

July 12, 2015
God Sounds Like My Mother
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II Samuel 6:1-23

Did you miss having homework this week? The reading was so short I skipped it. Only three important things happened since last week's passage in which David took Jerusalem to establish his capital there.

He established foreign trade relationships. He acquired a harem of wives and concubines. And he consolidated the military. All three of which would have left religious conservatives horrified and probably a little sick, and angry, and hostile, because their idea of Israel was, to say the least, ancient and sacred and liturgical. Rooted in their ancient relationship with Yahweh. One writer noted that before this episode David had more power than he had popular affection. He had foreign recognition and a crack military. What he didn't have was legitimacy to lead. The Bible intends us to know, to believe, that King David was faithful to Yahweh *and* that King David was smart.

Thus he gathered 30,000 men to go and fetch the ark of the covenant from Abinadab's house, where the Philistines had dropped it off 20+ years earlier after taking it from the Israelites in battle. They tried to keep it themselves, but everywhere they hid it, bunches of people fell down dead. So they took it to Abinadab and said, "never mind, you can have it back."

30,000 men to move one big box? Yep, because remember, David was SMART. He wanted everyone in every town they passed through to see what he was doing and to see him latch his military activity onto the religious. To see that he understood, as much as the most religious people among them, Yahweh's ancient intentions for Israel.

He was faithful and he was so politically savvy. Knowing that this very religious, liturgical, sacred act was a brilliant political move too. Why? Because the ones appalled and hostile, loved it. And if they wanted to worship at the ark, they were required to go to Jerusalem. And by just going, they gave tacit approval to King David's reign. The very legitimacy he needed to rule.

Commentators say all kinds of things about David's naked dance party. Some say it was a kind of orgy, others a parade of ecstatic worship. It offended Michal, one of his wives, but more important to the story, Saul's daughter, the last Saulide voice ever to contest David's kingship.

My idea is to compare David's experience to ours, as believers and the church. Our desire to be faithful to Yahweh and, at the same time, legitimate to the

world in which we wish to thrive, both as people and as a church. By thrive I mean in all good ways, to be moral, to contribute. As a church, to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. It is not easy.

It's not easy always to *want* to be good let alone actually to *be* good. When we do our best at *wanting* to be good as a person, as a church, sometimes the "trying our best to be good" gets in the way of *actually* being good. Which brings us to the scene which pretty much ruins the story for me.

A soldier named Uzzah is walking along, guarding the ark, obeying orders, and the oxen pulling the cart stumble, which causes the cart to shimmy. Without thinking about rules a few hundred years old, he puts out his hand to steady the cart, touches the ark, and WHAM! God erases him. Just like that! Does Yahweh erase the oxen who stumbled in the first place? No. Just the guy trying to help. Trying to do the right thing.

A woman I know, long healed from being raised by abusive parents, told me once, "honestly, God reminds me of my mother." "How so?" I asked. "Like when God says, 'Don't touch that or I'll kill you.'"

For his part, David was angry. Then David was afraid. He lost his nerve and took the ark to the house of a guy named Obed-edom and the whole project halted for three months. Can you imagine how thrilled Obed was with this plan? "Uh, see that fancy box on that cart? Every time somebody touches it he drops dead. We want to put it in your barn for now." But nothing bad happened and in fact, Obed's family was extra blessed. And finally David got his nerve back. Restarted the parade, eventually making it to Jerusalem with no more trouble.

Ever felt like you were doing everything you were supposed to, everything God wanted you to do, and still nothing worked? Everything you touched seemed to mess up? Or if not fail outright, seemed always to limp along? Friends, what if that predicament, apparently common to us, and even to King David – the Bible's most faithful and smartest – is NOT a predicament of incompetence but simply, life. Life itself. Life together. Life in God. Mad he makes me sometimes; low down as I see him, the Bible keeps pushing me to see David as faithful and wise.

Sigh.

So, going with that, if he's so faithful and wise and he gets hung up like this, why wouldn't I? Why wouldn't we? At least that's what the Bible seems to be saying here. That we do our best and stuff still happens. And whatever else it means.

I wonder if this story doesn't partly mean that when we get all high, mighty and confident with our plans for public legitimacy, and when we think we can pull off some awesome project of divine complexity and at the same time show off

for the folks watching and waiting for us to fail... God is watching too. Closely. And always, always, always the one truly running the show.

True, Uzzah dies. But that's how stories work. Characters come and go to serve the purpose of the story. It sure pulled David up short, didn't it? He was angry, then afraid, paralyzed for a while, then ready to proceed. Proceed with being king. Which couldn't have been easy.

Being a human being is hard. Being a human being believer in a community which desires to be faithful is not easy. Much to balance. Prayers to pray and risks to take, hoping we are getting it right.

The beauty and craziness of it all if we imagine ourselves to be doing the will of the Creator of the universe.

These little lives of ours, these everyday words and deeds which we seek the legitimacy to call the will of God.

The audacity with which we assume that what we say, what we do, matters in the scope of time and space, of eternity and infinity itself!

. . . And along comes a violent, creepy, slightly boring story to confirm that very assumption.

A king named David putting on a show in order to establish and rule his country the best way he can. He prays and then gets busy. Very busy. And by the slightest missteps he learns God IS paying attention and cares enormously about what he's doing.

I'm not a big fan of HOW God pays attention, but a very big fan of the reminder that God does. That we are NOT on our own here. That small and mundane as our lives are, these are also the lives we've been given, by the Creator of the universe. To do His will. In this one time and place. As best we can. And with His help.