

## **It's Time For a Party: The Amazing Goodness of God**

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1 Chronicles 15:25-29; 16:1-3,7-13

*So David and the elders of Israel, and the commanders of the thousands, went to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD from the house of Obed-edom with rejoicing. And because God helped the Levites who were carrying the ark of the covenant of the LORD, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams. David was clothed with a robe of fine linen, as also were all the Levites who were carrying the ark, and the singers, and Chenaniah the leader of the music of the singers; and David wore a linen ephod. So all Israel brought up the ark of the covenant of the LORD with shouting, to the sound of the horn, trumpets, and cymbals, and made loud music on harps and lyres.*

*As the ark of the covenant of the LORD came to the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing; and she despised him in her heart. 1 Chronicles 15:25-29 (NRSV)*

*They brought in the ark of God, and set it inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and they offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before God. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD; and he distributed to every person in Israel—man and woman alike—to each a loaf of bread, a portion of meat and a cake of raisins. 1 Chronicles 16:1-3 (NRSV)*

*Then on that day David first appointed the singing of praises to the LORD by Asaph and his kindred.*

*O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name,  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
Sing to him, sing praises to him,  
tell of all his wonderful works.  
<sup>1</sup>Glory in his holy name;*

*let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.  
Seek the LORD and his strength,  
seek his presence continually.  
Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles, and the judgments he uttered,  
O offspring of his servant Israel,  
children of Jacob, his chosen ones.* 1 Chronicles 16:7-13 (NRSV)

I stand here today in the pulpit and preach in the pulpit, and that's unusual for me if you aren't a regular here at St. Luke's. I do that to see if maybe I can capture just a little of the amazing Holy Spirit that worked through those who stood in this pulpit before. The founding pastor, Durwood Fleming, Kenneth Shamblin, Walter Underwood, James W. Moore, broke open God's word for us and spoke to our hearts in such powerful ways over the last 75 years. So I'm honored to be here and be a part of this day.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our heart, God, that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

So we've been talking about parties this month and thinking about this particular celebration. And the one we're looking at in Scripture today is one of my favorites. Let me give you the background, so you understand what's going on. The Ark of the Covenant, which is the box that contains the Ten Commandment tablets that Moses received, had been captured from the army of Israel by the Philistines. And after a period of time because of a number of things certainly King David's victories in battle and his great diplomacy. Also, because of a plague that came upon the Philistines, they chose to return the Ark to Israel. When the Ark came back to Israel King David was still worried about it, so he kept it in homes outside the city of Jerusalem because he believed that it might be that the city of Jerusalem would be sacked. After a while, as a time of greater peace and prosperity began to grow, David decided it was time to bring the Ark of the Covenant out of those homes outside the city into the city itself and make it the center of their community and religious life. So what did he do, but he threw a parade? He threw a party.

There were musicians galore, as the Ark of the Covenant is being brought in by the Levites. There are trumpet players, and harpists and lyres and cymbals, and singers. And my favorite part is when King David himself dancing in front of the Ark as it's brought into the city. And very

frankly, he's just wearing a loincloth. It says a "linen ephod" in the Scripture. I just love that part.

I thought I might recreate that here for you today. I can actually hear you through the miracle of live streaming, shouting, "No, please don't!" No, we're not going to do that, but I do want us to think about what that experience might have been like 3000 years ago. At the time, the community was just so full of joy and excitement and hope. There was no temple yet, or church, so they put the Ark of the Covenant in a tent. The temple was just a dream in David's heart at that time. But the joy and celebration were palpable.

You know, it may be a stretch to think on that day just 75 years ago when 450 people gathered in the auditorium at Lamar High School to begin a brand-new church that there was that same sense of excitement. But I bet there was. What a celebration there must have been. There was no church building, so they had to meet in the borrowed auditorium. But the Holy Spirit was there, and the same dreams and hopes were there.

What I'd like to do today is to think about how we celebrate. Celebrate those 75 years, how they celebrated 3000 years ago when they brought the Ark into the city of Jerusalem. And see what we might learn from them.

Here's the first thing we can do when we celebrate. We celebrate by thanking God for the people who have been to this church. In the Scripture that we read, I left out part of it, and I cut it out really for the sake of our associate pastors who are reading Scripture. It goes this way, "Asaph was the chief, and next to him in rank were Zechariah and Jaaziel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-Edom and Jeiel. These were to play the lyres and harps..." (I Sam. 16:5) I think that's funny, but when you read these historical books of Scripture what you find is that there are lots and lots of just names. Names of people you have no idea of who they really are. But they're listed there. Why?

That's because they're just names; those are people. And while we might not know who they are, God knows who they are, and they're important. I have been rereading this last week *Upon This Rock*, which was written for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St. Luke's, and it's full of names. You can have one if you want one. Just let us know here at the church, and we'll be glad to get you one. You can come by and pick it up, or we'll get it to you somehow. But I read it, and it's so interesting. It's like it carries you back in time to the founding. You see all these names of people who did this or did that, or who led this or led that, or offered this or offered that. And I

don't know most of the names though I do know some of them for sure. But I don't know most of those names. But, gosh, I'm thankful for them! I'm thankful for all that God has done through those people.

I think of people like Grace and Joe Ross. Grace was the Director of Christian Education, and Durwood Fleming hired her here. She made such an impact for so many years on the families of people here at St. Luke's. Joe and Grace had no children of their own, and so the children of St. Luke's were their children; that's the way they viewed it. When Joe and Grace died, they left their entire estate to St. Luke's, saying, "This is our family. These are our people."

I could go on and on, but I realize how many I'd leave out. At the end of today's service, there is a postlude, which was written especially for today by Rob Landes, and I hope you'll stay and listen to that postlude. And as you do, we'll be scrolling the names of our charter members of St. Luke's.

Those aren't obviously all the people we give thanks to God for. But they represent those people on whose shoulders we stand as we seek to do God's work in this place. We celebrate by remembering and thanking God for the people.

Here's the second thing. We celebrate by remembering the wonderful works that God has done. Not wonderful works that *we* have done, but the wonderful works that God has done.

Listen to what the Scripture said today that we read: Starting on verse seven. "Then on that day David first appointed the singing of praises to the Lord by Asaph and his kindred. O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wonderful works...remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles..." (1 Chronicles 16:7-9, 12)

When I watched that video that we played earlier in the service today that our team put together, it made me cry. I watched it four times, and it makes me cry every time when I think about what God has done here. There was big stuff, like new facilities that are built that are used to do God's work in this place. I think about the new Outreach Ministries that are launched, the incredible worship experiences that were put together. But honestly, when I think about the real wonderful works of God that are happening through the ministry of St. Luke's, they are smaller and more subtle and more personal, but maybe more powerful.

I think the impact, the wonderful works of God are in the student who comes to know Christ personally for the very first time on a youth retreat or a youth trip. I think about the family

who walks away from our children's ministry program every Sunday, so grateful that their children and their family are being shaped by a God of grace and love rather than by a God of anger and judgment. I think about the singer who is standing in our choir and has found authentic community, a place to really belong and to work side by side for something that is offered to God and that sense of saying, "This is my place, I belong here."

I think about the adult who takes Disciple Bible Study and in week 20 - they've been in the church all of their lives, and then in week 20 of Disciple Bible Study, they say, "Oh, my gosh, I get it now! I think I understand this narrative of God's love that we find in Scripture."

I think the wonderful works of God are in the woman who is in the hospital week after week after week, month after month, and somebody from the church sees her most days of every week. I think about the people who look at the list of prayer requests every single day, and either in the Prayer Room here at St. Luke's or at home, they pray those names, and they're vessels of God's power and love. I think about the man who is going through a divorce, and he comes to St. Luke's, and here he finds a friend who will walk with him through that difficult time. I think about that ordinary family who faces the unimaginable loss of a child and sits in our worship service every Sunday just clinging to the hope and the promise of eternal life. And that's how they get through the days.

I think about the young couple who comes to find an adult Sunday school class here at St. Luke's, and that class becomes their friends. And all of the class members have children near the same time, and those children grow up together. And these people are the foundation of the community of their life. I think about the senior adult who comes to this church every Sunday and sits in the same place, in the same pew, every single Sunday. And they find here an anchor in a world that is changing all around them.

I think about the woman who walked away from the church 20 years ago because of a trauma or a disappointment or discrimination. And then she catches a worship service on television and comes back again, comes back home again, and is welcomed with open arms.

Friends, the wonderful works of God are not in the big things but in those small personal things that happen here in this place through these people. That's the wonderful works of God.

Some years ago, a young person was thinking about the ordained ministry and asked me, "Do you think you have lived a life well lived?" And first of all, I was a little annoyed because I thought I still had a lot of life left, and I didn't need to be thinking about if I had a "life well

lived.” But I thought about it, and I thought, “My goodness, to the extent that I’ve given a part of my life to the church, this community of people who walk through life with joys and pains together embracing the very presence of God as they walk together. That’s a life well-lived! And I’m so honored that I can be a part of that. We celebrate by thanking God for God’s wonderful works.

Third, we celebrate by blessing others any way we can. Listen again to verse two in our Scripture, “When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord; and he distributed to every person in Israel – man and woman alike – to each a loaf of bread, a portion of meat and a cake of raisins.” (1 Chronicles 16:2-3).

Celebration was something to be shared, to be shared with everyone; everyone around was to get a piece of the celebration.

Friends, this church is one whose DNA is built around making a difference in our community. That we recognize that God has placed us here, has provided resources for us, to be used not just for us but for others whether you’re thinking about St. Luke’s Day School or the After School Program, or Amazing Place, or Christian Community Service Center, or Bridges Academy, or reVision, or Nick Finnegan Counseling Center, or our merger with Gethsemane, or the launching of The Story Houston, or our creation and partnership with Connect Community, or our African Fellowship, or our Oasis Worship community in Spanish, or this year the creation of PX Project, the workforce development program. So much of who we are, so much of our DNA is built around being able to make a difference in the community. That is the way we celebrate. We celebrate by the offering of ourselves to others.

One of the most powerful images that I’ve found among the stories I have found comes from the fourth century. The last pagan emperor of Rome was Julian, often called Julian the Apostate because he’d been a Christian and turned back to the pagan gods of Rome. He kept regretting that Christianity was growing so fast and that it was pulling people away from these Roman gods. He called Christians *atheists* because they didn’t believe in the Roman gods. Here’s what he writes in the fourth century: “Atheism [which is what he called the Christian faith] has been specially advanced through the loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar and that the godless Galileans (again the Christians) care not only for their own poor but for ours

as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.” (Julian the Apostate, Fourth Century).

It is not just the DNA of St. Luke’s but the DNA of the whole Christian faith that is built for others. It’s why for our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we created this “Serve 75” Booklet – and it contains 75 different ways we can be involved in service to our community so that our 75<sup>th</sup>-anniversary party is designed to be a party for others as well as for us. It’s why these children collected these marvelous piggy banks to be given to others. We celebrate by giving ourselves away to the community around us.

Where do we go from here, friends? Where do we go from here? What is ahead for us? What do you think the next 75 years hold? And how should we face it?

I’m reminded of the funny story about the older pastor who’s visiting with a young man who’s thinking about getting married. The pastor says to the young man, “Son, I don’t know what you think marriage is like, but whatever it is, it’s not like that!”

We don’t know what the future holds. What we think it’s going to be like it’s not going to be like that at all. If we’ve learned nothing in the year 2020, we’ve learned that.

How do we take the Gospel forward? How do we continue to move the DNA of this congregation forward, carrying the Gospel out in word and deed?

I think the answer is found in verse eleven of our Scripture today. It says, “Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually.” (1 Chronicles 16:11).

I think about the last 75 years and all of the challenges that have been faced. And they’ve been faced by simply seeking the presence of God, trusting in the strength of God. The next 75 years aren’t going to be like the last 75. We live in a different age, a different world. We live in a time when the question isn’t “What church do you go to?” but whether you go to church at all or whether you believe at all. We have much work that needs to be done. We’re surrounded by all sorts of challenges. But we’ll face them, and we’ll face them by seeking God’s presence continually and by trusting in God’s strength.

I don't think that Durward Fleming danced in a loincloth on that first Sunday in the processional down the aisles of the Lamar High School auditorium. But I know his heart danced. I find it interesting that the hymn that they chose to sing is so apropos for us today. It is a prayer, and the text was written by Harry Emerson Fosdick, and at that time, it was a very new hymn. I simply want our closing prayer to be the words of that hymn. I want to read one verse, and then I want you to sing it with me. Let us pray.

*“God of grace and God of glory,  
on thy people pour thy power;  
crown the ancient church's story;  
bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.” Amen.*