

We're on the 5th week of our 9 week series of OT readings about King David. There's a song that describes perfectly how David probably felt at this point in his life:

*Oh, what a beautiful mornin',*

*Oh, what a beautiful day.*

*I got a beautiful feelin'*

*Ev'rything's goin' my way.<sup>1</sup>*

I suspect that's the way King David felt. It seemed like everything was going his way. Everything seemed to be clicking. It looked like he had hit the sweet spot of his life.

A quick recap. David had gone from lowly shepherd boy to mighty general to king. He had survived all the intrigue of King Saul's royal court. He had been made King, not only by God's anointing, but also by the acclaim of the people. He had just established a new capital city in Jerusalem. The King of what we now call Lebanon had sent fabulous cedar trees to David, and David used the cedar to construct a new palace. God seemed to be blessing everything he did.

Apparently, David is feeling very thankful for the way God has blessed him. And so he wants to do something for God. And so David decides to go and bring home the Ark. This is the Ark of the Covenant. For those of you who like movies, this is the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* Ark. Quick flashback. God instructed Moses to build the Ark. It was a large wooden box with gold plating and an elaborate gold lid. The box contained the tablets of the 10 Commandments, along with some other items. The gold lid was symbolically God's throne. This made the Ark a very holy item. It was so holy that no one was allowed to touch it. Instead, they carried it around on poles that were threaded through built-in metal loops on the ark. And even then, only a small subgroup of Levites was allowed to touch the poles. And even they were warned that if they touched the Ark, and not the poles, they would die.

Fast forward a few hundred years. When David was a boy, the Ark had been lost in a battle with the Philistines. But the Philistines kept having problems with it. So they loaded it on the back of an ox cart, and hooked it up to a couple of cows.

Without being driven, the cows headed straight for the border. When the Ark got to the Jewish side of the border, it was taken to the house of Abinadab. And there it sat for 20 years.

Which brings us to 2Samuel ch6. David is going to the border to bring the Ark back. He probably has 2 motives. First and foremost, I believe that David truly wants to honor God by taking the Ark out of obscurity and bringing it to his new capital city of Jerusalem. I truly believe that David wants to honor God by having the ark in the capital city where everyone can honor it rather than letting it languish in some border farmhouse. But there is another possible motivation. There is a secondary benefit to David. Having the Ark in Jerusalem will legitimate and solidify his kingdom. By having such an ancient and powerful religious relic in his capital, the implicit message would be that God really is on David's side. I think David has God's honor

---

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma*

chiefly in mind. Nevertheless, it will also be of personal benefit to himself. Which brings us to our OT lesson (bulletins).

v1 begins with David getting an enormous crowd together. They're going to form a big parade to bring home the Ark.

v2 David takes them with him to Baale-judah, a border town with the Philistines. v3, They load the Ark on a new cart, and the procession sets out from Abinadab's house. And Abinadab's sons, Uzzah and Ahio drive the oxen. v5 David and all the house of Israel dance before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. It's a joyous procession, a great parade.

But then, something terrible happens. It's so terrible that the editors of the lectionary skipped over these verses. They probably did it because it is a difficult little section. It probably made them uncomfortable. So they did the easy thing and jumped right over. But when something makes me uncomfortable in scripture, that's often a sign that I should pay attention to it. So let me read a couple of the verses we didn't read this morning.

v6 "When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it."

v7 "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God."

Whoa. That should get your attention. That should make you uncomfortable. That should make you want to skip over this section. The oxen shook the cart. And so Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the Ark so that it doesn't fall. And God strikes him dead. Yes, it's possible that Uzzah was so terrified he dropped dead of a heart attack. But whatever happens, he touches the ark. And he's dead. Why would God do such a thing? One minute Uzzah is trying to steady the ark. And the next minute he's dead. The thought that God might possibly do such a thing both scares me and make me angry.

That's why I love David so much. David shares those same emotions. v8 says "David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah." v9 says "David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, 'How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?'"

God has rained on David's parade. In fact, God has rained death on David's parade. Everything is no longer going David's way. And that makes David pause, and think. But actually, that's not such a bad thing. It's important to pause and think at times. Because we do the same things Uzzah and David did in this chapter. We are prone to the same kinds of mistakes.

First, they forgot to have a healthy respect for God's power. I have a healthy respect for electricity. I won't plug my keys into an electrical outlet. I have a healthy respect for natural gas. I won't fill the room with fumes and then light a match. I know these things have power. And I treat them with the respect they deserve. Yet God's power is far greater than the power of

LP&L. And so I have to pause and step back, and ask myself, "Do I always take God seriously? Do I have respect for his power?"

Second, David and Uzzah took God for granted. Uzzah grew up in a house where the Ark was kept for 20 years. His familiarity with the Ark probably dulled Uzzah's sense of who God really was. Also, David had a close relationship with God. Perhaps it's a case of familiarity breeds contempt, or at least indifference.

And so I have to pause and step back, and ask myself, "Do I always treasure my relationship with God? Do I take God for granted?"

Third, David and Uzzah were doing things their way, not God's way. God originally said to carry the Ark around by the poles. It was the Philistines who first transported it by ox cart. So when David and Uzzah decide to transport the Ark on a cart, that innovation is not an improvement. If it had been carried by the poles, it would have been much more stable. As it was, the Ark slipped and Uzzah made the mistake of trying to keep the ark from falling off of a cart where it should have never been placed in the first place. And so I have to pause and step back, and ask myself, "Am I trying to do things Jim Haney's way? Or am I trying to do things God's way?"

It turns out this is a story about trying to control God. It's about trying to keep God in a box. If we think we can control God or use God for our ends, we're in trouble. If we have a healthy respect for God and humbly ask, "How can the things of God come into my care?" we're in much better shape spiritually.

That's what David learns. The Ark remained in the house of a local person named Obed for 3 months. And during those 3 months, God blessed Obed and all of his household. And so, v12, when David hears that Obed has been blessed by the presence of the Ark, he goes to bring it finally to Jerusalem. And this time, v13, instead of putting it on the back of an ox cart, they carry it, they bear it. They carry the Ark to Jerusalem on poles, just like they're supposed to do.<sup>2</sup>

And then we hear something wonderful. v14 "David danced before the LORD with all his might."

Don't miss the deep significance here. David doesn't act like a dignified king. Instead, he dances like a common person. He dances before God to show his love for God. And he shows all the people that the king should serve God, not vice-versa. David isn't using God for his own ends. David is worshipping God with all of his might. David is worshipping God with abandon, and he doesn't care what anyone else thinks.

In fact, we hear in v16, that David's wife Michal thinks it's very undignified. But David doesn't care about his own dignity. David simply cares about honoring God. David has moved the Ark from the frontier to the capital. But David has moved himself as well. David

---

<sup>2</sup> 1Chron 15:2,15

makes a move from trying to honor God while receiving fringe benefits for himself to honoring God simply for the sake of honoring God.

And that's an important reminder to all of us God does want to draw near to us. That was the whole point of the Ark of the Covenant in the first place. It was a tangible sign of God's presence in the midst of his people. That's the whole reason that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, to be in our midst, to be with us. God wants to be near us.

And God wants to bless us. He wants to shower his grace and his abundance upon us. But God wants to do so on his terms. Not because we demand it. Not because we think that we've earned it. Instead, God blesses us because of who he is: gracious and full of compassion, abounding in steadfast love. But it's not our job to dictate policy to God. Instead, it is God's pleasure to extend his grace to us in the manner that he prescribes.

And for us, that way is clear: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," Jesus says. And to those who come to him in faith, he gives an incredible gift. We are given access and relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

If the Hebrew people touched the Ark, they would die. But we can touch God and live. We are promised that we can touch Jesus Christ through the sacrament of his Body and Blood. And his touch brings life. And that is something we should never take for granted.

Let us come to God's table with reverence and awe and respect; so that we may receive his mercy; so that we may find his grace. Let us approach the God's table with confidence. Not confidence in our own deserving. But confidence in God's love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. James P. Haney V  
St. Paul's-on-the Plains Episcopal Church