

## David, Uzzah, and the Ark of the Lord

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 6:1-15

Before I read the Bible text, let me try to give you a larger sense of its context in the life of David. Last Sunday we heard about Saul's death. Saul had died on the battlefield, David has sung his song of lament, and it seemed like everything was ready for David to take over the throne. It seems as though the door is wide open for David to claim his anointing and become the king of Israel.

But the transition is not smooth. David does not become king immediately after Saul dies. He is acclaimed king over the tribe of Judah, but for 2 years the rest of the tribes actually give their allegiance to Saul's son Ish-Bosheth. There is conflict between Ish-Bosheth's people and David's people. It's actually a brutal civil war which sets brother against brother. After a lot of death and destruction, and some treachery too, David comes out victorious. He becomes king of the 12 tribes.

Once on the throne, king David shows himself to be a shrewd politician. He moves to consolidate his power. The first thing he does is establish a new capitol city. He takes the city of Jerusalem from the Jebusites and makes it his city. Once his capitol is in place, he works on securing his border. He goes to war with the Philistines and soundly defeats them, thus reducing the threat from outside enemies. So he's establishing control. And now, as a further step, David wants to bring the ark to Jerusalem. It's never been in Jerusalem before. Up to this time, the ark's regular home was the town of Shiloh. But David wants to bring the ark to his capitol and set it up in the Tabernacle. That will make Jerusalem both the political and the religious center of the nation, which will further consolidate his control over the country.

So David sets out to get the ark and bring it to Jerusalem. As it happens, because of some misdeeds recorded early in the book of Samuel, the ark isn't at Shiloh like it's supposed to be; it's at the house of a man named Abinidab. Here's what happens when David goes to get it. Read 2 Samuel 6:1-15

So David and 30,000 of his closest friends make a plan to take the Ark to Jerusalem. They load it onto a brand new ox cart. They enlist the ancient equivalent of a marching band to accompany the procession. It's a great festive parade. But then somewhere along the way, the oxen stumble, the cart carrying the ark lurches, and one of the caretakers, a man named Uzzah reaches out and takes hold of the ark to steady it. He tries to keep it from falling. But when he grasps the ark the Lord's anger bursts out, and Uzzah falls over dead.

I wonder, did you hear this story as a child? Was it a story that you were told in your youth? If it was, what was your reaction? Did it bother you? Was there part of you that thought, 'Whoa! Wait a minute! Uzzah was trying to help! Does he really deserve to die!?' 'He was trying to protect the ark! Why does God kill him?!' If you did have that reaction, you're in good company. David is right there with you. "Then David was angry because the Lord's wrath had broken out against Uzzah." David is angry with the Lord for this outburst. We know from the Psalms that David wasn't afraid to ask God angry questions. He seems to do that here. David is not just angry; he is also afraid. He asked the question, "How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me!?" So David's reaction is just like ours: Anger: "Wait God! that's not fair!" And then fear: "Who are you Lord? How can I live with you?"

What explanations can we offer for this story? What words can we say to the fear and anger that David feels and that we feel. At one level, there's a fairly easy explanation for why Uzzah gets punished. If you read the parallel account of this story in 1 Chronicles 15, you find that explanation. 1 Chronicles says that this happened because David and the rest of the people didn't follow God's rules for the proper transportation of the ark. In Numbers 4, it says very clearly that the ark is supposed to be carried on poles by 6 Levites; it's not supposed to be carried by 2 oxen in a cart. David chose the wrong transportation method. He disobeyed the law and Uzzah paid the price for David's mistake. The ark isn't just some sort of box that you can treat the way you want! The ark is holy! As verse 2 reminds us, it's "the ark of God which is called by the Name, the name of

the Lord almighty who is enthroned between the cherubim and the ark.” David doesn’t properly respect God’s instructions for handling this holy thing; Uzzah pays the price.

So on one level those words from Chronicles explains things, but is it completely satisfying? Does it get rid of all your questions? Does it dispel all your fear? Not for me. I still have a question: I see how David broke the rules, but why is the penalty so severe? Why does God get so angry in this story? Is it just because of a failure to follow the rules? Or is there something deeper going on here? What’s at stake in this story? What is God protecting with these super-strict rules about handling the ark? What’s at stake, that there should be such a severe punishment?

Here’s what I think God is protecting in this fearful story. God is saying to David, “I am not your nail gun.” What do I mean by that? A couple of years ago I got my own nail gun. For those of you who don’t know, a nail gun is a tool that is shaped like a gun. It has a trigger and a magazine, you load up the magazine with nails. I think you can put 50 nails in the magazine of my nail gun. You attach the gun to an air compressor with a hose. The compressor builds up pressure into the gun and the air pressure shoots the nails right into the wood! A couple of weeks ago I put up big sheets of siding on my daughter’s shed. You just hold up the board and, ‘Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!’ You shoot the nails right in there. Easy peasy. I used to have to hold the nails one at a time and try to hit them with a hammer - try not to hit my finger. Not anymore. Because I have a nail gun. A nail gun is an amazing tool. You can get a lot done with a nail gun.

But God is not a nail gun. God is not a tool for helping you get your projects done. David is in the middle of a project. He’s trying to consolidate power in his Kingdom. David has a strategic plan. He wants to unite all the tribes around him. He will secure the borders by defeating the Philistines, he will unite Israel by making Jerusalem his political capitol, and then, the icing on the cake, the final piece of the puzzle, he will centralize worship in Jerusalem by bringing the ark and then everything will be in place. Is David starting to use God as a tool to accomplish his political purposes?

Think about this: Whose idea is it to bring the Ark to Jerusalem? Did God ask David to do this? Is this about God’s will and God’s strategic purposes; or is David getting close to thinking of the ark as a powerful tool – like a nail gun – a tool that he can grasp in his clenched fist and use to nail down control of his kingdom.

If that’s what David is doing, he’s giving into a seductive temptation that has tripped up many kings and many ordinary people. Do kings and politicians sometimes use God’s name as their tool, their nail gun to nail down their power. Absolutely. Not every politician who says ‘God Bless America’ means it like a prayer. A lot of them say it as a kind of political tool. A way to nail down votes with part of their constituency. A way to manipulate.

Another example: Why do they crown the kings and queens of England in the church of Westminster Abby? Why in a church? It’s not just piety. I can’t say what’s in the heart of all the individual kings, but I can safely say that many of the kings chose to be crowned in church and use religious ceremony as a tool for securing their own power. It suggests that they rule by God’s choice and blessing. It suggests that they rule by divine right. It consolidates their power.

It’s not just kings that do this; the whole health and wealth gospel does this. Any of those TV preachers who tell you that if you give to their ministry, God will shower you with blessing, he will heal your aches and pains he will take away your debt, they’re treating God like a nail gun – a tool for your project. A power to accomplish your goals. There’s even a bit of this in us when we come to God in prayer and ask him to help us with a long list of our needs and priorities, rather than praying as Jesus taught us, “Hallowed be your name. Your will be done.’

God does not like being treated like a tool. God will not be a means to your end. He is a Holy God. He is the Holy One enthroned between the cherubim. He is not the tool of kings; he is the King of kings. He is not the instrument of lords; he is the Lord of lords. The lightening the hail and the stormy winds do his bidding. The trees of the field clap their hands before him and the mountains leap like lambs. This is not a God you put on an ox cart; this is not a God you reach out and steady like he’s your elderly aunt. When Uzzah reaches out

and steadies the ark it's a perfect representation of the mindset that sees God as a tool to be grasped. And God will not be grasped. He's the one who holds the universe in the palm of his hand.

David is first angry about what happens to Uzzah. Then he is afraid. And then he seems to change. For the rest of the trip to Jerusalem, it's very clear that if he ever thought of the ark of the covenant as a tool, all such thoughts are gone. In the rest of the story, he is completely surrendered to God's Holiness and power. David dances before the Lord. Dance is the perfect form of surrender, right? Dance is surrender. When you really dance you surrender yourself to the music. And David really dances. He dances with all his might. He dances like nobody is watching. David totally loses himself in his dance.

Notice that David's dancing forms a contrast with Uzzah's grabbing. When Uzzah reaches out and takes hold of the ark to steady it; that's the ultimate symbol of trying to manage and control God. When David dances before the Lord it's the ultimate act of self-abandonment. When David dances God isn't just managing him, he is utterly surrendered to his King. No Israelite watching David dance before the Lord would have any doubt about who was the Lord and who was the instrument.

I want to go back to that question David asks in the middle of the story: "How can the ark of the Lord come to me!? How can a person like me live next to the holiness of God?" A thousand years later, God answers David's question. The Ark comes to God's people. Not just a decorative box; the One who is called by the name of the Lord almighty and is enthroned between the cherubim comes in person, he comes in the flesh. He comes as a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

His coming changes our ability to live in the presence of a Holy God. It used to be that no one could touch the ark or handle it. But now the holy and living God is carried by a 14-year-old girl, and held in the coarse hands of common shepherds. It used to be that an ox cart was an inappropriate thing to carry God's glory, but now the One who is the glory of God shares a stable with the oxen and makes his bed in their straw. It used to be that we couldn't touch God, but now God lets himself be touched by regular people and look what happens! In our story the Holy God and the sinful human come into contact and the sinful human dies, Uzzah dies. But what happens when Jesus comes in the flesh and lets himself be handled? Who dies then? Jesus dies. Jesus is struck down. He lets himself be struck down so that we could live in fellowship with a holy and majestic God. Now, because of Jesus, any bruised sinner can stumble into the presence of the immortal God and receive from him grace upon grace upon grace.

And how should we respond to such amazing grace? Maybe we could do like David. Maybe we could dance. Oh no, some of you are saying, please not that. I'm not much of a dancer. That's OK. Me neither. Don't worry, dancing is surrender and there are other ways to surrender. There are other ways of offering yourself as a living sacrifice, as Paul says. Sometimes dancing looks like surrendering yourself to the work of caring for someone, someone young or maybe someone old who completely depends on you. Sometimes dancing looks like a group of men and women cleaning up in the kitchen long after the funeral luncheon has ended – wiping the counters, doing the dishes. Sometimes dancing looks like a four-hour council meeting where a whole room full of people stay hopeful and attentive and kind right up to the end. Sometimes dancing looks like a room full of people singing Jerusalem the Golden at the top of their lungs while fighting back the tears.

However it looks, it is the joyful posture of a soul who knows that the holy Lord of the Universe, the One who is infinitely more than we could ask or imagine, is also the One who has given his life for us, the one who will never let us go.

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