

“Simple Gifts”

A reflection by Walter Spencer for Sunday, July 16, 2006

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel: 6:1-5, 12b-19, 1st Ephesians, 1:3-14, and Mark 6:14-29

What a diverse collection of scripture readings!

In my youth, I considered the Gospel chronicle of the death of John the Baptist as unique to that time and place, removed by history and advancement of civilization. But in recent months I have come to understand that we have not progressed very far at all. John’s manner of death is as current today as ever.

It seems Herod had a great respect for this prophet, somewhat founded in fear, but the Gospel says Herod liked to listen to John. In the end, Herod let his pride and public image cloud what he knew was right and acted against his own better judgment to keep an ill-made and extravagant promise. Power and image overcame sound thinking.

In the Old Testament reading, we get a glimpse of another powerful ruler, David, King of Israel.

Mortimer Cohen in his essay “David the King” says that, “David molded the Jewish people into a nation, giving it a capital, a court, and a government that could make itself felt.” Remember, that the Jews had been a nomadic people until a relatively short time before David’s rise to power.

Cohen further comments that David “was also the royal champion of Israel’s religion. He made the city of Jerusalem the fortress of a faith, the sanctuary, and the home of Israel’s God. In addition, David is regarded as the poet-patron of Jewish psalmody and Jewish music. Though he did not write the whole of the Psalter, he undoubtedly wrote some of the psalms...”

And it is worth remembering that David was born in Bethlehem. He chose the life of a shepherd, which some rabbis say was the life that prepared him for his later exalted position. They said that with gentle consideration he led the flocks entrusted to him.

The young lambs he guided to pastures of tender grass; the patches of less juicy herbs he reserved for the sheep; and the full-grown sturdy rams were given the tough weeds for food. (Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, as quoted in Mortimer Cohen's *David the King*.) A simple life that would inform his leadership.

Samuel tells us that David managed to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem and is so joyful that this sacred vessel is returned, he dances with all his might. Imagine! Here he is dressed in his priestly garments (an ephod is a vestment worn by the high priests. Has nothing to do with an i-pod although I would expect the musician and “sweet voice of Israel” would enjoy an i-pod) regal and robed in holy attire, dancing “with all his might”! It must have been a spectacle, for the writer mentions it several times and elaborates on the joyful spirit in commenting that there were cymbals and castanets, trumpets, lyres and harps, songs and shouting, and all sorts of celebrating. A joyful noise! The whole house of Israel was dancing and shouting except for Michal who looked at him with scorn. Hers seems to have been a minority view. David leaping and dancing with all his might.

I looked at several translations of this passage to see if there was a different interpretation of “danced with all his might”, but found none. Many of you know that my youngest son is a professional dancer. I have seen him dance with all his might, but I can't picture David dancing like my son, Isaac. I don't imagine David spent a lot of time rehearsing or practicing. David let the spirit move him and expressed his joy in dancing. Willing to open his heart to God, he was not embarrassed to sing and dance with all his might in praise of God.

Imagine a head of state showing such emotion today. Can you imagine Queen Elizabeth dancing with all her might? I can't imagine her doing anything with all her might.

And John Dean practically ended his political aspirations with the now famous “yahoo” shout at the end of a speech while campaigning. We just aren't comfortable with hearty displays of

emotion in certain situations; particularly when men are the ones emoting.

It's OK for a football player to do a funky dance in the end zone after a touchdown, or after a player scores a goal in hockey or soccer, but there are not many other places where this sort of behavior is accepted or expected.

How do we feel about expressing joy in church? Do we confine the spirit?

The Gospel stories about Jesus don't tell us much about how he expressed joy. I would love to know about Jesus as a child. Did he have tantrums? What was he like as a teenager? Did he ever ask for the reins to the donkey? Stay out too late with his friends? Think that Mary and Joseph were out of touch?

Did he ever laugh and joke with his friends? What amused him? Did he ever dance with joy?

One of the most memorable services I ever attended was a Christmas Mass celebrated in a barn. I was in college at the time. There were animals making noise, children everywhere and a genuine sense of joy in the simplicity of that space. It was a community of people gathered to praise God in a non-traditional setting. The room was filled with joyful noise.

I have also had the blessing of attending other services where spontaneous joy is manifested in shouts of "Amen" and "Hallelujah!" It was strange to me at first, but I slowly realized that we need not stifle our joy and need to praise God all the time and in every way.

Listen to the little children who performed so beautifully here a few weeks ago with their simple gift of music. Some were off-key, some were off tempo, but I think we all felt the joy that these beautiful little people were expressing. It was a joyful noise and it was wonderful to hear. It was a fundamental expression of love. I think we need to be a little more child-like sometimes. We need to find the joy in simple things and un-complicate our lives. As we read in [Luke 18:16](#):

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

And just last week Gail Kendrick was telling some of us gathered in Fellowship Hall of her trip to South Africa and commenting about a moment where the congregation gathered around her and each offered their own prayer in their own words at the same time. She told of how all the words became entangled and grew louder in this prayerful cacophony of voices. A joyful noise of simple prayers woven together and presented to God.

When Dianne and I first visited this church, I was impressed by the Senior Choir. I still am. I'm honored that they include me in their joyful noise. You should know that it is sometimes a long and difficult journey to get the performance "service-ready". Rehearsals are a form of worship in themselves, full of humor, song, dance (yes, dance!) downright silliness and a little serious work. Renee Fossey does an incredible job of shepherding this flock of aspiring musicians as we attempt to tame our spontaneous joy. It's a little like herding cats. The Holy Spirit works overtime with us. You don't have to be a Pavarotti or a Kiri Te Kanawa to sing. You just need the spirit. Listen to the birds in the early morning as they join in a chorus of song. Not all of them sing sweetly, but together it is a beautiful experience. Someone has written, "Oh, how silent would be our fields and forest, if only those birds sang which sing best." Sing out! Let your voice join in praise. This is not a talent show! Life is not a rehearsal. Sing praise!

Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells us that through Christ we might live for the praise of God's glory. We are all adopted children of God. We know God loves us and we praise God with our words, our songs, our dances and by the very way we live our lives every day. God promises us an inheritance. Luke tells us that Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Not merely half a kingdom as Herod offered, but the whole thing! As adopted children, God has

lavished upon us the riches of God's grace. We need to celebrate.

The Word of God is part of our inheritance. Samuel, Paul and Mark all left us the story of God's love for us. We are children loved by God.

I found this poem that expresses this generational love in a modern way.

A Poem for Emily

Miller Williams

Small fact and fingers and farthest one from me,
a hand's width and two generations away,
in this still present I am fifty-three.
You are not yet a full day.

When I am sixty-three, when you are ten,
and you are neither closer nor as far,
your arms will fill with what you know by then,
the arithmetic and love we do and are.

When I by blood and luck am eighty-six
and you are someplace else and thirty-three,
believing in sex and god and politics
with children who look not at all like me,

sometime I know you will have read them this
so they will know I love them and say so
and love their mother. Child, whatever is
is always or never was. Long ago,

a day I watched awhile beside your bed,
I wrote this down, a thing that might be kept
awhile, to tell you what I would have said
when you were who know s what and I was dead
which is I stood and loved you while you slept.

Tell someone you love them today. I hope this is neither the first nor the last time that you hear this today: God loves you. I love you. Amen.