

2 Samuel 6
Ephesians 1: 3-14

Ever wonder about where we get our Scripture passages from? For the most part I take mine from the lectionary – a schedule of suggested readings designed to cover the whole Bible in a couple years. But what I’ve noticed is that sometimes the lectionary skips around in a passage, and that always makes me curious. So that’s where I want to start this morning.

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And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the Lord had broken forth upon Uzzah; and that place is called Perezuzzah, to this day.

Poor Uzzah, he was only trying to keep the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest symbol of God’s presence, from falling. How harsh of God to strike him down! His is a natural reaction right? Uzzah, marching with the Ark on the cart, sees it tilt to one side because the oxen stumbled. He reached out. Uzzah had the best of intentions. Surely God didn’t want his holy symbol to fall to the ground. Why such a harsh judgment? Why did God smite Uzzah for reaching out and steadying the Ark of the Covenant? What sin had he committed? Yes, Moses instructed that no one was to touch the Ark, but please, this is an exception, right? Poor Uzzah, he was only doing what seemed best to him. Can’t you relate? We do things all the time with the best of intentions. We make decisions, rationalizations, even counsel others – many times with the assumption that we have God’s interests in mind. But like Uzzah we find out later, we did not in fact have God’s holiness in proper perspective.

As many of you know, my dad is a Presbyterian minister, and as a boy I would trot on up to the front of the church just like the children did here – just like my Emmie does now. Now early on, when my father would ask a question I’d try to answer in earnest, without giving much thought to the onlooking congregation. You all know that the answers given during the time with the children can cover a broad spectrum – from the poignantly sweet and insightful to, well, sometimes it’s hard to read where the comments are coming from, or where they’re going next...some of the children’s comments can draw quite a few chuckles. But, when I was young, I didn’t know any better and would faithfully do my best to answer my dad, never mind the chuckles. As I got a little older I began to catch on to how the congregation was watching, maybe even anticipating some silliness. I’d start hamming it up, asking funny questions, giving ridiculous answers...until that fateful moment when my dad would say (very slow and solemn), “Cool it Buck.” And I knew immediately, without question, my mortal danger – that smiting would be soon to follow – and yet I’d still pull an Uzzah. It’s just so tempting

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David was afraid of the Ark, at least initially. He saw how God judged Uzzah, and he was angry and afraid. So afraid, that he changed his mind about having the Ark in his capital city and so he sent it to Obed-Edom the Gittite. First Chronicles tells us that Obed was a Levite priest, ‘hopefully he’d know what to do’ David must have thought. And while David wasn’t completely sure about sending the Ark to Obed, he was sure that he couldn’t bring this holy Ark into his city in an unworthy way. David had to be sure that he was doing God’s will by moving the Ark into the capital of Israel. As the new king in his new city, David learned that he could not just haphazardly bring the Ark of the Covenant up. David was angry and afraid and had to get things straight – the Ark was with Uzzah’s family for twenty years and look what happened. “How can the Ark come to me?” he asks.

David brought the Ark to Obed and then he went home to think about it. Three months later, David heard the Obed and his family were being blessed by the presence of the Ark in their house. This was good news. David took this as a sign that God wasn’t angry anymore. It meant that God’s presence was a blessing to be around as well as something to be feared. David gathered the people of Israel together again and went down to Obed-Edom’s house to bring the Ark up. The Ark was God’s symbol of his presence with his people – it needed to be in the capital city of Israel, it belonged in Jerusalem.

But this time things would be different. Rather than pulling the Ark in a cart, David ordered that it be carried in the traditional way, the way Moses instructed, the way God commanded. The Ark was to be carried by four Levite priests. The Ark had four rings of gold, one on each corner. They were positioned so that the special gilded wood poles could slide through the rings on the two ends of the Ark. The Ark was then carried by each of the four priests, resting the pole in their shoulders. You see David was extra careful to follow God’s law to the letter; he was extra careful to be obedient. Once the priests lifted the Ark and carried it six steps, David knew everything was going to be okay. The Scripture says he sacrificed a bull and a calf, in this way he praised God for allowing him, David, to receive the Ark of the Covenant into his city. David humbled himself; he was obedient and reverent, showing God that he took his law most seriously.

What about Uzzah? Unlike David, Uzzah was neither obedient nor reverent. Uzzah allowed the Ark of the Covenant to be pulled in a cart rather than carried according to the law. Uzzah disregarded God’s explicit instructions. Also, Uzzah chose to reach out and take hold of the Ark. Uzzah failed to be obedient – he was not reverent to the holiness of God. I would even argue that Uzzah was proud. Picked to escort the Ark into the king’s city, Uzzah thought too much of himself. When he saw the Ark about to fall, he thought, “I can grab it. I know it’s supposed to be forbidden, but God surely understands”. That was pride and God did not, and does not, tolerate it.

One Sunday morning, a couple years back, some friends and I were worshipping at a mainline denomination church. We were a little taken aback when a ‘hippie spiritual guy’ (my friends’ description) stood and sang a ridiculous song about how “there really

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isn't sin in our lives, just obstacles which we must overcome". He was rejecting the notion of sin. It was a gospel devoid of the real gospel. Perhaps he was committing the sin of Uzzah. He was saying to God, "Hey you don't actually want us to believe all this stuff in the Bible about sin and death right? Don't worry God, we get it. We know which verses are worth abiding, if not obeying, and which ones we can dispose of." Sometimes the church approaches God with irreverence to his Word. Like Uzzah, we figure we can take the holy things of God and make them better. We can reach out and give God 'a hand' when it seems he is asking something unreasonable of us.

What about us? Where in our lives have we acted irreverent to God's holiness? Where have we, in our pride, taken it upon ourselves to decide what things of God to obey and what things to disregard? How's Jesus' sermon on the mount working out for you these days?

Matt. 5:17-48

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and

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throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that you whole body go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform for the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Ever fallen short of any of these?

Are such instances understandable? Are they common to all of us as members of the human race? You bet...but that’s sin isn’t it? And pride is at the root of it. I know that I often pick and choose which commandments to obey. I suppose I feel I’m good enough, wise enough, mature enough to do that. Uzzah thought he was good enough to give God ‘a hand’ and break his laws. Where has your pride led you away from humbling yourself before God and his holiness? Where are those rough places, those undisciplined places,

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those portions of our lives where inordinate pride, desire or fear declare our allegiance to ourselves rather than the Lord.

Now David, David did right; he was obedient and reverent. But his reverence was a bit different from our expectations. The scripture goes on to say that he danced, and danced. He took off his robes and girded with only a linen ephod, he danced. The linen ephod, that's a special undergarment worn by priests, perhaps it's crude but, basically, the underwear of a priest. The scripture says that he danced and whirled about with all his might. It says he leapt and whirled. In the Hebrew these words are usually reserved for describing the actions of animals. David was leaping like a gazelle and whirling like a bird. In other words, David was so ecstatic with God, so enraptured with him, so overjoyed, that he was making a fool of himself. He was giving glory to God. In front of all the royalty, his family, the soldiers, his maidservants, and all the men, women, and children of Israel, David their mighty king was dancing around in his priestly long-johns like a wild animal.

Haven't you heard the famous, but silly advice given to public speakers? If you have to speak in front of group and you fear you may freeze from stage fright, you should imagine your audience in their underwear or some other foolish predicament. Why is that the going advice for public performance and public speaking? Because people in their underwear aren't very intimidating. It's easy to feel confident around people who look silly.

Well, here David turns that on its head – rather than picturing the people looking foolish; it's David who was the fool. He's the one dancing with all his might without his robes, girded with only a linen ephod. Rather than lifting himself up before his people, he lowered himself. He debased himself before God. Seeing no other way to compete with the holy presence of God, he celebrated in lowliness. What a scene, the people's king making a fool of himself as he was carried away in his joy. We should be jealous – David, so overjoyed, so enthralled with the presence of God, disregards the judgments of others and dances before the Lord, the holy one of Israel.

But then there was Michal...

Poor Michal. Here's her husband, the king of Israel, making a fool of himself before the people and his God. How embarrassing! Not only does she bear the frustration and humiliation of being Saul's daughter (the rejected king of Israel), but now the new king, David, goes and humiliates himself in front of her maidservants and her friends – all because of a lousy piece of sacred furniture. How much must she endure? Well, she gave David a piece of her mind when he came home. She tried to shame David into an apology. Michal was not going to stand for this kind of injury to her reputation. She was, after all, going to be the mother of the next king of Israel! Her glory was tarnished when David acted so foolishly before the people. How could he?

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Oh how she missed the whole point. Her pride caused her to be embarrassed and offended by David's dance. Rather than giving God the glory and humbling herself, she was proud. Her pride was ultimately the pride of jealousy. God was getting the glory that day, not her husband, not her family, not her future. Her glory was in competition with God's glory and she refused to yield, or as she thought of it, to be the fool. Unlike David, she despised his show of humility and worship – she wanted hers first and God could get the leftovers.

It's a shame Michal didn't pay much attention to historical precedent right? I mean this is David after all, the same individual who as a youngster went at the greatest warrior on the planet with a rock and a slingshot. Foolish David matched against a giant clad in armor so big that David could have lived in it as a house, carrying a spear so tremendous that it weighed more than David. David armed with only a rock and a sling...and obedience to God. And we know who carried the day, became the greatest king of Israel...

We claim all these characters as heroes of the faith – remember the children's musical a few months back? But do we really strive to emulate that witness by challenging the pride in our own lives, in our own hearts? Isn't that us? Aren't we like Michal too? Aren't we like Uzzah? Often we'll only obey, only try to satisfy God if it satisfies us too. Just like Michal, just like Uzzah we're often unwilling to be a fool for God.

There were three responses and only one was right. David, the foolish one was the one that pleased God. David pleased God because David was the one who humbled himself. Unlike Uzzah, David humbled himself by being obedient and reverent. Unlike Michal, David lost himself for God's glory. David gave up his own glory and sought after God's glory. David was obedient and David forfeited his own glory – that's humility. Uzzah and Michal responded to God's holiness with pride. In pride, Uzzah acted irreverently to God's holiness and his law. In pride, Michal was angry that the presence of the holy God of Israel would mean humility for her.

So how is our pride? Are we willing to be humble for God? Do we relinquish all claims of glory for the sake of Christ? Do we obey God in all things and humble ourselves before his laws? Are we truly humble with each other and with him? C.S. Lewis says that in God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud person is always looking down on things and people. As long as you're looking down you cannot see something that is above you. You stop looking down on things and people and looking up like the apostle Paul and you'll have that stance of praise and wonder. You will be able to say, as Paul,

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Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Amen.