

“MAY I PLEASE HAVE THIS DANCE?”

2 Samuel 6:1-19

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

July 15, 2018

As many of you know, I typically preach from the ecumenical lectionary, which is a three-year cycle of readings from the Bible. These readings follow the Christian calendar and include a lesson for each Sunday from the Old Testament, the Psalms, one of the Gospels, and another book of the New Testament. Sometimes the readings are connected by theme; sometimes they are not. In any case, you have just heard all four of the designated readings for this 8th Sunday after Pentecost.

To be honest with you, preaching from the lectionary is both a blessing and a challenge. The blessing is this: over a three-year period you and I are exposed to a great variety of Scripture passages, not just those we are naturally drawn to or those that are congenial to our tastes and beliefs. The challenge of the lectionary is the flip side of the blessing: in being exposed to this wide variety of Scripture readings, you and I are forced to deal with some passages that are troublesome and that we might easily choose to avoid.

Today’s Old Testament Lesson falls into this latter category. In fact, our reading from 2 Samuel has not one but two features that may cause us to scratch our heads or squirm in our pews. Even so, I’m going to venture this morning into a part of the lectionary I’ve never dared to preach on before, a passage that pushes me right out of my comfort zone – the account of King David’s transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

A little background to this story is certainly in order. 2 Samuel reports how a charismatic young man named David is anointed king over Israel, and then mounts an army to capture the strategically located town of Jerusalem and establish that town as the nation’s capital. David’s achievement is of the greatest importance, because he succeeds where his predecessor King Saul has failed: he unites all the tribes of Israel and puts an end to the military threat of the neighboring Philistines. Without this accomplishment, Israel never could have developed as an independent state and had such a great influence on human and religious history.

And yet, the central figure in today’s story is not the king himself, but a mysterious object called the Ark of the Covenant. As Stephen Spielberg and Harrison Ford reminded us in their iconic movie, the ark is a lost object to us today; but it is frequently visible in the Old Testament and plays a major role in the worship life of ancient Israel. The ark dates back to the time when the twelve tribes of Israel are wandering in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan. Their God, Yahweh, has delivered them from slavery in Egypt. But they are not yet truly free; they are now a people in bondage to chaos. And they are certainly not a faithful people; they are repeatedly rebellious toward the God who has liberated them.

And so, while they are camped at Mt. Sinai, Yahweh gives them a set of laws to orient their worship and guide their behavior. These laws are inscribed in tablets of stone; the tablets and other sacred objects are placed in a large chest called an ark; and the ark is carried by the Israelites through the wilderness to the land of Canaan. The ark becomes a portable sanctuary, symbolizing the throne of God. It is a visible reminder of God’s presence and protection. At one

point Israel's arch-enemies, the Philistines, capture the ark, but they finally let it go because of its awesome and dangerous power.

Today's story is an account of how David brings the ark of God to Jerusalem, thus making it the nation's center of worship as well as its political capital. Although this is an easy story to tell, it is not an easy one to interpret or to preach. As the ark is being transported to Jerusalem, two things transpire that raise the eyebrows of many modern readers.

In the first instance, the ark is involved in a near-accident which has terrible consequences, not for the ark but for a human being. The writer tells us that the ark is being carried on a new cart pulled by oxen. Along the way the oxen stumble, and the ark starts shaking and is in danger of falling. One of the attendants, a man named Uzzah, reaches out and takes hold of the ark to steady it. The writer of 2 Samuel doesn't mince words in describing what happens next: "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" (2 Samuel 6:7).

What are you and I to make of that? Uzzah's death sentence doesn't make a lick of sense on either practical or theological grounds. Obviously, it is possible and necessary for persons to approach the ark and even touch it. How else could it be loaded onto the cart? Uzzah himself has the best of intentions when he touches the ark; he doesn't want it to come crashing to the ground! Why would God react so vindictively toward a man who is only trying to protect and preserve God's dwelling place?

The writer of 2 Samuel offers no explanation; you and I can only read between the lines. Apparently, there are rules which govern the handling of the ark; it can only be approached and touched in ritually proper ways. Uzzah violates these rules and receives the ultimate punishment. What disturbs us about this story is that correct movements and words are more important than a person's motives, for clearly Uzzah has worthy motives when he reaches out his hand and touches the ark. And yet, in the name of ritual correctness, God strikes him dead!

If you and I respond in anger to the injustice of Uzzah's death, we are not the first to do so. David himself is angry with God; and David is also afraid – afraid that he will suffer the same fate Uzzah does if he continues to move the ark from place to place (vv. 8-9). Needless to say, a relationship with God based on anger and fear is not a healthy relationship. A story like this conjures up all our bad stereotypes of the God of the Old Testament, who is sometimes portrayed acting more like a petty tyrant than a loving Father.

But perhaps there is something in this story of enduring value, something that can guide us in our own relationship with God. You see, whatever else the ancient Israelites believe about God, they believe first and foremost that God is holy – which means that God is "set apart," distinct from human beings, higher than human beings, worthy of utmost reverence from human beings. Now, the ark may seem to us like nothing more than a treasured piece of furniture; but to the Israelites the ark represents God – specifically, God's holiness, God's sacredness, God's otherness – and for that reason the people of God are expected to keep a respectful distance from the ark or from any object which symbolizes God's holy presence. This theme of distance is a consistent one throughout the Old Testament. During their wilderness wanderings, the Israelites

come to believe that no one can see God and live. In later times, even the name of God is considered so sacred that it cannot be uttered out loud.

Friends, it strikes me that this is a dimension of our relationship with God which many people today have lost and would do well to recover. Some of our contemporaries speak of God and relate to God as if God were a close chum or a sugar daddy rather than the Lord of the universe. When the divine is dragged down to the human level, the divine becomes an easy target for manipulation: “Not Thy will, but mine be done.”

Of course, it is a good thing for us to want to get close to God – provided we don’t overstep our creaturely boundaries and become too familiar with our Creator. I feel close to my mother, but for me to presume to call her “Beverly” instead of “Mother” would be a sign of disrespect. It’s true that God is all around us and deep within us; indeed, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. And yet, the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once spoke of the “infinite qualitative distance between [humanity] and God.” The Ark of the Covenant symbolizes this distance. God is not our good buddy; God is God – the One who stands above and beyond our human limitations and desires, and who deserves to be regarded with awe and reverence. Uzzah’s death may be an extreme example, but it reminds us of the consequences that follow from getting uppity with God, from trying to handle or control the sacred.

And so, Uzzah dies a questionable death, which produces in David the feelings of anger and fear. But in the end, David is undeterred; he continues to transport the ark to Jerusalem, where his mood and behavior quickly change. And this brings me to the other feature of this passage that pushes me right out of my comfort zone. The writer of 2 Samuel tells us that “David danced before the Lord with all his might . . . David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting and with the sound of the trumpet” (vv. 14-15). Notice: in this remarkable scene David is not only acting as king, but as priest. He offers sacrifices and wears a priestly garment. The whole story is replete with liturgical language and ritual activities. In other words, this procession into Jerusalem is a picture of Israel at worship, and the picture we get is one of joyous celebration, of unbridled enthusiasm and ecstasy, led by David himself.

Notice further that David’s wife Michal, the daughter of Saul, ridicules David for his public display of exuberance. For Michal, David’s behavior is not fitting for a king, much less a priest. And I have to tell you: I have some sympathy for Michal’s reaction. Some of you may have some sympathy for it as well. What if, in the middle of our carefully planned, deliberately dignified worship service, I were to break into dancing here in the chancel? What if Chris Shay were to lead us in a chorus of shouts and foot-stomping music, turning up the volume until it splits our ears? In a Methodist church . . . in New England?! You and I might tolerate this style of worship once in a blue moon, but we would probably resist a steady diet of it.

When David hears Michal object to his dancing before the ark, he puts her aside in favor of his other wives. David views Michal as too conservative and rigid, as one who quenches the Spirit in her devotion to God. And so, this story is an ancient version of the conflict in today’s Church which we call “worship wars.” On the one side, there are the Michals among us who prefer a traditional form of worship, with stately liturgy and classic hymns and erudite preaching. Michal’s followers place a priority on dignity and reverence, on order and familiarity, in the worship of God. On the other side, there are the Davids among us who prefer a more contemporary worship style, punctuated by lively praise music, hymn lyrics and catchy videos

projected onto a screen, and preaching which bypasses the lectionary and seeks to address “real-life issues.” David’s followers desire a worship service which is less serious and more joyful, less structured and more spontaneous, with greater freedom for the Spirit to blow where it will.

And so, the battle lines have been drawn in the Church’s “worship wars”; but what we really need is less conflict and more constructive communication, so that both sides understand and appreciate the values espoused by the other. When I go each year to the New York Annual Conference on Long Island, I am always astonished by the variety of worship forms we are exposed to and asked to embrace. There is carefully crafted liturgy and thoughtful preaching, to be sure; but there is also loud praise music, visual media, and, yes, liturgical dance. Would you believe, a few years ago our resident Bishop back then, Jeremiah Park, led the entire assembly in a snake dance on the floor of the arena! What was remarkable about this is that Bishop Park is an introvert by nature; he is Korean, and Korean culture tends to be polite and reserved; and he was over 60 years old when he led us in this exercise! What the Bishop demonstrated that day was openness to the variety of worship styles practiced by the churches in our Conference. A congregation in Harlem doesn’t worship in the same way as a congregation in western Connecticut. But that’s OK, because there is room for all of us around the ark of God, and you and I might actually grow in our faith if we got out of our comfort zones occasionally and tried out worship styles that are foreign to us.

This Wednesday night, our church will host the Ugandan Kids Choir for a musical concert. If you and I show up expecting to hear these children sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “How Great Thou Art,” we’re going to be frustrated and disappointed. But if we come here with hearts that are open to the praise and music styles of Africa, we will be uplifted and enlightened.

Friends, I confess to you that by nature I am more like Michal than David, and I need to become more like David – less structured and inhibited, more spontaneous and free in my worship of God. On the threshold of turning 70, I imagine that my dancing days are largely over, but the truth is, I’m not too old to dance again. I need to learn how to dance with God. I need to learn how to “fast dance,” to let it all hang out in God’s presence; and I also need to learn how to “slow dance,” to be quiet and gentle and intimate in God’s presence.

I recently saw a movie entitled *45 Years*. It is about a retired British couple who are on the verge of celebrating their 45th wedding anniversary at a big dinner with family and friends. One week before the anniversary bash, the husband learns that the body of his one-time lover, a woman he had lived with before he had met his wife, had been discovered in the Swiss Alps. Fifty years earlier, they had been on a hike together, and this woman had fallen into a crevice in a glacier and was never seen again. Now the glacier had melted and her body was found. The man shared this news with his wife, and the week leading up to their anniversary party quickly turned into a time of turmoil. The husband toyed with the idea of flying to Switzerland to claim his old girlfriend’s body; the wife began to doubt that she was her husband’s true love.

Well, after all this uncertainty and anguish, the anniversary party finally rolled around. The husband stood up and gave an awkward but heartfelt verbal tribute to his wife. His speech was moving enough, but then something happened that was even more touching. A band started playing music, and the husband and wife were invited to have the first dance. They walked onto the dance floor and then held each other, moving slowly to a tune they associated with their courtship, “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” It’s worth noting that the husband and wife didn’t dance

cheek-to-cheek; they danced face-to-face, so they could gaze into each other's eyes and explore the mystery and wonder of their 45 years of marriage. They were intimate, but they also kept a respectful distance.

You know, sometimes I want to say to God, "May I please have this dance?"