

Pentecost 6B  
2 Samuel 6

Pastor Wayne Peterson  
July 16, 2006

### David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem

*David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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 <sup>4</sup>with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. <sup>5</sup>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...*

*<sup>12</sup>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; <sup>13</sup>and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. <sup>14</sup>David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. <sup>15</sup>So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.*

*<sup>16</sup>As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal 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.*

*<sup>17</sup>They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. <sup>18</sup>When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, <sup>19</sup>and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.*

During the summer months, we are giving our attention to the stories of the first three kings of Israel – Saul, David, and Solomon. Each Sunday we read one of the more significant stories of this period, which covers about 100 years, from Samuel’s anointing of Saul as king in 1025 B.C. to the death of Solomon in 928 B.C. Reading just eleven stories from a period of almost 100 years obviously means that we are skipping a lot of stories, so allow me to begin with a little commercial urging you to read the longer passages that are listed in the *Church Begins at Home* devotional materials, or just sit down some evening and read all of 1 & 2 Samuel. You will find that the transition from Saul to David was not a smooth one – battles were fought between forces loyal to Saul and those loyal to David and Saul’s head general and surviving sons were murdered by David’s forces, though without David’s approval. For seven years after the death of Saul, David was recognized as king only by the southern tribe of Judah. It was only after Saul’s son Ishbaal was murdered that that leaders of the northern tribes recognized David as king over all the tribes of Israel.

The main thing I would like to talk about this morning is David's dancing, but before I get to that, we must understand the reason for David's dancing, so I need to provide some context for this story about moving the ark to Jerusalem. David was an astute politician, and he did two things to give Israel a sense of unity. First, he chose a small town that was not important to any of the tribes to become his capital – Jerusalem. The founders of the United States followed a similar strategy in selecting a capital. The southern states would not agree to the capital being in the north in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia, and the northern states would not agree to a capital in Charleston or Richmond, so they selected a neutral site on the Potomac River and called it the District of Columbia. Jerusalem was like Washington, D.C. – a wise political decision that everyone could agree with.

The second wise thing David did is recounted in today's reading, where David brings the ark of God (also called the ark of the LORD or the ark of the covenant) to Jerusalem, thereby making Jerusalem the religious center as well as the political center of the country.

What's this ark, you might ask? This ark is not a big boat, like Noah's ark. This ark was a large box, made famous in our generation by Indiana Jones and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The ark originates during the time of Moses and the Exodus, over 200 years before the time of David. There is not a complete consistency in the Biblical record of the ark's purpose and significance, but it contained the stone tablets on which God had given Moses the Ten Commandments and the people of Israel carried the ark with them as a sign of God's promise and presence. It might have looked something like the drawing on the front of the bulletin, with the cherubim, which may have been angels or mythical winged lions, guarding the LORD God's throne.

When the Israelites arrived at the threshold of the Promised Land, only to face the Jordan River in flood stage, the priests carried the ark into the river and the waters parted, allowing the people to cross on dry ground just as they had done at the Red Sea. During the period of the judges, the ark was kept in a shrine at Shiloh, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. You might recall the story of the young boy Samuel, who goes to be an assistant to the elderly priest Eli – that was at the shrine of Shiloh where the ark was kept.

When Samuel was an adult, but still a few years before Saul became king, the Israelites were fighting yet another battle with their neighbors, the Philistines, and the battle was not going well for the home team. So they decided they would greatly improve their chances of victory if they carried the ark with them into battle. They reasoned, "Who can possibly defeat us if we have the LORD God of hosts leading the battle?" So they went to Shiloh, got the ark, and promptly lost both the battle and the ark. For the next 25 years or so, the ark was sort of under Philistine control. I say "sort of" under their control because in whatever city the ark resided, terrible things happened to the residents in the form of plague and tumors. The Philistines ultimately decided that the ark was more trouble than it was worth, so they put it on a cart, hitched it up to two cows, and set the cows off in the direction of Israelite territory. The cows ended up at the home of Abinadab, in Baale-judah, about seven miles west of Jerusalem, and that is where it stayed until David came to bring it to his new capital of Jerusalem.

One last detail before we look at David's dancing. The committee that put together our lectionary decided to skip some verses in today's reading. You may have noted that we read verses 1-5 and then skipped to verse 12. Something quite puzzling happens in those five skipped verses. Abinadab's sons, Uzzah and Ahio, are walking alongside the cart when the cart begins to tip. Uzzah reaches out to steady it, and the text reads, "The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark." Seems a little

harsh, doesn't it? There are varying interpretations of what was going on here, but a key message would seem to be that God is so powerful and holy that humans cannot be in the presence of God and live.

After Uzzah's death, David was understandably cautious about moving the ark, which is why the text says they took six paces toward Jerusalem and then stopped. They likely figured that if the LORD God was angry about the move, something to indicate this anger would happen immediately. When they had gone six paces without anyone else being struck down, David offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving and then danced before the ark all the way to Jerusalem.

That's a lot of background material, but now I get to the main point of this sermon, which is David's dancing. I'd like to reflect on what it means to dance before God or dance with God. Some of you with long memories may recall that about seven years ago we used a Lenten series theme, "Called to the Dance." We looked at dance as a metaphor for our faith journey, our relationship with God. This dance is both one-on-one with God and a communal dance with brothers and sisters in Christ.

In order to understand the nature of this dance, we must first reflect upon the roles of the dancers. The one who leads in this dance, the one who has taken the initiative to invite us onto the dance floor, is not your typical dance partner. This dance is not between equals. This is the LORD God, the one who appeared to Moses in a burning and bush and commanded Moses to take off his shoes in his presence. Moses responded by hiding his face in fear and awe before the majesty of God's presence.

This dance partner is the LORD God who appeared to the prophet Isaiah in a vision. Isaiah's response was fear and dread, recognizing his unworthiness to be in the presence of Almighty God.

This dance partner is the LORD God whom David had just witnessed striking Uzzah dead, perhaps for dealing too casually with God's presence.

When we approach God, whether it's to worship him or question him or vent our anger at him, we step onto the dance floor with knees knocking. We dance with the creator of the entire universe, the one who gave us life, the one who expects our obedience and desires our love. How often we come to worship casually wondering what we might get out of the service, when what we should be doing, according to author Annie Dillard, is wear crash helmets, knowing that coming into the presence of the Living God will likely disrupt our comfortable lives. Imagine the impact it would have on our expectations of worship if, in addition to a bulletin, the ushers would hand us a crash helmet to wear as we enter to worship in God's presence.

As awesome as God is, the other partner in this dance, you and me, is mortal, insignificant, transient. You know what a Biblical metaphor of our condition is? Grass. We are grass. Psalm 90 says of us grass, "In the morning we flourish and are renewed, and in the evening we fade and wither." The prophet Isaiah says, "All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it."

What does withered, dried-up grass become? Dust. Ashes. We accomplish wondrous things in our lives. We have talent and creativity and ingenuity. We make plans for the future. We're going to build bigger barns. Yet we remain grass. We flourish in the morning. We wither by nightfall. Dust. Ashes.

This is a picture of the dance partners -- one is all-powerful and immortal, the other is insignificant and mortal. As it stands, it would not appear to be a dance in which we would be interested in participating. But this is only a partial picture, not the entire picture.

To get the full picture, listen to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount:

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you--you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*

How do we insignificant, mortal creatures dare dance with the creator? We dare do it because in Jesus Christ we know that this Almighty God loves us and wants only the best for us. It is true that we are dust, but we are precious dust in God's eyes. It is because we are confident of God's love for us that days like All Saints Day and Ash Wednesday are not morbid days on which we think about our own death. Those days are a reality check for us, to be sure. Being confronted with our mortality is never easy. But we visualize our dance with God in the context of God's promises to us, especially Paul's words at the end of Romans 8 -- "Nothing in all creation -- not even death -- can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We dare dance with Almighty God for the same reason that David danced -- because we know God loves us, mortal and sinful though we are. We dance with joy and thanksgiving with this awesome, mysterious God because we know God's Word to us -- Jesus Christ -- is a Word for us. As this next old carol suggests, we dance and sing because we know that we are God's true love.