the street from the church? Did I mention that I was leading worship the next morning? Did I mention that we had nosy neighbors who commented on everything that happened at that house? It took until 2 am to finally clear the house and make sure everyone had a safe ride home.

I haven't had a party like that since. But recently I brought my daughter to her friend's birthday party. It was the first indoor birthday party she had attended since the pandemic began-- and she had strict orders from her moms to keep her mask on at all times. There was an earlier party that had gone through, and I noticed when they got to the trampoline zone-- which was darkened with party lights-- masks floated off their faces, onto their chins or stuffed into their pockets. I was relieved that Kai's friends were all masked-- since we are about to spend a week with my sister and her family, my sister and I have promised to each other that we will be extra cautious, so that our kids can enjoy being maskless in the house together. However, when Kai's group got to the trampoline zone, the same thing happened! Masks disappeared, even from Kai's maskiest friends. Kai did a good job of keeping her distance, and I tried to do a good job of keeping my cool. When it came time for pizza and cake, I had prepared Kai-- the hosts were going to box some up for us and we were going to slip out early. But Kai whispered to me, "I don't want to leave my friends!" Meanwhile, pizza was being passed out. Kai kept her mask on while we waited for her doggie bag. The other children asked her, "Don't you want some pizza? Have a juice box! Why don't you take off your mask?" And I imagined the parties she will attend years from now, when her friends will try to encourage her to try other things. I hope she will have the same willpower-- which proved strong, as she happily ate her pizza and cake in the

safety of an empty room next door, and then joined her friends for another 30 minutes of play. She was good-natured about the whole thing.

I, on the other hand, felt sour like Michal, David's wife, who-- upon witnessing David leaping and dancing before the Lord with all his might, despised him in her heart. Okay, that might be a little extreme. I did not despise anybody at the party. But I also could not forget about the pandemic enough to let my child take her mask off and jump and eat pizza with joyous, carefree abandon.

And at first glance, one might see Michal as lacking in joy in the presence of God. Who was she to scorn an act of rapturous devotion by David? But Michal has been around long enough to know things are not as they appear. She once loved David, and even risked her life trying to protect him from her father Saul. But David repeatedly chose other women over her-- and married them. And then Michal was passed around by her father to another man for a political marriage, and then back to David to add legitimacy to his kingship. So if Michal is not smiling, I think I get it.

But I also wonder if what Michal is reacting to-- which the lectionary leaves out-- is that a dangerous shift has happened in this celebration as well. In the first few verses, 2 Samuel announces the arrival of the ark and reports that "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." *Everyone* is singing and dancing. But in a few verses the lectionary literally dances around and omits, something strange and terrible happens. The oxen pulling the ark stumble, causing the ark to jostle. Uzzah reaches out and touches the ark, to steady it. This action, as 2 Samuel reports, angers The Lord so much that God strikes poor Uzzah dead! David is angry and afraid of The Lord, and asks, "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" So instead of bringing the ark into Jerusalem, David brings the ark to the house of Obed-edom, a safe distance away.

In the 3 months that Obed-edom cared for the powerful ark, Obed-edom and his entire household grew with great blessing. Seeing this, David wants the same for Jerusalem. And so, he once again starts the procession into Jerusalem with the ark. Except this time, David is *the only one* dancing. It seems everyone else had a sober knowledge of the kind of power they were dealing with. Michal certainly does. As for David, we will see throughout his kingship that although he has an earnest desire to glorify God, he often confuses *his own* glory for God's glory. He abuses that power in ways that harm his family and his people.

These two stories have a sobering effect. They make you want to skip the dancing, skip the booze, and go home and have a boring sandwich. Who needs the drama? We can watch that on Netflix; we don't need it in real life. Maybe we can even just opt out of this God thing. Like Herod found, these God stories are intriguing. But why risk putting your whole self in? You just might get burned. Or, beheaded. Heck, there's a whole bible full of stories of bad things that happen to people who [try to] follow God.

And yet, the gospel *sandwiches* this story of John's assassination between two stories that are very much about life. In the verses before, we see the commissioning of the 12 disciples, 2x2, to preach and to heal-- as we heard in last week's worship. Directly *after* today's passage, Mark's gospel tells the story of Jesus feeding a crowd of 5,000 who had come to hear him preach-- with only 5 loaves of bread and two fish. Why does Mark take the time to drop such a gruesome story in the midst of the good news of Jesus' ministry: his teachings, his healings, and his miracles?

The gospels tell the truth, no matter how uncomfortable it is. The truth is that we live in a world where just last week, the President in Haiti was assassinated, leaving a country that already suffers into greater chaos. We live in a country where people confuse the power of God with the power of nation, worshipping one as if it is the other-- as Israel sometimes did in relation to God. We live in families that have broken relationships.

But the truth also sets us free. Imagine if Herod felt free enough to announce to his family and his party "No" at the request for John's severed head. Still, we, God's people, more often say yes to the powers that claim to be God, while saying no to our true God.

Jesus, on the other hand, shows us a different kind of party. It's a party of inclusion-- 5,000 people gathered, where a child's offering of loaves and fish inspires a miracle that feeds everyone. It is a party where there is enough for all-- no fighting over resources, because people are willing to share. I would be lying if I told you that putting your whole self into this party-- the one where Jesus sent the invitation-- isn't risky. It is, because it will expose you and change you and maybe even ask your life of you. But the people at this party? They have found the *life* of the party.