

“Dancing with God”

2 Samuel 6: 1-23

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Most of us can't read this story about the Ark of the Covenant without thinking about the great Indiana Jones' movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You remember the plot. Indiana, the great archaeologist searches for the Ark, and the Nazis are also looking for it. The rush to find it was based on the thought that whoever controlled the Ark would have the power to control heaven and earth, whoever possesses the Ark would possess the power of God. Well ... we'll see.

In our story this morning, the Ark has been in storage for a long time in the household of Abinadab. The Philistines, the great enemies of Israel, had captured it once and returned it, where now it has been gathering dust in Abinadab's barn. Nobody wanted it, and nobody really needed it. The story tells us that David wanted it. David is now firmly enthroned as the king in Jerusalem. He has united the tribes around his kingship, and now he wants to centralize worship in Jerusalem. The new king of newly united nation wanted a unified place of worship. The Ark was a splendid thing to behold. Steven Spielberg got that right, at least. Made of acacia wood and plated with gold, it resembled a box. Its lid of solid gold was called the mercy seat. On top were two cherubim, representations of awesome heavenly beings, with outstretched wings, and they framed the space that surrounded the mercy seat where, it was believed, that God was enthroned, “enthroned on the cherubim.” Inside of the Ark were three items: the tablets of stone that Moses received on Sinai; a jar of manna which fed the people during their wandering in the wilderness; and the Aaron's rod that budded. These objects reminded them that God was always working among them: with the tablets God commanded them; with manna he provided for them; and the rod reminded them of God's protection. Commandment, protection, provision.

Contrary to the premise of the movie, the Ark did not have any magical properties. It wasn't a source of power they could plug into. The Hebrews believed that God worked in their history. God wasn't found in the warm glow of emotion, nor was God an abstract concept, or a remote legislator, stern and exacting. God was personal, in their midst, saving, redeeming, judging, at work to make them a people. Above all else, God was loving, and God entered into covenants with them, sharing with them dignity and life. The Ark reminded them of all of this. That's what its purpose was: to present the evidence of the God with whom they had to deal. It wasn't just a piece of old memorabilia, but the display of what God was up to in their lives and world, what God was doing and would continue to do. It is like this sanctuary or the organ, or the bread and cup at the Lord's Supper. God works through these material things to bring to us God's presence and life. “Holy things for holy people to make us holy,” I say in the communion prayer. That's the heart of what the sacraments are. God takes ordinary things to bring us God's extraordinary grace and presence.

So, you see why David wants the Ark in Jerusalem. It puts God at the center of the life of his people. It provides a focus that would center the people on God's rule, not just David's government. **It makes worship the most important thing the people can do.** But along the way of moving the Ark to Jerusalem something happens. And this is where the story gets dramatic and interesting. There is a person in this parade who is not worshipping. His name is Uzzah. And this is a story that bothers me. They parade the Ark on a cart, and they jostle it. The Ark threatens to topple over, and Uzzah reaches out his hand to stabilize it, and he is struck dead immediately. Why? Why did Uzzah die? Why did God smite him? It doesn't fit well with the idea of a loving God who calls us to repentance, who seeks out people to give them life. It seems so unfair. After all, Uzzah was a priest who was charged with caring for holy things. He was only doing God a favor, wasn't he? He was only helping, right? If that's how God is, maybe we should put a warning on our bulletins: Beware of God, for God is a wild thing!

Let's probe a little deeper. What happened to Uzzah was the conclusion of his life-long obsession of managing the Ark. The clue is found in the sentence: “They carried the Ark of God on a new cart.” That's not how the Ark was supposed to be carried. Moses had left specific instructions that it was not to be touched with human hands and that it was to be carried on poles inserted through rings on the side of the Ark. It was to be carried reverently by the Levite priests.

Uzzah, however, had other thoughts. He defied the instructions. He decided to replace all these consecrated persons who were appointed to carry the Ark with that new dazzling technology: the Philistine cart, drawn by massive oxen, with the slickest wooden wheels. The Tesla of its time. Uzzah wants to manage God. Uzzah wants to control the divine. Uzzah had God right where he wanted him, in the box, so to speak. Instead of losing himself in worship, Uzzah keeps God safe in his box, away from the dust and muck of life. But God will not be managed or controlled, by kings, or priests, politicians, or Presbyterian ministers, or congregations.

God does not need us to be managed by us. God does not need us to be cared for by us. God cares for us, and worship is where God wants to care for us. Contrary to all appearances, we are not in charge of our worship. Oh, yes, we think we are. We fashion beautiful orders of worship, craft lovely prayers and meaningful sermons, sing polished music, and dutifully go through the motions. And I am thankful that unlike Uzzah, we follow our Directory of Worship that has instructions and advice on worship. Worship is not something we slapdash together. All of which is well and good. All of this helps people find God, build lives of service and meaning and hope. We begin our Christian journey in worship in baptism. Here we find forgiveness; we hear God speak in scripture, sermon, and song. Here we are moved to serve and to give, to go forth to build a more just and peaceful world. We enjoy our worship and work in the church.

But when you are in the church for a while, something subtle might happen, We get to be in charge, and soon the Spirit of life that awakened us becomes the Spirit of control and management. And then something dies within us in our attempts to massage the divine. If I hear the story right, the constant need to stay in charge of God will result in death, not life. Our spirits will wither and die. David observes all of this, and the text says: “David was afraid of the Ark of the Lord that day.” The God of the Ark is alive, unpredictable, will not be manipulated or controlled. God is a wild thing! God will not be used for any political or any other purposes. And so, David leaves the Ark in the house of Obed-edom, like it’s some kind of nuclear waste. Not in my backyard, thank you very much. But David observes that the household of Obed-edom is blessed by the presence of the Ark, and so he retrieves the ark and begins the parade again.

The story tells us that on the way to Jerusalem David danced before the Lord with all his might. That’s with abandonment. And that’s no stately Virginia Reel; it’s like get down! And when he finally arrives in Jerusalem, his wife Michal sees him “leaping and dancing before the Lord.” Although the word “worship” is not mentioned in the story, that is exactly what David is doing. Instead, the word “dancing” is used; it becomes a metaphor for what worship is. If you have ever watched two dancers, you know there is control and pattern in dancing, but there is also a sense in dancing that you are caught up in, a movement that is beyond you and beyond your control. You are grasped and seized, and the dance carries you in a great movement. Uzzah doesn’t worship. He likes to control and manage the religious enterprise. And Michal doesn’t worship. She is a critic who evaluates performance by appearance. She reminds me of what happened one Sunday when someone was so moved in worship that he shouted out “Praise the Lord” only to encounter an usher, who said, “Sir, we don’t praise the Lord in this church!”

But David does. God pulls David out of himself, out of his worries, out of his anxieties, out of his concerns. ***David is caught up in a dance greater than what he could ever choreograph on his own.*** It’s God’s dance. It’s worship. It’s delight. It is unbounded joy. You can’t dance at the table of a God you control. You can only dance before, and truly worship, a God not of your making, the true and living God. It is this God we encounter here, this playful and joyful God who calls us to dance as God’s partner in life. The story tells us that once the rejoicing ended, David distributed among the people a roll of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. David, the richest and most powerful person, had an obligation that day to those who were there. Like Jesus, he fed the crowd. Like Jesus he cared for the people, and for sure there were poor people in the crowd that day.

Passionate worship leads to passionate service. Worship – no matter how inspiring or moving – is worthless without actions of service and compassion. True worship, according to the prophet Isaiah, is to cease evil, learn to do the good, search for justice, help the oppressed, and plead for those disenfranchised (Isaiah 1.16-17). The dance begun here sweeps us up into a new movement into the world where we encounter God’s presence when we dance with those who seek justice and compassion. The words of our next hymn this morning tell us: “Dance then wherever you may be/I am the Lord of the Dance, said he/And I’ll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I’ll lead you all in the dance, said He.”