

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost- August 26, 2007

Scripture lessons: Psalm 149:1-5 & II Samuel 6:1-23

LETTING GO FOR GOD

Let's recall again why we're spending so much time this summer with the Biblical stories of David. With the exception of Jesus, David's the Bible's most prominent character. Taking into account the major overlaps in the gospel stories, there are more David stories in the Bible than there are even of Jesus. The Scriptures give David the unique distinction of being a man "after God's own heart", a man God not only loves, but *likes*.

God likes him *not* because he's so saintly- we've already seen how very far he is from that- but because he's so *alive*. In today's vernacular, we might say that David is a "full throttle" kind of guy. He works hard, plays hard, sins hard and worships hard. There's something appealing about that all by itself, yet God likes David not just because he's so alive, but because he's alive *with* God.

Many times David fights with God, forgets God, or turns away from God, but David is never *indifferent* to God. Even when he's at his worst- and his worst is very, very bad- David still engages with God. He struggles constantly to come to terms with what God is doing in his life. He takes God seriously as *THE* vital presence with whom he has to deal. Putting all of that together, I think David's the sort of person St. Irenaeus had in mind when he said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

So where are we now in the David story? With today's reading from II Samuel, chapter 6, we've made a big jump ahead from the time when David was in Gath. That's where he's been the last two times we've joined him, but his situation has changed greatly. In Gath, he'd been a fugitive from King Saul who was trying to kill him. But now Saul is dead, David's back in his homeland and David is king. He's defeated his people's archenemy, the Philistines. He's brought the southern tribes of Judah and the northern tribes of Israel into a single, unified kingdom with Jerusalem as the capital.

David still has one very important piece of business to tend to if he wants to get his kingdom properly in order. It has to do with the "ark of God" or as it's traditionally been known, "the ark of the covenant". David sees it as an essential part of his people's tradition, one that goes all the way back to the time of their wilderness wanderings after Moses had led them from slavery in Egypt. It was a gold-plated wooden box constructed during that period, rectangular in shape and about four feet by two feet in size. Its lid, made of solid gold, was known as the mercy seat.

The figure of an angel was built at each end of the lid. The space which those figures framed above the mercy seat was *THE* symbolic focus for Israel of God's presence with them. Inside the box were three objects they held in the highest honor from their time in the wilderness. One was the stone tablets of the commandments Moses had received from God at Mt. Sinai. Another was a jar of the manna God had sent to help feed them when they were hungry. The third was the rod that Moses' brother, Aaron, had used in the desert as an instrument of deliverance.

All three were seen as primary evidence for and continuing reminders of God's faithful work among them- commanding them, providing for them, and delivering them. The ark was similar in its meaning to the meaning the waters of baptism and the bread and cup of communion have for us. It provided a visible, tangible, sacramental sign of God's presence and activity both in their past and their present.

Thirty years earlier, before David's time, the ark had been lost to the Philistines in battle. The Philistines had become strangely ill during the time they'd had it, so they'd eventually returned it. It had ended up at the house of the priest, Abinadab.

Now David's ready to retrieve it. The new capital of Jerusalem will focus the people on his government and his kingly rule, but David wants the ark there, too. He wants it to remind him and his people that, ultimately, God is their ruler.

He goes to Abinadab's house to get the ark. It's a grand and momentous day as Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, load the ark onto an oxen cart. David leads a marching band of lyres, harps, tambourines, castanets, and cymbals. Singing and dancing mark the day as this rousing, festive procession heads off for Jerusalem.

Then the completely unexpected happens. The text says that at the threshing floor of Nacon the oxen shake the cart. Maybe it lurches because it hits a rock or a rut. In any case, Uzzah reaches out to steady the ark so it won't fall off. Suddenly he drops dead.

It's what we would call "rain on a parade". David and his people are ready for a huge celebration of their life and faith when suddenly death strikes. Imagine that we're here on an Easter Sunday morning, singing out our happy alleluias. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, one of us dies. This is even worse because, according to II Samuel 6, Uzzah's death isn't from out of nowhere. *God* strikes him dead. Verse 7 says, "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there . . ."

The next verse is a beauty. It says, "David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah." It's a beauty because it's so David. It's so full of the honest emotion he often feels in his relationship with God. The psalms he writes show that to us repeatedly.

This fierce feeling David has when Uzzah dies is the one we feel, too, if we put ourselves in his place even a little bit. "Come on, God, is this really necessary?!! This poor man was only trying to save the ark from hitting the ground and breaking. What's so wrong with that?" The question shouts at us from this story- why does God kill Uzzah?

This can't be the God that we believe in. Where's the God who's so full of compassion, patience, and kindness that David also celebrates in his psalms? Where's the God who's so full of tender and unconditional love towards everyone that we learn from and see in Jesus?

The story in II Samuel 6 doesn't offer even a whiff of explanation for God's unsettling behavior. Yet it's a firmly established principle of Christian Biblical interpretation that if a Scripture story leaves such a yawning gap of silence on such an obvious question, we're free to fill it in with our own prayerful imaginations. That doesn't mean we get to fill it in with whatever we like. It does mean that we ponder the whole picture of God the Scriptures give to see if its wider context can help us with the questions a particular story raises. That never guarantees a completely satisfactory explanation, especially of something as difficult and grating as this. But it still can yield important truth that's worth taking to heart.

I think that's definitely the case with this story. Several facts in the larger context of it bear directly on the question it raises. One is that the Law of Moses which gives strict rules for how the ark's supposed to be moved says that it's never to be touched by human hands. It's to be carried only by Levites and only with poles that can be slipped through rings on the sides of the ark.

Abinadab's sons certainly know that. But maybe they feel flush with the power and excitement of this new, bigger, and stronger kingdom that David's setting up. Maybe this makes them want to show off a bit- show off the oxcart as one of the recent technological innovations of their time, one that, by the way, the Philistines invented.

Connected with this and more substantially we can see Uzzah as a particularly dramatic example of someone who feels that he has God in a box, of someone who thinks he can assume responsibility for keeping God safe and under control. The true God, of course, is not in a box. God never is under our control. God can't be carted around by the sons of priests or by anyone else. God doesn't have to be protected from the rocks, ruts, and dirt of this world or any other.

The Scriptures give us Uzzah's story, and others like it- the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts, chapter 5, for example, in which they're also suddenly struck down- as major warnings against being too presumptuous about God. When we're part of a big religious tradition like ours,

it's easy to assume, almost unconsciously, that we *do* have God in a box, that God is ringed in by our rituals, hemmed in by our teachings, and shut up in our traditions. It's easy for our worship of such a thoroughly domesticated God to become a casual or a fussy affair, one that we feel is firmly under our control, one that we can take or leave as we choose as a favor that we grant or not to a God who's in our possession and who's on call for our purposes like, for instance, serving as a prop for a kingdom that we fully intend to rule.

Now I don't pretend that this understanding of Uzzah's death fully explains how it can be the act of a God whom we Christians say is love. Yet it does put us on notice that the love of this God must be a lot freer, wilder, more mysterious and more dangerous than we usually like to think. The New Testament letter to the Hebrews invites us always to come before God with confidence because of the love God has shown to us in Jesus. But it also says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). That line serves as a fitting epitaph on Uzzah's tombstone and it's a potent warning to us- "Beware of God."

The story goes on to give us more to work with. Three months later, David's not as angry or afraid as he had been. He hears that the house of Obed-edom, where the ark had been taken after Uzzah's death, is being greatly blessed. He prepares again to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

This time things go much differently. Apparently throughout the trip, the ark is borne by the priests in the manner prescribed by Moses' law. No one presumes to touch it. David even offers sacrifices after the ark has been carried only six paces. He takes great care to make sure the ark is treated the way it's supposed to be treated.

But that doesn't mean he's at all stiff, stuffy, or uptight about it. The journey of the ark to Jerusalem is still an occasion for great joy. The sound of trumpets rings out as David leads the way leaping and dancing with all his might.

One of his wives, Michal, is disgusted by him. She's repelled by his exuberance which she thinks borders on the obscene. She's a daughter of Saul who had grown up in Saul's royal court and she has definite ideas about how a king should conduct himself in public. They don't include his dancing uninhibitedly in a linen ephod that can easily show too much skin.

Yet it seems to me that this is exactly the sort of thing that God likes about David. David was honestly angry with and afraid of God over Uzzah's death. Now he's honestly joyful and exuberant in bringing the ark to Jerusalem. David's not afraid to let go for God. He lets his joy in the Lord all hang out on this occasion which he believes calls for it.

Michal, for her part, thinks he's being grossly undignified. She's sure that kings should be much more in control both of themselves and of situations. I imagine that she wants someone like Prince Charles in public- tie cinched up tightly, collar and French cuffs properly stiff, back straight, steps measured, and at most a small, creased smile on the face. David gives her a Holy Roller instead. He dances, leaps, sways, claps his hands, waves his arms, works up a big sweat and doesn't care what anyone thinks. He does it for God.

Uzzah touches the ark and God strikes him down. David dances before the ark with nearly obscene abandon and God approves. What's the difference?

David lets go for God. Uzzah thinks he has God in a box. David lets go for God whether he's angry, afraid, or joyful. But did Uzzah ever let go, whether in anger, fear, joy or anything else for the Lord? With God in a box at his dad's house or all safe and secure on the ox cart on the way to Jerusalem, it seems that he thought of God as the one he took control of, not the One he let go for.

The question for us is, "Are we more like David or more like Uzzah and Michal?" Do we, perhaps unconsciously, try to box God up by the way we practice our faith? Do we, for example, aim to keep God under our control by thinking that we can take or leave God as we see fit or by manipulating God for our own self-centered purposes or by maintaining a phony dignity about it all that actually serves to cover up the fact we're the ones trying to call the shots? If so, we're more like Uzzah and Michal.

Or do we get real with God? Do we let go for God with what's really going on with us whether for good or for ill, whether in anger, fear, or joy, whether in love or in rebellion? Do we respond

to the living God body and soul, with our hearts wide open and with all of our light and darkness showing, no matter what the proportions of those might be? If so, we're more like David.

And we can be. We can be more like David because like him we know that God knows all about all of us already. There's nothing that any of us can hide from God. There's nothing we have to hide from God because God already loves each one of us unconditionally in the midst of all of our stuff, both the beautiful and the ugly.

As Uzzah's death shows, God's love sometimes can be awfully rough and tumble, a lot wilder, more dangerous, and more undignified than we usually like to think. But God's love *is* in control. The love of God ultimately is the real deal and God wants us to be real with God in return.

So like David, we can let go. We can let go to give God the glory by becoming human beings who are fully alive- alive *with* God. Amen.