

Exodus 15 An Occasion to Dance¹



There are two times Tripp and I have really danced,
both times many years ago and at weddings.
One, was of course at our wedding
—where we chose the song,
“I Just Want to Dance” by Space Capone as our first dance.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLehVOQy83A> (start right at 49 secs)

The only other time we really danced a lot
was at Jordan Bolick Howie’s wedding
in Charleston in September of 2011.
Jordan and her husband Tom had their reception
on one of the plantations near Charleston
and her parents brought their furniture
down from Hickory and set up
in this old barn like you wouldn’t believe
—it was right on the water
and maybe I should mention their wedding drinks
were blueberry lemonade cocktails
and gin and tonics.
We got caught in a huge rainstorm on the way home.
We dashed from that old barn and got soaking wet;
but it felt wonderful because
we were hot and gross having danced so much.

Ironically in Tripp’s spare time
he is always thinking of ways to choreograph
a dance for us to do in the church retreat talent show
—I’m not making this up.

Ironic because I hate dancing;
I don’t mean I hate it like

¹ Sermon based off the idea of Rev. Dr. James Lowery’s sermon, Dancing on the Distant Shore of Chaos Journal for Preachers, Lent 2005

if you are a dancer, I don't like you
—I just mean I'm so astronomically,
uncomfortable dancing, it is painful.
As many weddings as we go to,
Tripp already knows to go ahead
and find another dance partner
while I go talk and eat more wedding food.

If I weren't so uncomfortable at it,
dancing would be really great.
I love watching professional dancers
—the movements are beautiful,
and complex but made to look
natural, easy, elegant.

I'm sure for some people
dancing is a stress reliever,
an act of expression of joy,
or I can't even imagine, but fun.
Many of you grew up dancing
—remembering all those Greek life socials in college
or dancing your summers away to beach music.

Maybe you met your spouse
out dancing, perhaps.
I've heard it happens.



Dancing can be for celebration
—why they just changed the rules for celebration
in the end zone in the NFL.
The rules have been loosened for the 2017 season,
allowing players to again use the football as a prop,
celebrate as a group and
roll around on the ground if they like.²
Commissioner Roger Goodell...said he [is] looking forward

² <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/05/24/529802443/the-no-fun-league-relaxes-nfl-celebration-rules>

to seeing what players would do
with their newfound freedom of expression.³

Oh yes, I can't wait to see
what sort of dancing that will come from the NFL.



Dancing I think can be
a way of communicating
where words just fall short.

During the summer in Lake Lure
there is a festival to celebrate the film,
Dirty Dancing.

If you're feeling lucky or nostalgic
you can enter in the *Lake Lift Competition*
and try out your skills of the famous lake scene.
I imagine if some of us tried that,
there'd again be no words.

But who knows, you might
just have the time of your life! (*I couldn't help it, that was too easy to pass up!*)

For many cultures,
dancing is religious, worshipful.
Because we are Presbyterian
we are reforming and always being reformed,
dancing is making its way back into churches
—can you imagine?
Mostly it is liturgical dances,
but just a few years ago Paul Kercher
preached at the 8:30 service
and invited people to dance,
and they did!
Dorrie remembers, don't you?

³ ibid



Dancing goes back to our ancestors,
even before Biblical times.

But I think we'll stick to the biblical
because it makes sense to do that here.
Maybe the most famous stories of dancing
is the story when David dances,
you remember that story, right?

When the ark of the covenant
is returned to Jerusalem?

Turns out the ark had been captured
by the Philistines and they kept it with them,
until it caused havoc and chaos wherever they put it.



So finally they sent it back to Israel
but no one wanted to go near it
so they sent it in unmanned cart
with gifts of golden tumors
and two cows to pull it.
You just can't make this stuff up.

The ark came to the house of Abinadab
and its stayed some 20 years 1 Samuel says.

Throughout those 20 years
there was strife and war in Israel.

Is there anything more chaotic than war?
David had to go to war with Saul—utter chaos,
since Saul's son Jonathon was David's best friend.
20 years of chaos.

But then David went to get the ark after all that time.

David was the new king and things seemed
to settle a little,
the chaos was at bay.
And 2 Samuel tells says,
“They carried the ark of God on a new cart,
and brought it out of the house of Abinadab,
which was on a hill.
Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab,
were driving the new cart and Ahio
went in front of the ark.

David and all of 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.” (2 Sam. 6:3-5)
David and all the house of Israel, danced!

Probably a bit lesser known
but dancing even gets a mention in our text,
though you may not have noticed it.
We talk a lot about the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea,
but we don’t talk a lot about the songs
of Moses and Miriam that come after them.
Those last verses about Miriam and the other women,
“Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister,
took a tambourine in her hand;
and all the women went out after her
with tambourines and with dancing.

And Miriam sang to them:
“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown in to the sea.” (Ex. 15:20-21)

Those verses are the oldest verses
—using very archaic Hebrew—
they are some of the oldest verses in the Old Testament.



Think of it, after watching
the on-coming army of Pharaoh,
charging after you
—nervously walking on the dry bed of the Red Sea,
safely getting to the other side and swoosh!
Here comes that water
rushing from its invisible barriers
to swallow up chariots and generals
and horses and all those mean,
vengeful, oppressive Egyptians...

What is not to celebrate right?
The Israelites were now safely delivered
and just as Miriam's song says,
"the Lord has triumphed gloriously!"

We all know what it is to rejoice in our own victory,
safely on the shore of freedom,
safely on the shore of victory,
safely on the far shore of chaos.

That is where the Moses, Miriam,
Aaron and the Israelites found themselves;
looking back at their journey on the **far shore of chaos.**
Would they have had any idea
of what would come next?

The 40 years of chaos?
That is never how life is—
we never know what the future holds.
Those stories are for another day.

That is also where David danced,
on the ***far shore of chaos,***
dancing in joy and celebration
that the presence of the Lord,

the ark, was in Jerusalem.
David was ready to settle in
and make Jerusalem a city
with a name and purpose.
Of course he didn't know about the chaos to come,
Bathsheba, Uriah, Tamar,
the split of his kingdom.
You never can know what the future holds.
Those are stories for another day.



Today we our story is about the God
who brought the people to the far shores of chaos.
When the Hebrew people told this story
of the chaos of the Red Sea
of dancing and rejoicing on the far shore of chaos
they did not tell it so much to talk about it
as a victory over Pharaoh.
That would make the Exodus event
far too narrow in the scope of cosmic significance.

When our Jewish brothers and sisters retell this story,
it is as a story of the God
who delivers them through the sea
onto the far shore, away from chaos.
Chaos is one of those pesky truths about our reality
—it is everywhere and perhaps lurking around every corner.

This is what makes the story so real.
“It seems we're always standing
on the near shore of some chaos or other.”⁴

Can't you just imagine the chaos
of these Hebrews as they fled Egypt?
I imagine it is similar to watching family

⁴ Rev. Dr. James Lowry Dancing On the Distant Shore of Chaos Journal for Preachers, Lent 2005

and neighbors and friends flee Florida.
We watched them last week,
as they searched for gas and left their homes.



The terrible decisions,
standing in each room
quickly, frantically attaching emotional value
to everything and then assessing it all.
My friend Libby Shannon is the chaplain
at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg
and she said this about leaving;
“It’s an extraordinary thing to walk away from your home.
To go room by room,
inventorying your things and determining
what simply has to come with you,
what can be protected and left,
and what is just stuff.”⁵

That is what the Hebrews had to do too
when Moses told them it was time to go.
Gather up only what you can take with you and go.
We forget that fleeing,
even when it is for your safety,
even when it is for your children’s future,
even when God tells you to do it
—fleeing is never easy.
Fleeing is chaotic.

We can feel the chaos of fleeing
and the chaos standing before those rushing waters.
Ancient people with their belongings
stuffed into sacks carried on their backs
and on their donkeys,

⁵ <https://thecraftybeaver.wordpress.com>

standing there look at a chaotic sea
before them and the chaos of being pursued
behind them.

Chaos all around.

Chaotic water, it makes us think about Harvey.



The massive flooding,
the desperate fleeing;
watching the water rise.

The pictures we saw of houses, cars, people
being swept away by raging waters.



The picture of the news station downtown flooding,
office chairs rolling in the currents.



The image of this neighbor
being rescued from their second story bedroom window



and that neighbor being rescued by a canoe.



The mother and her infant daughter
rescued by an airboat

and I can't even bear to show you the picture
of those poor people trapped in filthy water
up to their hips in their wheelchairs
at the nursing home.

Chaos, utter chaos.

No, this isn't a story about victory.

It isn't a story about freedom
and deliverance so to speak.

It isn't about God's strong and mighty arm
—God's power over other lesser gods
in the biblical times.



What this story is, is **a story that is remembered.**

It is **a story that is told.**

It is **a story that is lived,**
even today.

This story of the oldest of song and dance
becomes a vision,

so that we too
“tell how once our people danced

on the far shore of chaos
so in retelling the story,
we might be dreaming of dancing again,
on the far shore of chaos,
no matter the form of chaos.”⁶

It is a vision for Florida.

It is a vision for Houston.

It is a vision for those of us
who feel chaos over the political scene.

It is a mess, isn't? Our political system...

It is a vision for the chaos that is
caring for your parents, older, frail, slower.

For your chaos trying to juggle your life,
your spouse's travel for work
and your kids who have such full calendars
it seems some days
you barely keep your head above the water.

It is a vision for the chaos we feel
at growing older and not remembering
what we have always been able to remember.

A vision for the chaos of trying to stand on
stable financial ground .

It is a vision for the chaos we feel
over the changing of gender roles
and the changes in marriage
and bathrooms
and race
and guns.

It doesn't matter what side you stand on,
it doesn't matter the shore—near or far—of chaos,
you can sense it,
the upheaval.

⁶ Rev. Dr. James Lowry Dancing On the Distant Shore of Chaos Journal for Preachers, Lent 2005

You and I,
we know what chaos feels like.



But this story, is a vision.

A vision for us to see
that God calls us to
dream of dancing one day
when the chaos is no more.

And it isn't just our dream,
it's God's dream too I think;
that dancing would return.

The Midrash, that's the tradition
that grew within the Jewish tradition
to fill in the gaps.
The places in the stories that left things out,
the Midrash stepped in.
Rabbis would gather and talk
and tell stories to fill in those gaps.

They'd argue and wrestle the text.
They'd bring all their questions and hesitations to it.

One of those Midrash stories is about this Red Sea chaos.
It tells how the angels began rejoicing
when the last of the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea
and were safely on the far shore of chaos.
The angels rejoiced as the seas came crashing down
over those mean, vengeful, oppressive Egyptians,
as the sea swallowed up horse and rider,
as it claimed Pharaoh and his army.

God's people were safe!
Praise be!

But the Midrash goes further.
It says that when the angels came to God's throne,

full of victory and dancing and singing,
God rebuked them and said,
“My creations are drowning
and you are singing before me?”⁷

Did you know there is no explicit command
in scripture to rejoice during Passover?
Because the Egyptians died,
because God’s creatures suffered.

No, this story isn’t a victory, it is a vision.
A vision God’s abiding presence
and promise with all of creation.

God is with you on the far shore of chaos
and the Lord is with you if you are drowning.
Who knew that God was playing on both teams?
I guess only God can do that.

One of our very first promises
in our scripture
is that God hovered above the waters.
Water has always been a metaphor for chaos.
Right there at the beginning
we are assured that God is above the chaos

—God’s in control,
not the water,
not the struggle,
not the chaos.



This story is a vision for us to see our God
as the one who bring us to the far shores of chaos,
who will see us through.

It is a lived story
of the God who will be with us
in our haste and chaos
when it is time to flee.

⁷ <http://rorycooney.blogspot.com/2013/03/my-creations-are-drowning-and-you-are.html>

It is the reality of the God
 who will be with us as the waters rise
 and flood our homes and our lives.
 Even a vision for those of us
 who watch from here
 where we sit on the far shore of that chaos.

“This is more than the story
 of something that happened once a long time ago.
 This story of something that happened once
 has become a vision... a vision of something
 that happens now and more,
 it is a vision of something that is going to happen.”⁸

This is a vision for us to live as though
 we believe that with this God,
 it doesn't matter if we are drowning
 or safely standing on the dry shore,
 God is with and for us.

Paul proclaims this vision in a different way
 generations after the Red Sea;
 he retells the vision of dancing when he says,

“If God is for us, who is against us?
³²He who did not withhold his own Son,
but gave him up for all of us,
will he not with him also give us everything else?
³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ?
Will hardship, or distress, or persecution,
or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶As it is written,
'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷No, in all these things
we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us.

⁸ ibid

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death,
nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This journey of life might just be us learning
that the occasion to dance
is there no matter what shore
we occupy, calm or chaotic, near or far.

Our calling is we dance the vision
into our lives,
that nothing will separate from God's love
—no matter the chaos.
“Sing gloriously to the Lord;
for horse and rider he has thrown in the sea.”

What do you think?
Doesn't that ring true?
Any one want to dance?

(Play again, starting at 3:26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLehVOOy83A>)