

July 16, 2006  
Ephesians 1:3-14, 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19  
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“Joy: Danced, Sung, or Otherwise”

We welcome to worship this morning the 2006 Congo Choir Tour. Today is a joyous day at Second Presbyterian, and I would be remiss if I didn't thank David Berry for his months of hard work in bringing the Congo Choir here to worship with us, as well as thank the host families for their Christian hospitality and friendship in inviting the choir members into their homes over the past few days.

I want to share a word of greeting with you, a word in Tshiluba, which is one of the indigenous languages of Congo; but before I do that, I want to set your minds at ease on a couple of points:

First, as jubilant and as joyous as the music has been and will be this morning, I have absolutely no intention of imitating King David by lifting up my robe and shimmying, shaking and leaping down the aisles.

Trust me, I come from a long line of rhythmically and expressively challenged Presbyterians.

This brings me to my second point of reassurance: for all of you out there who may also be rhythmically and expressively challenged: It's OK.

I promise: no tired jokes about Presbyterians being "the frozen chosen" or needing to loosen up, no covert gestures from behind the pulpit urging you to clap or find the beat.

If the Spirit does move you in these ways this morning, that's wonderful. Praise God. BUT, if your way of expressing joy is a little more reserved, well, that's fine, too. It's quite possible to feel the deepest joy with the only visible evidence being a quiet smile or a barely noticeable foot-tapping.

You see, I think when we focus too much on the "right" way of expressing joy, we run the risk of forgetting the very source of joy itself.

That's really Michal's problem in our Old Testament lesson today.

Michal, daughter of Saul (the former king) and the wife of David (the present one), is so distracted-scandalized in fact-by how David expresses his joy-David dancing in the street, so carried away that he's flashing his linen ephod (which is the ancient version of sacred boxer shorts) for the whole world to see, that she forgets the what for of David's joy: The Ark of the Covenant is being brought to Jerusalem.

Now, many of us remember the Ark of the Covenant from a movie in which Indiana Jones (a.k.a., Harrison Ford) chased it all over the Mediterranean while having innumerable adventures and wearing a very cool hat. The Ark of the Covenant was a big box, a chest really. It contained the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them, a jar of manna from the Israelites' time in the wilderness and the staff of Aaron that, over night, miraculously sprouted buds, blossoms and almonds; and, if you look through the 25th chapter of Exodus, you'll find detailed instructions for its composition, construction, dimensions and ornamentation.

But it wasn't the Ark as an impressive piece of craftsmanship, or even the sacred items inside it, that got David dancing. No, it's what the Ark meant that got David dancing and what the Ark meant was God is with us. God dwells here-among us.

You see, the Ark wasn't just a box containing mementos of the Israelites' time spent with God. It was the visible sign that God had chosen them to be His people. When the Ark was there, God was there.

You have to understand: the ancient Israelites did not believe that they had somehow captured God in a box, any more than we believe that we have captured God in the water of baptism or the bread and wine of communion. But, as with our sacraments, so with the Ark. Though God is always with us and though we experience that presence in myriad ways, nonetheless, through the sacraments (through the Ark), God is present in a special way. We are claimed as His own and we are given the strength and assurance of knowing who we are and whose we are. We come to know God and know that God loves us. What the ark said was NOT, "God belongs to us," but instead, "We belong to God."

The Ark, more than 30 years earlier, had fallen into enemy Philistine hands and, when it proved too hot for the Philistines or anyone else to handle, it was kept in a kind of cold storage in the house of the priest, Abinadab. But now, David, the great warrior-king, has defeated the Philistines and the ark is coming to Jerusalem, David's city. Imagine our being deprived of baptism and communion for 30 years-and then suddenly getting them back-we'd dance too!

So, what is the source of David's joy? The same as ours: God. God is with us. We belong to God. That's the source of Paul's joy, too.

I don't know whether you noticed it when Bob/Sandy read the passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, but the scholars say it has a "lyrical intensity," a "hymnic quality." One scholar remarked that it sounds "a magnificent note of jubilation" and "an outburst of praise" at the beginning of the letter. Allow me to translate: this is scholar-talk for "Paul is singing here."

Now I know, I know, we don't normally think of Paul as singing. But when I looked at this passage in Greek, I saw that the entire passage constitutes a single sentence. When I tried to parse that sentence grammatically, I got lost in branches within branches, within sub-branches with sub-sub-branches. But, when I took Paul's words and made them into a song - a song with its own refrain - well, they made much more sense to me:

Blessing, blessing, blessing  
He has chosen us in Christ  
We are his children through Jesus  
Forgiveness, new life.  
We belong to God  
Glorious grace,  
Lavish grace,  
Riches of grace.  
We belong to God  
He has chosen us in Christ  
Blessing, blessing, blessing.

Now I could hear his joy. Paul is singing here and this is his hymn of joy.

Then I found myself puzzled again. How could Paul be singing so joyfully when he wrote this letter in sitting in prison, awaiting his execution?

Then I remembered "Because of Winn-Dixie." "Because of Winn-Dixie," you probably know, is a children's story about a girl and her dog (Winn-Dixie is the name of the dog) which was recently made into a movie, which we discussed this spring in our "Theology Goes to the Movies" class. In the story there's this candy called a Litmus Lozenge and the thing about a Litmus Lozenge is that it tastes sweet and sad at the same time. So, the book and the movie have this refrain: "Life is like a Litmus Lozenge: sweet and sorrowful at the same time." In other words, joy and sorrow are interwoven through every human life, which we know from our own lives, and which King David certainly knew from his.

Go back sometime, and look at David's life. We are told at the beginning, middle and end of his story that God is with him and it's so obvious in so many places:

The youngest of eight sons, left out in the fields tending the flocks, not even thought worthy of an interview and still he is chosen:

The one who slew mighty Goliath with a slingshot.

The one with the good looks and the gift of song.

The one who slew his tens of thousands, while Saul could only slay his  
thousands.

The military and political genius.

The king.

The one who brought the ark to Jerusalem and danced like a madman.

Surely, God was with him.

And yet, also the one whose ascent to power was blighted by the death of his beloved friend Jonathan:

"I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful ... How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!"

The one who, at the very peak of his power, spent the night lying on the ground fasting, crying, pleading with God to spare the life of his child, the child born of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, and still the child dies.

Then the one who, in his old age, estranged from his beloved son, Absalom, finds out that that son is raising an army against him. Though David issues a direct order that, whatever else happens, Absalom must not be harmed, the order is disobeyed. Absalom is hacked to pieces. All David can do is cry out:

"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Joy and sorrow are interwoven in every human life, even a king's, even an apostle's. But—and this is the most important thing—in the end, we believe, it's all joy.

Go back to Paul's song of joy in Ephesians for a moment. Yes, Paul rejoices that, through Jesus Christ, God is with us, and we are with God. Like David, he is celebrating the presence of God. But in his song, Paul celebrates not just the presence of God, but also the promise of God.

Did you catch it at the end of the song? Paul sings of a plan "for the fullness of time," an inheritance that is "yet to come," a promise that is "sealed by the Holy Spirit." A promise that God, in Jesus Christ, will gather up all things—all things in heaven and all things on earth. A promise that every tear will be dried. A promise that death and sadness will be no more. A promise that God will be all in all. A promise that He will dwell with us and we will dwell with Him, forever and ever. A promise, in other words, that our joy will be made complete.

In the end, it's all joy. That's the promise. As Paul sings it, we set our hope on Christ.

And now I want to share that Tshiluba word of greeting. It is "mioyo," and one meaning of the word is "life." You greet someone by saying "mioyo" ("Life") and that person greets you back by saying "Mioyo wabe," ("Life be with you.") But "mioyo" also can be translated as "heart."

In fact, if you'll take out your bulletin insert (the one with the song lyrics printed on it), you'll see that the choir is about to sing a song called, *Let Us Strengthen Our Hearts*. But in Tshiluba, it is called *Tukoleshayi Mioyo: Let Us Be Strong in Our Mioyo*. Look at the first verse: do you see that italicized line that is repeated again and again: "Let us be strong in our faith"? Well, in Tshiluba (I hope I'm at least close here) that line is: "Tukoleshayi mioyo mu ditabuja": "Let our life/heart be strong in faith." Try it with me. I'll say a line, and then you say back to me that italicized line: *Let us be strong in our faith*:

Look, we are the Lord's own people.  
Let us be strong in our faith.  
The people who know Him and trust in Him.  
Let us be strong in our faith.

The people bought by Christ's own blood.  
Let us be strong in our faith.  
The people of the covenant yearning for eternal life.  
Let us be strong in our faith.

And now listen to the refrain:  
Let us rejoice! Let us rejoice!  
Let us dance with big smiles on our faces because God's love for all  
people has given us eternal life.  
Even if we have miseries and sufferings, even death cannot separate us  
from Christ, for all who believe in Him, even if they die, they  
will inherit eternal life.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every  
spiritual blessing in heavenly places.

Glorious grace,  
Lavish grace,  
Riches of grace.  
We belong to God  
He has chosen us in Christ  
Blessing, blessing, blessing.  
Joy.  
Joy.  
Joy.

Mioyo.