



Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Knoxville, TN  
July 14, 2024  
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble  
Sermon: "A Dance in 3-Steps"

## **2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 (NRSV)**

**6:1** David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim.

They carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God, and Ahio went in front of the ark.

David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

**6:12b** So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing, and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf. David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod.

So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet. 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.

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. 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 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.

### “A Dance in 3-Steps”

I heard this week an interview between the poet Kwame Alexander and theologian Kate Bowler.<sup>1</sup> Kwame Alexander was talking about losing his mother. After the funeral, there was an urgency in his family, not to grieve, but to move on.

Perhaps you’ve experienced something similar.

In Alexander’s case, his family all wanted to take a trip together, to celebrate his mother’s life. But Alexander didn’t want to take a trip. He didn’t want to celebrate. He needed time to grieve. But eventually, he relented. Under pressure from his family, he took the trip.

Kate Bowler, interviewing him, said something that really hit me. It wasn’t even a full sentence. Hearing about Alexander’s unfinished grief, she simply named:

*The unfinished-ness of things.*

That rings so true:

*The unfinished-ness of things.*

There’s something about life that gives it an unfinished quality. Sometimes relationships, careers, even family members - they come and they go, and you don’t get real closure.

There’s so much to this life that is unknown.  
Just look at yesterday.  
Just look at the last few weeks on the national stage.  
Where are we headed as a country?  
So much is unknown.  
You can drive yourself crazy, worrying about the unknown.

What is your experience?

What do you do, with the unfinished-ness of things?

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<sup>1</sup> *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*, “To Be Loved Like That with Kwame Alexander.” Season 10. Episode 12. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/to-be-loved-like-that/>

Second Samuel gives us an answer. In fact, it doesn't just give us one answer. It gives us three!<sup>2</sup> Three different models of how to go about this thing we call life, in the midst of its unfinished-ness.

**The First Answer comes from Uzzah: the overcautious priest**

Let me tell you at the start, I can be quiet an Uzzah some days.  
In fact, most days.

When it comes to an orientation to life, Uzzah is anxious; he wants to control the things he can't control. Things like the ark. Things like God.

Uzzah and Ahio are the priests driving the cart upon which the ark sits.

Ahio goes ahead with the cattle in the front.  
Uzzah walks behind the ark.

The oxen pulling the cart stumble. The ark shakes. It looks like it might fall. Uzzah holds out his hand and catches the ark. But the presence of God is so concentrated in the ark, the Lord's holiness too great, no one can touch the ark and live. Poor Uzzah is immediately struck down dead.

I'd imagine this isn't a one-time thing for Uzzah. Because to be brave enough to reach out and touch the ark, you've got to be a bit of a control freak to begin with. Uzzah must have liked to keep eye on things. Uzzah must have thought he could control the unfinished-ness of this life.

Do you ever grasp for control, around the unfinished parts of life?

An example:

If I have read 1 news-story about Joe Biden and Donald Trump, this week, I have read 20. If I've heard one podcast, I've heard 10. I can't get enough of the news this week, and let me tell you, I've you've been under a rock, no matter where on the political spectrum you are, none of it's good news, folks! I listen in the car, as I walk the dog, as I cook, as I get ready for work, as I get ready for bed. And this was before the shooting yesterday. *It all feels so overwhelming.*

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<sup>2</sup> In this 3 part breakdown of the passage, I am following the analysis of Eugene H. Peterson, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 161-166.

But, I can't look away, because ruminating on it gives me some sense of control, when in reality, I don't have much control.

Do you grasp for control these days?

At one point, listening to one of those podcasts, one morning, in the backseat, my daughter, 4 years old, kept interrupting.

We had been silent for 10 minutes. Just listening to the podcast. Out of nowhere, I hear:

“Daddy I'm wearing purple pants.”

- I turn the podcast down. I remark on how great I think her purple pants are too.

Turning back to the news. “Daddy, my eye is itching.”

- I turn it down. ‘I'm so sorry your eye is itching.’

A few moments later: “Daddy, do I need eye drops.’

- ‘No, I don't think you need eye drops.’

A few moments later: “Daddy, do you like Doritos.’

- She is the queen of the non sequitur.

But also, she was telling me she needed my attention. And I don't think I'd been great at giving her my full attention this week.

When I can grasp so hard for control, I can miss the subtle ways the Spirit is speaking to me. We can see the forest but not the trees; We can miss the places the Spirit is calling us.

We miss: the child, or spouse, or partner asking for attention.

The sibling or parent, who needs a phone call.

The church member, who needs an embrace.

And it's not just relationships. In despairing over the uncontrollable parts of our lives, we can miss the places where we can, in fact, have a real impact:

Like a school board meeting,

Like a protest march,

Like a justice-knox rally.

We can all be Uzzah, grasping to control the uncontrollable.

Grasping so hard, we can miss so much.

There's another reaction, to the unfinished-ness of things in our text.

### **There's Michal, daughter of King Saul, wife of King David.**

Today's text simply says, Michal "looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart."

Perhaps this is resentment. He father was once King. Now this man David, not a rightful heir in any sense, has his day in the sun.

Perhaps, its more criticism. 'Look at that fool dancing, losing himself in worship. With nothing but a loincloth on.' Michal doesn't join the procession. She doesn't participate in worship. She looks on, and judges.

We discussed Michal in Bible study this week. I pointed out one commentator said she is a reminder for us not to be overly critical when we are in worship.

One of our participants, who is a regular attendee Sunday mornings at Westminster, said, 'Well, isn't that what we are all doing?'

To which I said, "What do you mean you're always judging worship?"

To which another of our participants asked, "Can't we do two things at once? Can't you enjoy worship and judge it at the same time? We can't just shut our mind off."

To which, of course, I said, yes. We all do it. As a minster, I can't help it. I go to any other worship service, I'm always thinking in my mind, "Well, that didn't work." Or, "Wow, I've got to try that, sometime."

Sometimes, I overdo it; I'm so caught up in my observation, I don't actually worship. I sit back; I watch; I judge.

If Uzzah is our tendency to seek control, Michal represents our tendency to stand back and critique, to be present but not to participate, to scoff instead of offering support.

It's easier to for a teenager to be mean than to be a friend.

It's simpler for a coworker to point out another's shortcomings than to offer support. It's more convenient to complain about a church, or a school, or a neighborhood, or a city program than to join a committee and get to work.

We can all be Michal, sometimes. Sometimes we react to the unfinished-ness of things by lodging a complaint.

**And then there's David**, dancing with wild abandon before the ark.

David isn't perfect, by the way. Not by a long shot. We talked about that last week. But this week, he's an example to us, because he dances in hope before the Lord. He too was in a place of unknowingness. He wasn't the rightful king. He just made his kingdom in an unknown place, Jerusalem. And yet, in this place of ambiguity, he chose hope. Instead of dread, he chose to dance in the presence of God.

What does it look like, to dance in the presence of God, given the incomplete-ness of life?

Our men's book club just finished a discussion of Jonathan Eig's new biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. simply entitled, *King: A Life*.<sup>3</sup>

Not having lived in the 1960s, much of this history was new to me.

For example, I learned just how difficult the final years of Dr. King's life were. How often he felt like a failure.

On the one hand, the Civil Rights movement was seeking to make greater inroads on inner city poverty and discrimination in hiring in the north, but King was getting nowhere with northern city officials. Some Civil Rights leaders were calling him out of step with the movement. They were saying his nonviolent methods were out of date.

On the other hand, the national media were constantly disparaging him and going after him for his stance against the Vietnam War. White communities labeled him an extremist. To top it all off, there were constant threats made by white supremacists on his life and his family's lives.

On the night before his assassination, King was in a rut.  
*Talk about the unfinished-ness of life.*

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<sup>3</sup> See Jonathan Eig, *King: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023), 546-449.

He was in Memphis. He was invited to speak at the Mason Temple there on April 3, 1968. He almost didn't go. He was feeling sick and exhausted. He asked a friend to fill in.

King was still in his pajamas when his friend called him, told him the church was full, and, "The people...want you, not me," he said. Dr. King got dressed and appeared before the church, giving one of the most memorable speeches of his life.

Feeling defeated. Feeling threatened. In some ways, feeling resigned, he spoke those famous words of hope, his final public words in his lifetime. You've likely heard them before. King's answer to the unfinished-ness of life:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. He said. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life...But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the maintain. I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised land...I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!*

Do you hear it? The hope of that final public address.

That is the dance with God, dancing in the midst of the unfinished-ness of this life:

*Confronted on all sides, with things he could not change.* Almost acknowledging he was at the end of his short life, what did King proclaim? In the face of deep and entrenched racism. Racism and systemic oppression that are still with us today, mind you, he proclaimed, a promised land.

Friends, there is so much out of our control these days.

Unfinished aspects of our lives:

- Incomplete relationships.
- Dreams that do not come to fruition.
- Loved ones that we care about and worry about.
- And as I said last week, looking out at the news, near and far, we've got some difficult days ahead.

There's a part of me, and I bet there's a part of you, that wants to grasp for control of the things that we cannot control.

And there's part of me that wants to despair, and complain, and critique, and grow bitter.

Let's be kind to the Uzzahs and Michals inside each of us.  
They need to be heard.  
But they don't need to run our lives.

Because, no matter what may come,  
as believers in the Risen Christ, **we are called**,  
in the face of the unfinished things of this life, to proclaim hope, in the face of  
despair, to worship the God of resurrection life,  
in the trials of our time, to dance with our whole being.

Because our faith orients us, always:

- to the new day that is before us
- to the God of our lives who is faithful and just
- the one who sends us out to a world that is both broken and yet beautiful,
  - and always full of possibility.

That is the promise.

That is the dance.

That is the hope, that goes out with us, all our days.

And for that we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.