

## Why Uzzah?

### Prayer of Illumination

Present God,  
Settle our hearts.  
Still our minds.  
And stir our imaginations,  
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

### Scripture

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. 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. David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day.

David was afraid of the Lord that day; he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" So David was unwilling to take the ark of the Lord into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 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.

It was told King David, "The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

The Word of the Lord.  
Thanks be to God.

---

### Why Uzzah?

Our scripture reading for this morning is a challenging one. It will perhaps not surprise you to learn that the assigned lectionary reading for this morning actually skips the entire middle

section in which we read of Uzzah's death; presumably so that a sermon on this passage can focus on something other than the seemingly arbitrary death of a man who is doing his best to protect God.

But let's back up for a minute because even though the back story doesn't explain Uzzah's death, it does help provide a fuller picture of what is happening in this morning's reading. The first thing you need to know is that the ark of God, otherwise known as the ark of the covenant, was a box or a chest that God commanded the Israelites to build. According to the book of Exodus, it was to be made of wood and overlaid with gold inside and out. A crown or moulding was put around it and four rings of gold were attached to the four corners so that poles could be inserted and the entire thing could be carried by four priests. A golden lid, the Hebrew word for which is sometimes translated as a mercy seat, was placed on top and two gold Cherubim were placed on either end of the lid.

The plans for the ark of God or the ark of the covenant were given to Moses on Mt. Sinai so that there would be a place to house the tablets on which the 10 Commandments were inscribed. Far more than housing the commandments, however, the ark of the covenant came to symbolize the presence of the invisible God in the midst of the people.

Once created, the ark of the covenant was carried with the people through their forty years of wandering in the desert. According to the book of Joshua, the ark preceded the people into the Promised Land, causing the Jordan River to go dry for as long as the priests carrying the ark stood within its banks; it was part of the procession that caused the walls of Jericho to come tumbling down; it was where the Israelites consulted with God before engaging in military campaigns, and more than once the ark was taken into battle with the Israelites, so that God would be with them.

It was on one of these occasions when the ark was captured by the Philistines. According to the first book of Samuel, the Philistines took the ark to several places in their country, but wherever the ark resided, misfortune followed. After seven months of this, the Philistines had had enough and the ark appeared back in Israelite territory where it eventually came to reside at the home of Abinadab. And there the ark remained for over twenty years until this morning's passage, when David decides to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

David's motivations for moving the ark aren't clear, but two possibilities readily present themselves. The first is that this is a public declaration of faith and subservience—David may be king, but by bringing the ark to Jerusalem, it could be that David is declaring that God is still at the center, that God is the King of all, the ruler of even David. It's plausible, though there isn't any evidence in the text to support this reading, and the lack of any conversation between David and God about what is going to happen seems striking if this is David's true motivation, especially given how close a relationship David and God seem to have.

The second way to make sense of David's actions is to see them as politically motivated. David has recently been made king over a divided nation; recovering the ark of the covenant and moving it into the new capital city of Jerusalem might just be the public symbol and

celebration that the entire country can rally around. Reclaiming this ancient holy item that has been all but forgotten may be the perfect piece of political theater to rally both David's supporters as well as his more conservative and traditional detractors around the idea of a new capital, a new king, and a new united country.

Except that something goes horribly wrong. David has gathered 30,000 men, gone to the house of Abinadab, retrieved the ark, loaded it onto a new ox cart, and conscripted two of Abinadab's sons, Uzzah and Ahio, to accompany the ark. David and the whole house of Israel are dancing and making a joyful noise unto the Lord.

And then the ox stumbles.

The ox stumbles and the ark looks as though it is going to topple off the cart and Uzzah does what Uzzah has been sent to do, he puts his hands up to steady the ark so that it will not fall and be damaged. Presumably this is the very reason for Uzzah's presence on this journey—to ensure that the ark of God reaches its destination safely.

Only, Uzzah's actions spark the Lord's anger and Uzzah is struck down dead by the side of the cart. The Lord is angry and David gets angry and the whole celebration is called off. The ark is stashed at the house of a random Philistine named Obed-edom and David sulks off to Jerusalem, annoyed with God for having ruined his triumphal moment. Three months later, David will try again, and this time the ark will make it to Jerusalem. But Uzzah is never mentioned again and no further explanation of his death is ever given.

So why does Uzzah die? Why is touching the ark such an outrageous offense?

There are two possibilities that are offered most frequently in commentaries and in the rare sermon that addresses this passage in its entirety. The first is that Uzzah dies because the procession fails to follow the letter of the law, which requires that the ark be carried by four priests. In other words, Uzzah dies because David has not followed protocol and instead has engineered this piece of political theater without consulting either the law or the Lord.

The problem with this argument is that David is never very good with following the letter of the law. He has more wives than the law allows, he'll go on to commit adultery and sanction murder for his own personal gain, he has even eaten of the Holy Bread that is reserved for the Lord simply because he is hungry and there is nothing else on hand. David is far too impulsive to be any good at following the letter of the law. And yet, David is beloved by God. Despite his impulsiveness and his mistakes, David never stops being in relationship with God—a relationship that is tempestuous at times, but never perfunctory or superficial. So it's hard to imagine that this transgression of the law merits the death of an innocent man when previous and future transgressions do not.

So perhaps Uzzah's death was simply a matter of cause and effect. Perhaps the ark contains so much holiness that *anyone* who touches it would be killed. Perhaps the ark is a live wire, an

accident waiting to happen if proper precautions are not in place. Perhaps God had nothing to do with it, it was just an unfortunate accident.

Only, the text doesn't support this interpretation either. According to the text, Uzzah dies because the anger of the Lord is kindled against him. It isn't the ark that kills Uzzah, it's God who strikes him down. Even the name given to the place where it happens points to this fact—"Perez-Uzzah" translated means "Outburst against Uzzah." So if Uzzah's death isn't because the letter of the law wasn't followed and isn't because the ark of the covenant is just too holy to be touched, why does God kill Uzzah?

Perhaps the better question is: why is Uzzah the one who is killed? Why Uzzah and not David? After all, David was the one who orchestrated this entire situation; David was the one who failed to consult with the Lord before embarking on this act of political pageantry, who failed to follow tradition and thereby put Uzzah in a position where he had to reach out and steady the ark—why Uzzah and not David? Why do we celebrate David, whose impulsiveness and lack of care led to this situation? Why don't we remember and mourn Uzzah, who carefulness and desire to protect the Lord cost him his life?

Perhaps it is because God is more offended by our carefulness than by our impulsiveness.<sup>1</sup> David, after all, is never careful. As a child, David fought lions and bears; as a teenager he taunted a giant; when running from Saul, he decided to hide out with the Philistines, Israel's enemy. When God gets angry with David, David gets angry with God. That is not something you do when you're being careful. But God never seems to mind.

God, it seems, is not offended by our anger or our mistakes or even our impulsiveness, but carefulness? To the point that you feel like you need to protect God? That is something God does not tolerate, has never tolerated. In our reading for next Sunday, we'll hear of David's proposal to build a Temple for God and we'll hear of God's refusal—God is not one who is willing to be contained or confined, not even by David. In Jesus, we see a God who broke all the rules, who time and time again bucked tradition, refused to be the Messiah, the God, that people expected, and did not allow others to protect him, even when it led him to the cross. At Pentecost, the Spirit descended and ushered in an understanding of God as a force that continually breaks the bonds of tradition and bursts beyond the walls of the church, challenging us at every turn to expand our understanding of who God is, where God is, and what God is about. God has never been a God who needs nor tolerates our protection. God has always been a God who pushes the boundaries, who explodes our carefulness, who refuses to be contained, whether on an ox cart or in a Temple or in a sanctuary.

We Presbyterians have been known, on occasion, to get a little worked up when tradition isn't followed, when someone isn't dressed appropriately, or the liturgy isn't followed, or someone does something a little bit differently. If we're honest, most of us have felt, on occasion, the need to protect God or at least tradition—from one another, from change, from

---

<sup>1</sup>I'm indebted to Professor Craig Barnes for this interpretation, which he shared in a sermon preached at Princeton Theological Seminary.

those who don't seem to understand how it's always been done or those who don't appreciate the power of *our* rituals. I suspect that some of us will even have a few of these feelings later this month when we return to in-person worship and find that it isn't the same as it was when we last gathered. I *know* many of us had those feelings when we had to switch to Zoom for worship. We don't always like change, especially when it is forced on us, and so we assume that God doesn't like it either. But our story this morning reminds us that God does not need us to protect God, God is perfectly capable of doing that God's self. Nor is God ever going to allow us to contain God, not in our traditions, not in our sanctuaries, not in our ideas of what is appropriate and what is not.

The question of "Why Uzzah?" is a hard one—it doesn't seem fair. But I suspect that the answer is that Uzzah was too careful, too worried about protecting God. I think this is one of those times when reading the Bible literally makes it hard to see what the story is trying to convey, which isn't that God is capricious or cold-hearted, but rather that one of the pitfalls of a life of faith is believing that we need to protect God, that faithfulness means carefulness.

The beauty of David is that even though he is impulsive and sometimes seems to run ahead of God, even though he occasionally fails to follow tradition and finds himself outside of the law, even though he gets angry at God and goes off in a sulk, he comes back. Three months later, after hearing the news that God has blessed the house of Obed-edom because the ark of the covenant is with him, David returns. He sees the blessings as a sign that the ark is not an object of misfortune but of blessing, even for a Philistine, and he gets over his anger and his fear, his frustration and his embarrassment. He comes back, this time bringing with him priests to carry the ark and the procession begins again. Only this time, after only six steps, David stops and sacrifices an ox. He sacrifices an ox, the symbol of "plan A" that didn't work. David sacrifices his original plan to the Lord and he carries on, dancing with all that he has and all that he is. So my questions for you this morning are: how are you trying to contain the Lord? And what ideas or plans or beliefs do you need to sacrifice or give up so that you, too, can dance with joy before the Lord?