

Title: Getting Ahead of God
Text: 2 Samuel 6:1-11
Date: July 8, 2018

Some people are often a step *behind* God. For example, it took some people awhile to realize that slavery was not part of God's plan, but eventually they "got it." It took some people awhile to realize that the LGBTQ community should be fully embraced in the church, but eventually they "got it."

By contrast, other people are often a step *ahead* of God, and this certainly describes David. He constantly came up with ideas and plans that were news to God. Maybe, like David, you too know about trying to improve upon the slow moving work of God. But as our text today demonstrates, running ahead of God typically leads to disappointment.

Shortly after the long and terrible civil wars with Saul were over, David, who was now king, discovered he had assumed leadership of a discouraged and divided nation. (Sound familiar?) So *he* decides that to Make Israel Great Again, what was needed was the return of the Ark of the Covenant.

This ark was a sacred symbol given by God to the Hebrews while they were in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. It was an ornate gold box with angel wings on the top of it. As they carried this ark with them on their pilgrimage, it served as a symbol of the invisible God who journeyed with the people.

Thirty years before our text takes place today, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant. But they encountered so many headaches after capturing it, they dumped it at the house of a man named Abinidab.

David was sure that returning the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was a terrific idea – maybe the best idea ever. It would inspire and unite the people. It would make Jerusalem, David's new capital, not only the political center, but also the spiritual center of the nation.

David was *sure* that God would love this idea, even though we have no evidence of David ever talking to God about it. Why bother praying about something that you can make happen yourself with just a little hard work? David would have made a good Protestant. *Just do it!*

So, he gathers together a few soldiers – 30,000 – and they go to Abinidab's house to ask for the ark. Not surprisingly, Abinidab agreed and he also gives them his two sons, Uzzah and Ahio, to help David get the ark to Jerusalem.

They placed the ark on a brand new oxcart and began to haul it back to David's new capital. Soon a parade broke out. **"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."**

The parade marched along until somehow the stupid ox stumbled. Uzzah, who had been walking beside the ark just in case something like this happened, put up his hand, **"and took hold of the ark"** in order to steady it. Then we are told that, **"The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah,"** and God struck him dead on the spot. Dang!

This put something of a damper on the parade. The dancing stopped and David became furious saying, "Forget it. Just leave God's precious ark over there at that guy's house." So the Ark of the Covenant stayed in the roadside home of a man named Obedom, while David sulked back to Jerusalem, disappointed in a God he did not understand.

Now I don't want to be the one to *defend* what happened, but let me offer a word of explanation based on the mindset of the story. So what went wrong? For starters, they weren't carrying the ark "properly." When God gave the people this symbol, he gave very specific directions that it was only to be carried on the back of priests, not oxen. And even the priests were not allowed to touch it. It was too sacred to be grabbed. You don't grab at the presence of God. So when the priests would carry it, it had to be carried on long poles that would run through the little rings on the side of the ark.

So did God strike Uzzah dead because David was not obeying the letter of the law? Some would suggest that, but I am not convinced. You see David himself was never good at the letter of the law. God did not get angry when David took more wives than the law permitted, or when David walked into the temple and took the holy bread and ate it just because he was hungry. God was connected to David *not* because he was a perfect rule keeper. We are told that they were connected *by the heart*. Possibly what angered God was the heart of David that motivated him to take the ark . . . because he had *his own plan* to use God in his new capital. Likewise maybe God was angry at Uzzah who *had his own plan* to keep God safely on an oxcart.

Thirty years earlier, when the Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant, they hauled it around on an oxcart thinking they had a good luck charm. But it gave them so much grief and heartache that they abandoned it. Trying to haul God around on an oxcart is always a bad idea.

God will *not* be *contained* by *anyone* who thinks they might have a use for him . . . whether it is the Philistines, or the anointed King of Israel, or our own contemporary government, or whether it is you or I who want to pull God out of a box when we need him.

Neither will God be *rescued* by anyone whose rescue plan is to keep him safely tucked inside a box on a cart, whether it is Uzzah, or the church of today. Stanley Hauerwas writes: **"Never think that you need to protect God. Because anytime you think you need to protect God, you can be sure that you are worshipping an idol."**

But poor Uzzah. He was just trying to be careful while David was dancing around. Why did the Lord's anger burn against Uzzah? Why didn't he strike down David? Not sure we get an answer to that. Perhaps God has never been as offended by our *exuberance* as by our *carefulness*.

In contrast to Uzzah, David was never careful. He was not careful with anyone or anything – God included. He began his life by fighting with lions and bears. He would taunt giants. When he was on the run from Saul, he tried hiding *with* the Philistines – the enemy. Now that he's king he comes up with his first great idea and he thinks God will love it. But when God gets angry at him for it, David dared to be angry at God.

So isn't it interesting that God tolerated David's anger, but he killed Uzzah in his carefulness? Perhaps it is because anger is an emotion of the heart. And again, we're told that God and David are connected by the heart. David was as alive in God with his anger as he was with his praise. We can bring our anger *and* our hurt *and* our

disappointment to God in worship . . . but our carefulness will always prevent us from knowing the Divine.

Early in life we learn the importance of developing careful plans. We have plans for our own lives – to graduate, to get a job, to move ahead. We have plans for our children . . . so *many* plans for our children! Some of you have plans for what your next pastor should look like. Politicians claim to have plans for the immigration crisis. All of this planning is a necessity. We can't even get through the day without a plan of some sort. *But if we assume that God is boxed into our plans, we are destined for disappointment.* God will not be hauled around; certainly not by our strategies for a better life.

Do not pray for God to bless *your* plans; *pray for eyes to see where God is leading.* Throughout the day, God will be doing incredible things . . . but you'll miss it if your focus is only on your version of God in your box.

While David was back sulking in Jerusalem, he heard that God was blessing the home of Obededom, where he had left the Ark of the Covenant. David then illustrates again why he is remembered as one after God's heart. *He gets over his anger with God.* He chooses to stop being angry about his disappointment. He lets go of it.

David goes back to the home of Obededom, and this time he brings some priests to carry the ark correctly. And then the parade to Jerusalem begins again. But after the priest takes only six steps, David stops everything. He sacrifices an ox, and then he dances his way back to Jerusalem.

Isn't that interesting? He slays the ox - the symbol of everything that had gone wrong the last time he tried to move the ark. He sacrifices careful plans, and his own disappointment with God, and he returns to dancing before a God he does not fully understand.

Whatever your great argument with life may be, know that it is first of all *an argument with God.* Until you give up trying to keep God in a box of your own understanding, you will never be able to resume dancing.

Maybe, like David, you also ran ahead of God. You had an idea or a dream that you were *sure* God would bless . . . but the dream crumbled. The disappointment was great. You tried to get on with life, but couldn't shake the hurt.

Maybe the time has come for you to slay the ox. You are never going to get over the hurt until you sacrifice it, and all of your unanswered questions, before God. It's clear that God will not explain the hurt or himself to you any better than he did to David. Arguments with God do not get resolved. You just eventually get tired of them and carry on. That is, if you have a healthy heart.

Don't presume that you can keep God in a box of your own making. Give up striving to keep a step ahead of God. Like David, once you are in step with God, I bet you'll want to dance with all your heart.

Amen.

2 Samuel 6:1-11 (NRSV)

1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 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. 3 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 4 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5 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. 6 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. 7 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. 8 David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day. 9 David was afraid of the Lord that day; he said, "**How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?**" 10 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. 11 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.