

Blessed with Every Spiritual Blessing

Ephesians 1:3-14

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This morning the lectionary presents us with four passages of scripture. Our psalm, which we read as our opening sentences, is Psalm 24, about the King of glory who comes. It is a wonderful call to worship as well as an affirmation that the Lord, to whom all heaven and earth belong, has appointed earthly rulers whose purpose is to bring glory and honor to God. The Old Testament Lesson from II Samuel 6 draws our attention to David. David was an earthly ruler, a king with a kingdom, a sovereign with a throne, whose reign was a highlight in the history of Israel. We get a clear picture of his devotion to God as he dances with abandon before the Ark of the Covenant.

We did not read the Gospel lesson, but it comes from Mark 6:14-29. The king in the story is Herod. Herod had arrested John the Baptist, the one who went ahead of Jesus and prepared the way for the Lord. On a night of great feasting and entertainment, the daughter of Herod's new wife danced and won Herod's favor. He offered anything she wanted. In collusion with her mother Herodias, who bore a great grudge against John the Baptist, the daughter asked that her prize for the evening be the head of John the Baptist served up on a platter.

Although Mark's gospel tells us Herod was greatly distressed, what happened to John the Baptist wasn't that far out of line with the actions of the various Herods described in the New Testament, and in the historical writings of that period. It was one of the Herod's who ordered the murder of the innocents, that dark episode around the birth of Jesus where the image used to express the deep sorrow at the slaughter is of Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. It was a Herod who put James the brother of John to death in Acts 12. In his exhaustive book about the birth of the Messiah, Raymond Brown chronicles the cruel tyranny of Herod. "It was well attested that Herod was given to fits of ungovernable rage and had three of his own children put to death...To ensure mourning at his funeral, Herod wanted his

soldiers instructed to kill notable political prisoners upon the news of his death. His goal was expressed thus: ‘So that all Judea and every household weep for me, whether they wish it or not.’”¹

Against the backdrop of these two kings, David and Herod, one dancing with ecstatic emotion before the Lord and the other parading around with the head of God’s anointed prophet on a platter we are introduced in Ephesians to yet another king. This king has a kingdom far beyond the reach of any earthly dominion. The kingdom of this king is not limited by time or space. This king rules in the heavenly realms. This king has been active since before the dawn of creation. This king will be honored and glorified when all creation is finally brought to its final purpose. This cosmic king is Jesus Christ, and the ultimate purpose of all creation is that everything in all creation will be brought together in unity under the kingly reign of Jesus Christ. There are definitely echoes here of Paul’s words in Philippians 2 that one day every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. We pray for that every time we say the Lord’s Prayer...thy kingdom come. The early followers of Jesus, longing for that day cried out Maranatha...come Lord Jesus.

The trust and faith present in these verses from the first chapter of Ephesians are a chance for us to draw near in wonder and in awe. Here in these verses some words are introduced that can be threatening to us as humans. We read that what God has done for us was predestined. We read that God was choosing us in Christ Jesus before the creation of the world. Choosing is election. Predestined is predestination. What does it mean for us that God is at work in election and predestination? Does that rob of us our freedom, our dignity, our place as humans created in the image of God? These are good questions and theologians have wrestled with them over the ages. Errors have been made at times of saying that God is not ultimately in control. Errors have been made of saying that God’s control is so fixed that he has not only determined who is elected to salvation, but he has also determined who is elected to damnation.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 226 and 227.

Without resolving that tension, might we come to this passage not to contend with God, but to be content with God? Might we even find comfort in this passage? Our salvation is not dependent on how good we are or even how faithful we are. God had a plan and purpose for our lives long before we ever entered this world. In a world that can make humans feel small and insignificant, this passage says God has a plan and purpose for human lives. God has chosen us not simply as his creatures, but more importantly we have been chosen as God's children. He chose us. He saw value and worth in us simply because we are his. We were chosen freely, it has all been God's gracious work. In choosing us he blessed us, as we read, he blessed us with every spiritual blessing. The sign he has given that we are his is this amazing gift of the Holy Spirit that fills our lives. Like the Ark of the Covenant, holding the Ten Commandments and signifying the presence of God with the people of Israel, God dwells in the lives of his beloved children through the Holy Spirit. The presence of the Spirit of God in our lives is a seal, a stamp of God's presence and God's approval, a signal that one day this whole inheritance promised by God in Christ Jesus will belong to us, and all of it will be for the glory of God. Try that on when you have questions about predestination and election. See what incredible gifts and blessings come from the one who chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

It seems to me the power of doctrines like election and predestination is that they tell us our lives do have meaning and purpose, but only in relation to how we respond to this God who chooses and blesses and crowns us with glory and honor and who lives within us through the Holy Spirit and who loves us with such grace and favor in the person of Jesus Christ. As God chooses us to be his beloved children, the door is opened for us to choose God as our King and our Lord.

What a terrible world it would be, what a terrible life it would be, if our only choice for king was Herod. What if our only option was to be servants and subjects and even slaves in a world where children's lives have no value, where the loss of children's lives was accepted without comment? What if our only option was to be servants and subjects and

even slaves in a world where it was fashionable, a sign of valor, to lop off the heads of those who are considered enemies? What if our only option was to be servants and subjects and even slaves in a world where persecution and imprisonment and harassment greeted anyone who did not bow their knee to the tyrants and the despots? It has always been an option to bow down to these kings and their kingdoms. And there is plenty of that available today. That option is available. But what a terrible world it would be, what a terrible life it would be, if that was the only option available.

King David holds out a different option. King David holds out an option that is in marked contrast to what King Herod has to offer. In II Samuel 6 we read about David and his devotion to the Lord. What an example David sets as he walks before the Ark of the Covenant, worshiping and celebrating with all his might before the Lord. There are castanets, harps, lyres, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals. And David was dancing. His wife saw him leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she just didn't get it. She criticized him. Here the king is bowing down and humbling himself before the Lord and he gets criticism. David was so caught up in the moment he had stripped down until he was half-naked, and his wife didn't like it at all. "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of everybody." David offers no apology. In fact, he doubles down. "I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes." This king finds no shame in humbling himself in the presence of the living God.

While all this dancing and celebrating is taking place, all of this raucous worship, David takes time to do something which shines a light on what type of a king he was. David offered his sacrifices before the Lord, and then we read in II Samuel 6:19, "He gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd, both men and women." God had warned the people that if they had a king that king might only be concerned about his own wealth and welfare. God warned that the king might force the people into labor and send them off to war. Kings came who made life difficult for the people of

Israel. Solomon built a beautiful temple and an even more ornamented palace but it came with a cost, it came with forced labor. The son of Solomon was counseled to lighten the burden on the people and he rejected that counsel and made life even more difficult. But here we have David, doing something simple and kind for all the people, for men and for women. It was only a loaf of bread, just a cake of dates, nothing more than a cake of raisins. But it was more than any of these things and it was more than all of these things. It was a sign that this king loved his people and was looking out for them. It was a sign this king would bless his people.

Even as we look at the options before us of Herod and David, we have another option. There is one whose kingdom was different than Herod's in every way. Herod murdered children. Jesus blessed them. Jesus drew them to his side. Jesus used them as an example of trust and faith and forbid the disciples to forbid the children to come to him. "Let the little children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Herod took the head off his enemies and persecuted the people of God. Jesus said love your enemies and bless those who persecute you. Herod was willing to kill anyone and everyone to save his kingdom. Jesus laid down his own life to preserve his kingdom. Herod hated. Jesus loved.

That loaf of bread and those cakes of raisins and dates that David shared are like the tiny mustard that grew and became a great tree of healing and protection and comfort and blessing when Jesus came. When the Son of David came in the name of the Lord, this world sang with joy. Jesus, who blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing, was not content to stay in heaven. The Word of God who was before all things is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. He gave bread to the multitudes and added a succulent piece of fish to go with it. He led many a parade where he could have been swept along by the crowds who swelled as his popularity grew. But this King cared. This King had time. This King practiced kindness. He stopped for the leper. The scriptures tell us his heart was filled with compassion. Here was a child suffering, a child who was excluded, a child whose days were filled with shame. Jesus had compassion. He

wouldn't let a tax-collector wallow in his rejection, he called him to come. He went to the home. He made himself at home, and in doing that he made a home, a place of belonging for the sinners and the outcasts. He wasn't bothered by the hot tears that bathed his feet as a sinful woman knelt down in the home of a Pharisee, a Pharisee who had a hard and judgmental heart. He lifted this woman up and commended her for the great love she had shown. Her love was a welcome sign of the forgiveness that had bathed her soul and made her clean.

King David dancing with all his might is such a powerful image for us today. We have a choice. There are Herod's who are bent on destruction and selfish gain and manipulation and subjugation and domination. These forces are calling us to dance. Come and join my dance and watch how we can destroy life together. No. That is not the dance for God's chosen people. Even David, the wonderful king who was a man after God's own heart, even David is not the one we are called to dance with. David looked forward to one who would conquer all of God's enemies and who would rise from the dead and reign in glory. David is not the one we are called to dance with. No. That is not the dance for God's chosen people.

Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son of God, is extending his hand to us. He is inviting us to dance. Watch him as his feet take him over and around the hills of Galilee, bringing light and love to all. See him spin with delight as he shows us the lilies of the field in all their glory and says if my Father watches over the lilies, won't he watch over you, protect you, and bless you. See him sweep up the sinners and tax-collectors and fishermen and faithful women and lead them all in a dance full of meaning and purpose. See him take off his outer clothing as the dance builds to its climax. See him strip of his outer clothing and wrap a towel around his waist. Come and dance with me. As I have loved you, so you shall love others. See this one who is worthy of all glory and honor and power and might, see him not only teach about a kingdom where the servant is the greatest, see him become the servant. See him stripped down as the final steps of his dance lead him up the hill called Calvary. Hear him sing the song of the dance, "They whipped and they stripped

and they hung me high, and they left me there on the cross to die.” There is a choice. It is the only choice because one day there will be no other than Jesus. One day all things in heaven and on earth will be brought together in him. One day every knee will bow in that great dance of worship and every tongue will confess in that great acclamation of faith that Jesus Christ is Lord. This one who has chosen to dance with us and for us is calling us to choose him, to choose to join his dance.

Oh, that we would choose to join the dance. Oh, that we would join him in sharing love and kindness with the least, the last, and the lost. Oh, that we would dance with him as he spreads new sheets on the beds where a family will move from homelessness to having a home and a place of belonging. Oh, that we would join him as he serves at the Warm Center, greeting and welcoming each one with a kind word and a warm touch. Oh, that we would dance with delight as he takes his place with the children of our world, blessing them and caring for them and protecting them and teaching them to trust and follow him in their own special dance. Oh, that we would dance with him as we abandon our hearts in worship, entering his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, lifting up our hearts and voices in celebration and bowing down with reverence and humility, thanking him for such amazing kindness and grace that saves the lost and makes what is old and shattered new and beautiful. Oh, that we would dance among those whose lives are crushed and bowed down, that we would go right up to people and extend the love of Christ and invite them to take their place, to take their rightful place as children of the living God. Oh, that we would choose Jesus. Oh, that we would choose to dance with Jesus.

One of my favorite dances with Jesus happened in a church basement in Redondo Beach, California. We had taken a group of 30 high school students across the border into Mexico. We spent a week having Bible School with kids, reaching out to their families, accepting their invitation to have tea in their homes, and learning how to dance in the middle of poverty that is hard to describe. The village we were in was built on a garbage dump. The dump was still there, but the land was available. So homes sprouted up. It smelled. It was dirty. But there was

no question that Jesus was there, that Jesus was dancing even where life was being built on a dump. And the sense of his presence was overwhelming. Lives were changed.

On our way home from that transforming trip, we stopped at a church in Redondo Beach, and we gathered in the basement of the church. We were going to sleep on the floor of that church before we headed home. Sleeping bags were spread out. Dinner was served. We gathered in small groups for a time of reflection and sharing. Tears flowed. Laughter rang out. Commitments were made. One of the songs that week had the chorus, “I choose to follow Jesus...hey hey...I choose to follow the Lord.” Kids were choosing Jesus. Jesus had chosen them from the foundation of the world, but now they knew this dance, this dance with the Lord of all Creation, was the only dance that had any meaning. And so they chose the one who had chosen them, and it was sweet, and it was powerful, and it was holy.

After dinner, after the devotions, there was some free time. Kids scattered in groups to walk on the beach or go get ice cream. I hung around in the basement of that church with another of our youth leaders. Her name is Patsy. She has an incredible love for kids. I guess every church has a Patsy, or a Pat, who just loves kids and loves helping them find their place in the great dance of faith with Jesus. Patsy and I were basking in the glow of this wonderful week, where we had danced in a dump, and because Jesus was with us we had danced with delight.

There was a piano in that church basement. A few kids were waiting to head out, and as they lingered they did what every kid in every church basement with every piano has done, at least as long as I have worked with kids. They came over to the piano and they started playing a song. The song they played, the song that every kid plays on every piano in every church basement is the song *Heart and Soul*. Da da da, da da da da da da...Patsy and I had been on a hundred youth trips and heard that song a hundred times. We smiled. They kept playing. I don't know which one of us thought of it first, but one of us remembered a scene from a movie popular in the 80's. The movie was *Big*, starring Tom

Hanks, and at one point there is a giant keyboard and Tom Hanks jumps on it and starts stepping on the keys that play *Heart and Soul*.

The kids kept playing. Patsy and I couldn't take it any longer. We got up and we pretended we were on the keyboard, hopping and jumping and landing and skipping and having an absolute blast. We were dancing. We had danced on a dump, convinced that there was no place in all creation where you could go and Jesus wouldn't be there, living, loving, touching, healing, weeping, blessing, and dancing.

Jesus Christ chose us before the foundations of the world. He has a plan and purpose for our lives. How do we respond to that type of love? We choose Jesus. He extends his hand to us and asks, "Do you want to dance." And from that point on we learn to dance with our Lord. He is inviting us today, to choose him. "Dance, dance, wherever you may be. I am the Lord of the dance said he. I'll lead you all, wherever you may be. I'll lead you all in the dance said he."