

## DAVID DANCES

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
August 15, 2021**

Psalm 150  
II Samuel 6:1-22

When we last encountered David, he had fled from King Saul's court and had gathered a significant force of renegades around him in the Judean wilderness. They survived by raiding and pillaging among the Canaanites and other enemies of Israel. In time, David grew in wealth and influence in the southern region, eventually becoming the king of Judah. Meanwhile, Saul and Jonathan were killed in Israel's ongoing war with the Philistines. David then initiated a civil war against the Saulists for the throne of Israel itself. David won. He united the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, then he conquered a Jebusite city—a small fortress city that stood on a rock outcropping roughly between the two kingdoms—Jerusalem. And David made Jerusalem the capital of the unified nation.

As we return to the David story this morning, in the sixth chapter of Second Samuel, David has been king for seven years. The civil wars that have demanded every ounce of his time and energy are behind him. At last Israel is united. Now that David has some breathing room, he aims to fulfill his dream of bringing the Ark of the Covenant into his new capital of Jerusalem.

Now there was nothing more sacred in Israel than the Ark of the Covenant. It symbolized the presence of God—Yahweh—in the midst of the chosen people Israel. It was a rectangular box, not quite four feet in length and a little over two feet in depth and width. God had instructed Moses to build the Ark while the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness following their escape from slavery in Egypt. It was made of wood and plated with gold. The Ark contained three items: the tablets of stone that Moses had delivered to the people from Sinai; a jar of manna from the wilderness years of wandering; and Aaron's priestly staff. These objects reminded the people of Israel that God was working among them: commanding them (as with the tablets), providing for them (as with the manna), and saving them (as with the priestly staff). The Ark reminded Israel that they worshiped a living, powerful God who actually entered their lives; God judged and saved, called to account and blessed. Most of all, God loved.

The Israelites used to carry the Ark out into the field of battle against its enemies in the hope that Yahweh would fight for them and give them victory. Not long before Saul became king, though, the Philistines captured the Ark and carried it away into their own territory. But when the Philistines place the Ark before the idol of their god Dagon, the Philistine statue falls face forward and loses his hands. Then a plague of disease comes upon the Philistine cities. Panic ensues and the Philistine leaders come to the conclusion that messing with the Ark was not such a good idea. So they return the Ark to Israelite territory with golden offerings to appease Yahweh. The Ark comes to lodge for thirty years in the care of the house of an old priest, Abinadab.

The Bible tells us that the ark was neglected during Saul's times, and Psalm 132 implies that it was lost, since David had to launch a search for it to bring it to Jerusalem. Were David's motives for retrieving the ark religious or political? Certainly, David was a savvy enough leader

by this time to recognize the political importance of joining his fledgling monarchy with the older religious traditions that the ark represented. Bringing the ark to Jerusalem would make David's capital the political and religious center of the united Israelite kingdom.<sup>1</sup> So the Ark is taken out of mothballs where it's been for so long. Abinadab assigns his two priest sons, Uzzah and Ahio, to supervise delivery of the Ark to Jerusalem. They place it on a new ox-cart and begin the hilly journey to Jerusalem. They've hardly begun, however, when the oxen stumble and the ark teeters, as though it might fall. Uzzah reached out his hand and steadies the ark. "The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act," the Bible says, "therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God."

Uzzah did what any of us would do. The Ark was teetering and tottering, and he didn't want the flag to touch the ground. He stuck out his hand, and he died. Ascending up the hill of the Lord would have been no problem if they'd carried that the Ark on the shoulders of the Levites as God had instructed. But they disobeyed. They ignored God's law and acted as if God could not even keep his own Ark from falling out the back of an ox cart. Uzzah rushes forward like he was rescuing a wedding cake, and down he goes.

Why did Uzzah die? Why did God, as the old King James Version put it so bluntly, "smite him"? It's difficult to fit this episode into our picture of the God who is consistently revealed as the giver of life, patiently calling us to repentance, constantly seeking the lost, undeflected in God's steadfast love for us. It doesn't sit easy with us when we come across an assertion that God kills. Judgment, certainly, but sudden death? The text doesn't answer our question. Sometimes the Bible raises more questions than it answers!

Over the centuries, as the Christian imagination has reflected on Uzzah's death, one insight has appeared over and over: it's fatal to take charge of God. Uzzah is the person who has God in a box and imperiously assumes responsibility for keeping God safe from the mud and dust of the world. Have you ever known people in the church who take it upon themselves to protect God from the impurity of the world? Who are more concerned with keeping up appearances and polishing the silver than with serving the world outside the church doors? I imagine Uzzah may have been like that, and I guess that Uzzah's reflexive act—reaching out to steady the Ark as the oxen stumbled—wasn't the mistake of a moment; it was a piece of his lifelong obsession with managing the Ark. There were Mosaic traditions that gave clear directions regarding the handling of the Ark: it wasn't to be touched by human hands but carried by priests from the tribe of Levi using poles inserted through rings attached to the Ark. Uzzah ignored (defied!) the Mosaic directions and substituted the latest Philistine technological innovation—an ox-cart, of all things.<sup>2</sup> A well-designed ox-cart is undeniably more efficient for moving the Ark about than plodding Levites. But it's also impersonal—the replacement of consecrated persons by an efficient machine, the impersonal crowding out the personal. Uzzah is the patron saint of those who uncritically embrace technology without regard to the nature of the Holy. Uzzah was in charge (he thought) of God, and he meant to stay in charge. Uzzah had God where he wanted him and intended to keep him there.

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<sup>1</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed., *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 263-269.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Samuel 6:3.

Don't you see? The eventual consequence of this kind of life is death, for God will not be managed. God will not be put and kept in a box, whether the box is constructed of crafted wood or hewn stone or brilliant ideas or fine feelings. We don't take care of God; God takes care of us.

Holy Scripture posts Uzzah as a danger sign for us: "Beware the God." It's especially important to have such a sign posted in places designated for religious worship and learning. We enter a church or school to learn God, be trained in knowledge and obedience and prayer. And we get what we came for—truth that centers, words that command and comfort, rituals that stabilize, work that has purpose, a community of relationships that strengthen, forgiveness that frees. We find God. We change our ways. We repent and believe and follow. We rearrange our circumstances and reestablish our routines around what now gives meaning and hope. We take on responsibilities in the wonderful new world of worship and work. We advance in the ranks, and before we know it we're telling others what to do and how to do it. All this is good and right. But it's easy to cross a line—to get bossy and cranky on behalf of God. We begin by finding in God a way to live rightly and well, and then along the way we take over God's work for him and take charge of making sure others live rightly and well. We get the idea that we're important, self-important, because we're around the Important.

Organized religion is a breeding ground for this kind of thing. Not infrequently these God-managing men and women work themselves into positions of leadership. Over the years the basics with which they began, the elements of reverence and awe, the spirit of love and faith, erode and shrivel. Finally there's nothing left. They're dead to God.

Uzzah is a warning. If we think and act as he did, we'll be dead men and women, soon or late. Dead in our spirits. Dead to the aliveness of God. Jesus called such people "whitewashed tombs . . . full of dead men's bones."<sup>3</sup>

Well, David calls off the procession. He backs away from such awesome holy power. Rather than taking the ark to Jerusalem, he leaves it in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. Three months later, when David hears that Obed-edom has been blessed by the ark's presence, he comes back to retrieve it. This time the Ark is on poles over the shoulders of the Levitical priests. David and his entourage form a joyous procession into Jerusalem with the Ark. We read:

*<sup>14</sup> David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the Lord with all his might, <sup>15</sup> while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets."*

The frenzy of the worship procession causes the king to get carried away, he strips down and dances nearly naked before 30,000 people. Why did David dance? David, dancing before the Ark, was reckless and joyful. David knew something about God to which Uzzah was blind and deaf.

David had been living dangerously all his life—with lions and bears, a taunting giant and a murderous king, marauding Philistines and cunning Amalekites, in wilderness caves and wadis. And with and in God: running and hiding, praying and loving. It never would have occurred to David to take care of God. God was Savior and Commander, Shepherd and Rock. God wasn't a sheep that David tended. He wasn't a tame God. The rough and tumble of David's life had taught him to live openly, daringly, trustingly, and exultantly before God.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:27.

David wasn't careful with God. When Uzzah died, David lost his temper with God. His parade had been interrupted. Angry with God, David went home in a sulk, pouting. David's anger with God didn't get him killed. It didn't get him killed because David was as alive to God in his anger as he was earlier in his praise. Alive to God. Alive. David didn't like what had happened, but at least he was treating God as God. Uzzah would never have gotten angry with God; he was far too well-mannered and proper. And besides, one doesn't get angry with a box.

Home in Jerusalem, David had time to reflect and pray. He had time to remember the richness of God's blessing in his life. He had time to draw from the well of a relationship with God that ran deep. His anger melted away, replaced by thanksgiving and joy and confidence in the future God had in store for David and for Israel. And so David assembled his marching band again and was back with harps and lyres, and tambourines and cymbals, bringing the Ark to Jerusalem in grand style.

David danced. In God, David had access to life that exceeded his capacity to measure or control. And so he danced. When we're going about our work responsibly and steadily, we walk. Walking is our normal mode of locomotion. But when we're beside ourselves with love, charged with excess of meaning, shaken out of preoccupation with ourselves, we dance. David danced. If David had been merely carrying out his religious duties or conducting a political ceremony, he would have walked in solemn procession before the Ark, leading it into Jerusalem with dignity. But this was no duty. He wasn't using God to give dignity to Jerusalem, or taking pains that God be properly honored. He was worshiping, responding to the living God. He was open to the life of God flowing around and through him, the God whose ways intersected history in a manner defined by that Ark, ways of salvation and revelation and blessing.

We're never wholly ourselves until we're open before God, attending to the reality of God, responding to the action of God in us, receiving the word of God for us. That's why we worship. Worship gets us out of ourselves, turns our focus from ourselves to our God, the God who is always with us. Worship is the time and place that we set aside to pay attention, deliberately, to God—not because God is confined to Sunday morning at 9 o'clock on this Zoom meeting but because our concern for ourselves and our agendas is so relentless that if we don't deliberately interrupt ourselves regularly, we have no chance of attending to God at all at other times and in other places.

David dances. I have no idea of the distractions you are facing this morning. Things that make it hard for you to dance. Maybe it's sickness or a breakdown in an important relationship or troubles at work. Whatever is troubling you this morning, God's presence among us is an invitation for you to get up and leap in a moment of spiritual exuberance. For in a world of war and strife, conflict and brokenness, sadness and disappointment, the Great King is still on the throne.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.