

**2 Samuel 6:1-5 and 1 Chronicles 15:25-29,
1 Chronicles 16:7-36 (read antiphonally)
Lord of the Dance
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One of the things I love about scripture is that it never allows us to get very comfortable. Last week, we considered the relationship between worship and justice through the words of Dr. MLK, Jr., and I trust I'm not the only one who has had those words ringing in my ears this week. The week before, we saw the magi prostrating themselves before the infant Jesus, offering themselves in wholehearted worship of the Christ child. The giving of their extravagant gifts was an extension, a by-product of the giving of their lives. We could say that both justice and generosity are external, embodied signs of an internal reality. Other spiritual practices, like kneeling or fasting are also ways we can embody worship. Perhaps involving our bodies more would help us better embrace what Louis Giglio meant when he said that we are all worshiping all the time, in everything we do. It's never a question of *if* we're worshiping; just what or whom we're worshiping.

In many church traditions, worship is primarily characterized by solemn reverence, like the wise men falling at Jesus' feet. Matthew 2 is exactly the kind of text that lets the "Frozen Chosen" insist that proper decorum is of utmost importance within the church. But that would really put you in a pickle when it comes to the picture of worship we see today. In 1 Chronicles 15 and 16 we encounter worship that is a loud, jubilant, boisterous, fun-filled all-out jamboree. The singers are at triple fortissimo, and the musicians are going full tilt: trumpets, cymbals, harps, lyres, and horns in orchestrated crescendo. The priests are in full regalia, dancers are swaying and keeping time to the music, and the food and wine are flowing. Pageantry and celebration are the order of the day, and everybody is included, every man, woman, and child.

Why the big party? This requires a little context. As you know, the Philistines were a continual thorn in Israel's side throughout the OT history. At one point, the unthinkable happens—not only is Israel defeated in battle by the Philistines, but the Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant, that sacred shrine that Israel believed to house the throne of God and signify God's presence among them. The Philistines have control of the Ark of the Covenant for 7 months during which time nothing but calamity comes upon them. Chaos breaks out, people die who come in contact with the Ark, and even more people are afflicted with terrible

tumors. The Philistines pass the Ark from one city to another, hoping to find a place where it won't cause trouble before they figure out that their only hope is to send it back to the Israelites. They put it on a cart pulled by two animals, send them on their way, and the cows make a beeline for Baale-judah, the nearest town in Israelite territory.

Fast forward 20 years. The Ark of the Covenant is still in Baale-judah where the cart first deposited it 20 years prior. David is now King, and he has made Jerusalem his royal city. Plans for a royal palace complex are underway, but one task remains: to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. David offered to build a grand temple for the Ark, a permanent house for God, but God refused, saying that that task would fall not to David, but to David's son, Solomon. So, David did the next best thing—he “prepared a place for the Ark of God and pitched a tent for it.” (1 Chron. 15:1) Once David had everything ready, it was time for the procession of the Ark from Baale-judah to Jerusalem, and that is the event today's text is about. It's the event which inspires such ecstatic worship from the people and their King. No wonder there is such a sense of unbridled joy. This day has been a long time coming, and Israel is pulling out all the stops to celebrate it right.

This story has a lot to say about worship, not just on special occasions but for all worship. I've come up with an acronym for us—PEP—to help us think about and remember some “takeaways” from this passage. PEP stands for preparation, expectation, and participation.

Preparation: Pay close attention to the fact that David didn't just wake up one morning, remember the Ark of the Covenant languishing in Baale-judah and dispatch a messenger to fetch it. This was not a haphazard undertaking. Moving the Ark of the Covenant and the worship that accompanied it required thoughtful planning and careful execution. A new cart was made to transport the Ark and a new tent erected to house it. The liturgical guidelines for how the Ark was to be handled and by whom were followed to the letter. The singers and musicians were well rehearsed, the priests dressed in their finest, and the people were ready to join the procession and receive God's presence with joy and thanksgiving. David and the people gave their best to God. They weren't casual, offering only the minimum possible effort. There was never an attitude of, “oh, that will get us by” or “any old cart, any old sacrifice, any old song will do.” They paid attention to detail, they pursued excellence, and they showed up prepared to be in God's presence, prepared to worship.

That leads me to ask a hard question: do we take time to prepare ourselves for worship? Perhaps we haven't thought about the fact that all of us share the responsibility for coming in the door on Sunday morning ready to have an encounter with the living God. I can prepare the sermon. The musicians can practice their music and be ready to lead us in song. But, no one can prepare your heart but you.

The second characteristic I see in the Israelites worship is **Expectation**. Let me ask you a second hard question: what did you expect to happen when you came to church today? I can't help but wonder if the reason it doesn't occur to us to prepare for worship is that we don't really expect much of anything to happen when we get here, so why would we need to prepare? But I believe God wants us to have a very different approach and attitude about worship. Think about it—what are we doing when we worship? We're entering the presence of Sovereign God, the creator, redeemer, and Lover of the universe. We are standing in the presence of Holy Mystery before a reality that is completely beyond the comprehension of our feeble minds. Worship, then, is not business as usual. It is not something to be done mindlessly, nor is it ever to be taken for granted. When we seriously consider the profound nature of what worship is, some days we'll fall at God's feet, like the magi, because no other response will be possible. Some days we'll have no choice but to speak the truth in love, calling ourselves and others to repentance and acts of justice. And there will be other times when, like David, we'll dance down the aisles with all our might because nothing less will do. The joy of knowing God will simply spill over and we will not be able to contain it.

Some people feel uncomfortable with the idea of expecting anything from God, but to be frank, I think that's part of what ails the church universal today. We don't look for God, and so not surprisingly, we don't find God. If we don't believe God makes a difference, our low expectations will seldom go unmet. But this is not a faithful, biblical attitude. The church has a credibility problem not because we ask too much of God but because we ask too little and when we do ask, we too narrowly define what we expect of God. More often than not, we want to be the ones to dictate when God shows up and how and what we want God to do. We don't usually put it in terms quite that blatant, because it sounds absurd when we say it out loud—but we attempt to control God in numerous ways, nonetheless. Don't be surprised that God is uninterested in accommodating our foolish schemes. Worship, done rightly, always puts God on the throne with us seeking to be part of God's plans and purposes, not the other way around.

The final letter in our acronym is “P” which stands for **participation**. I want to say this as plainly as possible: *worship is not a spectator sport*. It is not something done to you or for you, and it’s not an event that you only watch the “experts” do. Worship—true worship—fully engages your heart and your head, and if either one of those is on the sidelines, then you’re doing something besides worshipping.

In both the story of the magi, in MLK’s story and in today’s story, there is a cautionary tale that we need to heed. Worship is risky, and it’s risky in both a horizontal sense and a vertical sense. In terms of our human relationships, not everyone will be happy with our decision to worship God with our whole hearts and lives. Herod was so threatened by the worship of a rival king that he ordered the slaughter of anyone who posed a challenge to his power and rule. MLK lived with constant threats and was eventually killed by an assassin’s bullet. David’s wife, Michal, hated David’s worship. In her eyes, he was making a public spectacle of himself and opening the monarchy to ridicule with his outrageous dancing and carrying on, and she despised him for it. Yet, David was more concerned with what God thought than what the people around him thought, which is why David was known as “a man after God’s own heart.” Anytime we’re willing to go against the flow of public opinion, it is always risky, even in the church. Worship will inevitably cost us something.

In terms of our relationship with God, the vertical axis, worship is risky because it requires that we give up control. True worship is a posture of heart, mind, spirit and even body that says, “Whatever you want, God, not what I want. Wherever you lead, I’ll follow. I’ll love my enemies and that co-worker who drives me nuts and whose sloppy work I continually have to redo not because I want to but because you want me to. I’ll let go of my hurt and anger towards that family member not because they deserve it but because that’s what Christ would do, and worship calls me to be like him.” That’s the risk: when we worship as participants, it changes us. Worship is not showing up once a week and singing a hymn that is so familiar the words don’t even penetrate your heart anymore. Worship is what happens when you sing those familiar words again and because of that, your heart and life are impacted in meaningful, concrete ways.

As we close, I want you to imagine something with me. What do you think it might feel like and look like if each and every one of us showed up here next week **prepared** to give ourselves wholeheartedly to worship because we are so sure God wants to meet us here? What might be possible if we came **expecting** God to not only meet us, but to touch us in the deepest places of our lives—places

that need healing, that need mending, that need comfort or encouragement, that need to come out of the darkness and into the light? What if we came eager to **participate** rather than sit in the pews as spectators? Can you imagine what might happen? More importantly, are you willing to take the risk to find out? Whether you need to fall at Christ's feet in dumb-struck awe, or to take a stand for justice, or to sit in silent prayer, or whether the joy in your heart leads you to dance, Jesus is Lord, and it's time to worship.

Thanks be to God. Amen.