



TO DANCE OR DIE!

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

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2 Samuel 6:1-23
Twelfth Message
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Has there ever been a time in your life when God rained on your parade? How about when the parade was in his honor, and you thought you were doing the Lord's work?

In our text today we come to just such an occurrence in the life of David. Our story, from the book of Second Samuel, records one of the most memorable events in the history of Israel, when David brought the ark of God up to Jerusalem. Incredibly, in the middle of his own "party," God became a disgruntled guest and called a halt to the celebrations. But in the end, God teaches all of Israel, and us as well, what it means to be a true worshipper of Yahweh. As Jesus said in the New Testament: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth...such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers" (John 4:23-24).

Our text records the story of David's two attempts to bring the ark of God up to Jerusalem. Each attempt has three elements: a procession filled with celebration; a blessing; and a death. In the responses of the three major characters in the account, Uzzah, David, and Michal, we learn what constitutes the difference between true and false worship.

I. The First Attempt to Bring the Ark Up¹ (6:1-12a)

(a) Procession of the Ark Upward Towards Jerusalem (6:1-5)

Now David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned above the cherubim. And they placed the ark of God on a new cart that they might bring it from the house of Abinadab which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. So they brought it with the ark of God from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Ahio was walking ahead of the ark. Meanwhile, David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the Lord with all kinds of instruments made of fir wood, and with lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets and cymbals. (NASB)

By this time, David has conquered Jerusalem and cleared the Philistine occupied territory west to the coastal plain. Now he assembles thirty thousand men for the task of bringing the ark up to Jerusalem. The ark is carefully identified in the text as "*the ark of God, which is called by the Name.*" The ark is described as the holy meeting place of God and his people. This avoids any idolatrous notions that God and the ark are one and the same, as if God lived

in a box and therefore could be managed.

David's passion to find a resting place for the ark is described in Psalm 132:1-5,

**Remember, O Lord, on David's behalf,
All his affliction,
How he swore to the Lord,
And vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob,
"Surely I will not enter my house,
Nor lie on my bed;
I will not give sleep to my eyes,
Or slumber to my eyelids;
Until I find a place for the Lord,
A dwelling place for he Mighty One of Jacob."**

How different David was from Saul, who showed no concern for the ark of God. Once it had been abandoned by the Philistines, Saul allowed it lie unattended for twenty years. But David is consumed by the ark. He yearns to place it at the very center of God's people.

The priests are commissioned to transport the ark, while David is left free to celebrate. The sons of Abinadab, in whose home the ark was housed for twenty years, choose a new form of transportation, one that was different from the age-old prescribed method of carrying the ark on poles. They adopt a Philistine innovation, placing the ark on a new ox-cart—a high tech approach, one that was much more efficient and less cumbersome.

But this new means of transporting the ark is not without its problems.

(b) The Death of Uzzah and the Halting of the Royal Procession (6:6-10)

But when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out toward the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen nearly upset it. And the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and God struck him down there for his irreverence; and he died there by the ark of God. And David became angry because of the Lord's outburst against Uzzah, and that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. So David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" And David was unwilling to move the ark of the Lord into the city of David with him; but David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

As the priests and the ox-cart descend down the hill from the house of Abinadab, the narrator describes David as a man overcome with joy. The king is in the midst of his people, caught up in a full blown festival that employs every musical instrument known to man—lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, cymbals. The scene is one of unbridled ecstasy before the Lord. Jerusalem will be the site of

the king's city and God's throne as well! Worship is called for.

But, like most events in David's life, his joy is short lived. As the oxen descend the hill they come upon the smooth stone threshing floor of Nacon. Their hooves stumble on the stony smooth floor, the cart lurches forward, and the ark is about to be catapulted off the end of the cart. Uzzah's reaction is instantaneous. He stretches out his hand and grasps (seizes) the ark to put it back in its place.

Human hands seizing the Holy! The outcome is as if Uzzah had grabbed a 220-volt line: "an unmanageable current sizzles his grasp to ash, flaring from the ends of his bones."² Uzzah drops dead by the side of the ark. The celebration comes to a crashing halt. The scene must have resembled baseball's opening day in Cincinnati a couple of weeks ago, when the home plate umpire dropped dead of a heart attack. The game was canceled and 50,000 fans had to go home. At the threshing floor of Nacon, the royal procession skids to a halt as Uzzah is struck down for his "irreverence." The majestic music is muted; the onlookers struck dumb.

David is enraged. How could God rain on his parade? But, the question has to be asked, Whose parade was it, anyway? David names the place Perez-uzzah, meaning "the outbreak against Uzzah." The same outbreak of God's holiness that enveloped the Philistines and established David's reign, in chapter 5, has now turned against David. What a painful and disturbing turn of events! Quickly, David's anger turns to fear. He wonders, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" With no answer from heaven, he gives up the quest and abandons the ark to the nearest house, the home of Obed-edom, a Gittite. Obed-edom, whose name means "servant of Edom," is identified as a Levite, in 1 Chr 15:18, 21. He was from the tribe of Korah, and later became a gatekeeper of the ark.

This results in another strange turn of events.

(c) The Lord Blesses the House of Obed-edom (6:11-12a)

Thus the ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

Now it was told King David, saying, "The Lord has blessed the house of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, on account of the ark of God."

The ark remained there for three months, and to everyone's surprise, God not only treated Obed-edom's home as an acceptable abode, he blessed this man and all his household. The parents, children, crops, livestock, and servants are blessed with a fertility beyond measure.

This is the turning point of the story. This gracious extravagance poured out from heaven upon the home of Obed-edom gives David new confidence to resume the holy procession. The king picks up where he left off, but this time in an entirely different spirit.

II. The Second Attempt to Bring the Ark Up (6:12b-23)

(a) The Procession of the Ark Upwards Towards Jerusalem (6:12b-17)

And David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom into the city of David with gladness. And so it was, that when the bearers of the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. And David was dancing before the Lord with all his might, and David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouting and the sound of the trumpet. Then it happened as the ark of the Lord came into the city of David that Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. So they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent which David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord.

(b) David Blesses All Israel (6:18-19)

And when David had finished offering the burnt offering and the peace offering, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts. Further, he distributed to all the people, to all the multitude of Israel, both to men and women, a cake of bread and one of dates and one of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed each to his house.

The oxcart, a high-tech but careless form of transportation for the ark, is replaced with the prescribed, personal mode of carrying, on poles, with priests as the bearers. The procession begins somewhat tentatively, for six steps, "one less than the sacred number seven."³ Then a sacrifice is made to atone for their previous sin, and God is given his rightful place in the procession. Having gone through the dramatic Uzzah sequence, David makes a subtle but significant change in his role in the procession. Reminiscent of the young boy Samuel, he takes off his royal robes and dons the more humble attire of a linen ephod, the clothing of a priest. Therefore, instead of inviting God as a guest to bless his royal party, the king takes the role a priest to serve at God's party.

This shift of roles changes everything. The once tentative celebration now takes off in exuberance and unadulterated joy, and is followed by even more sacrifices. Caught up with God's homecoming, David dances with abandon. Everything he had dreamed for has come true. Such an eventful day needs to be enjoyed to the fullest; it is worth lingering over. Burnt offerings⁴ are made as an expression of total dependence upon God, and peace offerings are to be enjoyed as fellowship meals. David continues in his role as the priestly host at God's party and distributes part of the sacrifice to every individual in the city. No one is left out of this grand occasion. David acts like the father of a bride at the wedding reception, going to every table, welcoming, embracing, and then distributing from the wealth of the moment.

The lesson is clear: When God breaks in on our lives with salvation, there is always more than enough joy to go around. Everyone is to be blessed personally by what God has done. There are no private parties in heaven.

David saves the final blessing for his wife, Michal, and heads home. He anticipates a joyous end to his consummate joy, but he is little prepared for the welcome he is about to receive.

(c) Michal Despises David, and is Barren Until Her

Death (6:20-23)

But when David returned to bless his household, Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants' maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!" So David said to Michal, "It was before the Lord who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord over Israel; therefore I will celebrate before the Lord. And I will be more lightly esteemed than this and will be humble in my own eyes, but with the maids of whom you have spoken, with them I will be distinguished." Thus Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

"David returns to 'bless his house'—the very last little stone in what he has built today...But Michal goes outside." Notice how she is identified: "'Michal, the daughter of Saul' and not 'his wife, Michal.'" She does not keep waiting for David to enter the room in which she finds herself, but is much more active: she gets up and goes outside to meet him. She can't wait to vent her spleen!"⁵

"How the king of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself today in the eyes of his servants' maids as one of the foolish ones shamelessly uncovers himself!"

The first procession of joy came to an abrupt halt with the death of Uzzah; the second procession skids to a halt in David's own home. There is nothing more painful than to be applauded in the community but rejected in one's own home.

Why is Michal so angry? Certainly, her past with David has been painful. She loved him, then lost him. Her new husband, Paltiel, loved her, but she was ripped away, like a political pawn, and returned to David. When she arrived in the royal court there is never any mention that David loved her. Her pain is real, and justified. But now it has taken root and become a root of bitterness. Her pain colors everything she sees.

The text portrays the image of Michal viewing the procession through "the window." Having distanced herself from everyone, as the daughter of Saul she interprets David's celebration through the lens of propriety. She looks down on her husband and "despises" him. Her "lens" is colored by jealousy over a husband who had yet to demonstrate any love for her. This blinded her to the significance of that day. Out of this comprehensive scene—the ark proceeding, God descending, Jerusalem embracing, David dancing, musicians playing, multitudes singing, servants rejoicing, and creation resounding—all she sees is her husband dancing without inhibition before some servant girls. A very restrictive lens indeed!

Michal publicly mocks David, insinuating that his religious surrender before God was sexually motivated. To her, this was not the dance of a humble priest, but the gyrations of a shameless gigolo. The dig about his clothing "is all the more painful for David because the only garment he had on to cover his shame was the linen ephod."⁶ Her poisoned invective penetrates bone and marrow.

David does not retreat. He answers the charge, and stings Michal with her own words. Her view of the whole

scene and David's motives was wrong. His dance was not before an audience of women, but before the Lord. She had left the Lord completely out of the picture—the Lord who had chosen him over her father, and had this very day placed his seal on the new monarchy. As to his humiliation, it was of his own free will—and he would gladly do it again. And as to his honor, those servant maidens had shown more honor to the king in his humiliation than his wife had demonstrated toward him in his glory. (This humbling of oneself, and the later exaltation, is reminiscent of Hannah's song in 1 Sam 2:7.)

David has rescued his honor from the very jaws of hell.

The account gives but one verse to describe the remaining years of a cold marriage relationship. Verse 23:

Thus Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

We are left with some ambiguity as to whether it was the Lord who closed Michal's womb in judgment or whether David deliberately abstained in their relationship. In either case, there is no doubt as to the coldness of their marriage. Michal becomes a "marked woman, doomed to isolation...[she] undergoes a slow death in life in the new palace."⁷

All three characters in this account, Uzzah, Michal, and David, are excellent studies in what constitutes true and false worship, and how worship determines our destiny.

III. Reflections on the Nature of True Worship

(a) On Uzzah, Keeping God in a Box

From Uzzah we learn the danger of religion becoming so routine that we become careless, leading us to compromise holy ethics. This is disastrous to one's health. Uzzah represents that deadly tendency in all of us to "manage God, by keeping him in his place." Eugene Peterson puts this beautifully in these words:

Uzzah is the person who has God in a box and officiously assumes responsibility for keeping him safe from the mud and dust of the world...Uzzah's reflexive act, reaching out to steady the Ark as the oxen stumbled, was not the mistake of a moment; it was a piece of his lifelong obsession with managing the Ark...He ignored (defied!) the Mosaic directions and substituted the latest Philistine technological innovation—an ox-cart, of all things. A well designed ox-cart is undeniably more efficient for moving the ark about than plodding Levites. But it is 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 meant to stay in charge...The eventual consequence of that 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 feeling. We do not take care of God; he takes care of us."⁸

We dare not try to put God in a box.

(b) On Michal, Past Pain Blinding the Present

While Uzzah is struck dead for his efforts to manage God, Michal's slow death comes as a result of distancing

herself from God and everyone else. She views life from her window of pain that colors everything she sees. Her past dealings with David so consume her that she does not allow anything new to break in. Thus, she is blinded to the glory of the present. Looking out her window she cannot see God taking his throne on earth. She is deaf to the music and numb to David's devotion. Worst of all, she transfers her own jealousy on to others. That imposition is the destructive blow to all that is holy and to all that is honorable in worship. She dies barren, her barrenness a symbol of a rotted soul.

How much of life do you view through a lens that is colored by your past pain? Do you keep your distance from God and from others, refusing to enter into the greatness of what he is doing because you are bitter? How many grand changes, conversions and royal processions have you missed because you allowed the pain of your past to outweigh the greatness and brightness of what God is doing in the present? God keeps blessing, but you prefer not to see it from your window. If you insist on living this way, you will die barren.

(c) On David, Living Recklessly Before God

Finally, we come to David. All three major characters, Uzzah, David and Michal, are recipients of an angry God. But of the three, David is the only one who gets angry at God in return and lives! He refuses to hide behind a polite facade. He is alive to God in his anger. This is something that neither the propriety of Michal nor the religion of Uzzah would have allowed. Of the three characters, David is the only one who changes.

When you give God your anger, it means he has access to you. Then, your anger is transformed into fear, and fear is transformed into insight. David realizes this is not his party, it is God's. In that humility, David changes his role at the celebration, dons the clothes of a priest, and dances with unadulterated joy in response to the living God. "He was on the edge of mystery, of glory. And so he danced...David knew something Michal didn't,...that we don't have to be careful and cautious with God; that it is death to decorously and politely manage God; that it is life eternal to let him take care of us."⁹

So let us worship God "in spirit and in truth," with our whole hearts, holding nothing held back, with no compromise of God's holiness. When God acts in salvation, there are only two choices open to us: we either dance or die.

Managing God

A stumble of beasts, a lurch
of the oxcart, and Uzzah's hands leap
to harness God's holy box. On the instant
he feels heaven's fire strike—
an unmanageable current sizzles his grasp
to ask, flaring from the ends of his bones.

David, when he senses the same perilous
burn ignite his fingers and
his flying feet, self-abandoned, his
spirit blazing, is stripped naked by joy
to servant girls, himself, and God,
who plays him like a wind-harp.

From her arrogant window Michal's jealousy
watches this wanton worship—holiness dancing
beyond propriety. Snuffing David's joy
like a candle, she learns the swiftness
of Yahweh; derision has cauterized her own
fecundity; contempt has stopped up her womb.

—Luci Shaw¹⁰

1. Note the key words that link this text with chapter 5. The verb "go up" (*alah*), used of holy war when David sought guidance: "Should I go up?," is now used of David bringing the ark of God up to Jerusalem. But in this case it is lacking the prayer that accompanied it in chapter 5. David does not "inquire" (*sha'al*) of the Lord. The root "go up" also comes at the end of the text, in v. 18, for the "burnt offerings" whose scent ascends (*goes up*) to heaven. Also "to break through, or out" (*paratz*), which was used twice in the victories over the Philistines, to depict the Holy God breaking through to defeat the enemies of Israel encased in their idolatry, is now used of that same God breaking out to kill those *within* Israel who have "no fear." This is a very painful turn of events.

2. Luci Shaw, "Managing God," *Crux* 31:3 (Sept. 1995), 6.

3. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 195. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman for many of my observations.

4. The term "burnt offering" also comes from the same Hebrew root as the verb "go up", since the whole offering was burned up, and its scent "went up" to heaven. Thus the Hebrew root "go up" (*alah*) frames the passage, vv 2, 12, 15, 17.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 198.

6. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 199.

7. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 205.

8. Eugene Peterson, "Why Did Uzzah Die? Why Did David Dance?" *Crux* 31:3 (Sept. 1995), 5-7.

9. Peterson, "Why Did Uzzah Die?" 8.

10. Shaw, "Managing God," 6.