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2 Samuel 6:1–23
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A Time to Weep and to Laugh, A Time to Mourn and to Dance

This morning we are diving into yet another one of the dialectic tensions of in Ecclesiastes 3. There is a time to weep, and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. Since they are both dealing with somewhat the same tension we will lump them all together.

When I thought about this, I immediately considered the story in 2 Samuel where David returned the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem after it had been stolen by the Philistines. David danced before the Lord with all his might. But his wife, Michal, Saul's daughter, resented David for his unashamed display of joy.

Now, before we dive into this story, it requires a little context to understand why these two people approached the same situation from such opposite perspectives. One responded with joy, the other from deep lament.

To fill in the gaps, we need to go back several chapters and learn a more about what had been going on. 2 Samuel begins with David learning about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. Saul was the king of Israel and was extremely paranoid about David, who was going to take his place as king - not his son, Jonathan. So much so that Saul tried to kill David many times to prevent that from happening.

Meanwhile David was very close friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. And that made Saul even more jealous. One would think that hearing about Saul's death would have been a relief for David. But we are told that it caused him great grief. He loved Jonathan deeply. And I think he loved Saul as well, even though he could never understand why Saul pursued him so violently.

Saul's death also set off a series of wars and power grabs between the house of Saul and the house of David. Several murders take place. There was political intrigue. There were shifting alliances. And then, on top of all this drama, David decided in the wake of Saul's death that Michal, Saul's daughter, would be better off as his wife.

The only problem was that Michal, like Bathsheba previously, was already married to another man. Well, apparently she didn't have much choice in the matter, and she was forced from her husband to become one of David's wives.

As we can see, the situation quickly disintegrated into an episode of **Desperate Housewives of Jerusalem**. Michal was torn from her husband and family, treated like a war prize, and forced to live where she did not want to live.

Can we imagine why David and Michal might perceive things differently?

One danced, the other mourned.

Join me as we read from 2 Samuel 6:12–22 and see how this episode unfolds.

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing, **13** and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf. **14** David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. **15** So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet.

16 As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart.

17 They brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the Lord. **18** When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts **19** and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

20 David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" **21** David said to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord—I will dance before the Lord. **22** I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be humbled in my own eyes, but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor."

Let us pray.

Prayer of Illumination.

Recently I was watching a college football game, and I was struck by the fact that in every game there are winners and there are losers. After all is said and done, there are be those who celebrate their victory. And then there are certainly be those who walk off the field in defeat. That's just the way competition goes.

Although, as someone who has watched enough college football, I will say that sometimes the fans act like they personally won the game. They didn't. They were sitting on a couch. But they celebrate like they personally scored the winning touchdown.

Even in sports, there is a time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn and a time to dance.

But what does this mean for us?

I want to break it up into two segments. First, we will look at a time to weep and mourn. And then we will look at a time to laugh and dance.

First, a Time to Weep and Mourn. The Hebrew word for "weep" comes from the root **bakah**. It means to bemoan, lament, or cry out loud. To wail. The Hebrew word for "mourn" comes from the root **saphad**. It literally describes the tearing out of one's hair and beating one's breast. An expression of deep lament.

These are aspects grief we find throughout the Old Testament and continuing into Jewish tradition. One of those traditions is sitting **shiva**. In Hebrew *shiva* means "seven" and describes the seven-day period of intense mourning following a death.

Jewish mourners traditionally stay at home. They sit on low stools or boxes. Mirrors are covered. A seven-day memorial candle is lit. Normal grooming, work, and even wearing leather shoes are avoided.

It is a very intentional interruption of normal life. Because grief is an interruption. When a loved one dies, life does not simply continue as though nothing happened. Something has changed.

In Old Testament days, people would wear black sackcloth, an oversized garment made out of goat's hair. Think burlap bag. Not exactly the kind of outfit you'd find at Nordstroms. It might cover the whole body like a dress or be as small as a loin cloth.

Mourners would also prostrate themselves on the ground and put ashes on their heads, reminding them of the frailty of human life and that one day we will all return to the dust of the earth from which we were created. More serious displays of mourning included tearing one's clothes, out of the distress and personal loss they had endured.

Now, if you were visiting a house where shiva was being observed, there is important protocol to follow that we non Jewish people need to know.

Wear appropriate business-casual attire. Nothing bright or celebratory.

Walk right in. Do not ring the doorbell, because it might disrupt mourners.

Enter quietly without greeting anyone.

Let the mourners lead the conversation.

Do not offer simple pleasantries like, "How are you?" Instead, simply sit or stand quietly and wait for them to initiate conversation—or not. When conversation does begin, speak of the deceased. Tell them what that person meant to you. Share personal stories as appropriate.

Again, listen for what the mourners need. Do not assume.

Unless you are a close friend or relative, keep your visit brief. Fifteen or thirty minutes. Again, this is about meeting the mourner's need. It's not about our need to be needed.

The Apostle Paul taught us, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." There is a time for both.

This would have been the scenario in John 11 that Jesus walked into after his good friend Lazarus died. Lazarus had been dead for four days. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, were fully engaged in sitting shiva. John tells us that many Jews had come to comfort them in the loss of their brother. Even Jesus was deeply moved and troubled in spirit when he saw them weeping.

The Greek word for "weep" comes from the root **klaio**. It means to wail inconsolably. Out loud. And John tells us: "Jesus wept."[1] It is one of the shortest and most powerful sentences in Scripture.

Jesus did not walk into that house and tell everyone to cheer up. He didn't say, "Well, everything happens for a reason." He certainly did not say, "Heaven needed another angel." He didn't offer them a theological explanation that would make their grief disappear.

He wept with them.

Jesus also said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."[2]

As many of you know, our family has had our own grief journey following my father-in-law's death. On behalf of Karen and I, I want to publicly thank you for your cards, calls, text messages, and emails. They have all been so thoughtful. We are grateful to be part of such a loving and caring community of faith. I truly don't know how people navigate these hard times apart from that. And knowing many of your stories and witnessing how you have navigated grief, gives us assurance that grief does not last forever. It is a season.

David says in Psalm 30, "Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."[3]

That doesn't mean the grief wasn't real. It means grief is not God's final word.

Stephen Ministries founder Kenneth Haugk wrote a series of four short booklets about journeying through grief: *A Time to Grieve, Experiencing Grief, Finding Hope and Healing,* and *Rebuilding and Remembering.* These books do several things. They normalize grief. They naturalize grief. And they necessitate grief. Because if we don't allow ourselves the freedom to go through the grief work, grief will still do its work in us.

I encourage people to read one booklet every quarter, as they are ready. Some prefer to read them all at once. I have read them all before, but I reread the first

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[1] John 11:19

[2] Matthew 5:4

[3] Psalm 30:4-5

book after our recent loss. Because sometimes knowing something intellectually is different from having to live it personally.

As I read this story in 2 Samuel about David and Michal, I wondered if Michal was still grieving. Remember she had just lost her father and brother. She had been torn away from her husband and her home that she loved. And then she watched David, this man of God, joyfully dancing in the streets, as if nothing had just happened.

The text says that she despised him in her heart. I wonder if that could have been part of her resentment? Could it have been that David was celebrating something she simply could not? This is one of the reasons we need to understand a story's context. Because we rarely know the whole story. We may see the dance. We don't always see the grief.

But enough about sad stuff. Because the good news is that Jesus came to "comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."[4]

Which brings us to the other side of this tension. A Time to Laugh and a Time to Dance.

The Hebrew word for "laugh" comes from the root **sachaq**. It means to play, make merry, or rejoice. We get a sense of being carefree. The Hebrew word for "dance" comes from the root **reqad**. It means to skip about, leap, or dance for joy.

This is what David was doing as he brought the Ark back to Jerusalem. He was celebrating. He was rejoicing. He was dancing before the Lord with all his might. And apparently, David was not particularly concerned about how he looked doing it.

There is something beautiful about that. Because sometimes we as Presbyterians get so concerned about looking dignified that we forget to be joyful.

We see a similar sort of rejoicing by the father in Luke 15 when the Prodigal Son returned home. The father was ready to throw a party. There was feasting. There was celebration. There was music.

But when the older son, who never left home, came in from the fields and found this celebration going on, he became angry and refused to participate. In other words, one son came home and the father threw a party. The other son came home and complained about the party.[5] It's a very similar tension as in our story with David and Michal.

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[4] Isaiah 61:2b-3; Luke 4:18-19

[5] Luke 15:28-30

In Exodus 15, after God led the Israelites safely across the Red Sea, Miriam, Moses' sister, took a tambourine and sang and danced for joy because of God's faithfulness through it all.[6]

The Psalmist says: "Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King. Let them praise him with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. For the Lord takes delight in his people."[7]

And in his Sermon on the Plain in Luke, Jesus said: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."[8]

Notice the pattern. Jesus does not deny the weeping. He promises that the weeping will not have the final word. There is a time to weep. And there is a time to laugh. There is a time to mourn. And there is a time to dance.

And I think this is what we sometimes forget. We can become so accustomed to one side of the tension that we have trouble moving to the other. Some people have learned how to mourn, but they have forgotten how to laugh. And some people are so good at celebrating that they don't know what to do when somebody else is hurting.

But the Christian life calls us to both.

Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."[9] Not one or the other. Both.

I think this is part of what makes this story so powerful. David dances. Michal mourns. And they are both responding to the same moment from completely different places in life.

That should make us pause before we judge someone else's response.

And that is why we need grace. Grace for the person who is weeping. Grace for the person who is laughing. Grace for the person who is mourning. Grace for the person who is dancing. Because there really is a time for all of it.

Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season for everything under heaven. And the beautiful thing about the Christian story is that God meets us in every season. God is with us in the ashes. God is with us in the celebration. God is with us when the tears come. And God is with us when the laughter returns.

So if you are in a season of mourning today, hear this:

You do not have to rush through your grief. You do not have to apologize for your tears. And you do not have to pretend that everything is okay when it isn't. God is with you in the ashes.

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[6] Exodus 15:20-21

[7] Psalm 149:2-4a

[8] Luke 6:21b

[9] Romans 12:15

And if you have been in that place for a long time, and laughter is beginning to return, hear this as well: You do not have to feel guilty for being happy again. Your joy does not dishonor what you have lost. God is with you there, too.

Because resurrection is not the denial of death. It is what God does on the other side of death.

So perhaps the invitation this morning is simply this:

If you need to weep, weep.

If you need to mourn, mourn.

If God is giving you reason to laugh, then laugh.

And if God has given you something to celebrate, then celebrate it. Dance. Rejoice. And don't worry too much about how you look as you do. Amen.