

## THERE IS GOOD NEWS AND THERE IS BAD NEWS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Psalm 27; II Samuel 6:1-23

Just about everyone has seen that Indiana Jones classic, **Raiders of the Lost Ark**. It's the action packed story of Indiana Jones' attempt to capture the Ark of the Covenant, the ark that God told Moses to build and that Israel carried through the wilderness for forty years. It was that instrument where the presence of God was most present of all places where God is present on earth; the closest Israel ever came to having a totem, an image that located the God who cannot be confined or located to one place alone.

Indy finds the ark, but a group of evil Nazis stalkers have found it, too, by following him. And the Nazis take the ark from Indy. They believe that if they can harness the power of the ark, God's power, they can rule the world. In the final scene of the movie as Indy and his love interest, Marian Ravenwood, are hidden out of sight on a bluff nearby, the curious Nazi captors of the ark want to see what they have worked so hard to get. They pry open the lid, a forbidden act, and look inside. And when they do, the power of God is unleashed like a tornado of gas and fire.

No one, from the time of Moses' meeting God on Sinai was ever allowed to look upon the face of God. So the Nazi soldiers have done the unforgivable thing, they have looked upon the *un-see-able*. In a frenzy of special effects, Steven Spielberg shows us what it would be like to look upon the face of God. All who look die! They burn in spontaneous combustion. All of them do, except Indy and Marian, who remember the scriptural prohibition, and look away. It is the only thing that saves them.

In the Biblical narrative of I Samuel, the Ark of the Covenant falls into the hands of the Philistines as they rout the Israelites, slaying 30,000 of Israel's finest.<sup>1</sup> The Philistines take the ark to the temple of Dagon, the god of the Philistines, and place the ark beside Dagon's likeness. Here the Bible, itself, sounds like a chapter from Spielberg's script.

The two images side by side are an imperfect pairing. Night after night the idol of Dagon inexplicably falls on its face before the Ark of the Covenant, and every morning the foolish Philistines try to set him upright again. It doesn't take Jungian analysis to figure out the heavy-handed symbols here. Soon the Philistines break out in sores and tumors, and their lives become miserable.

Now the Philistines were not the sharpest knives in the drawer. It took them seven months of this misery before they decided that the ark was the problem and they had better get rid of it lest they suffer the same plagues and punishments as the Egyptians did in Moses' time.

So they took the ark away from the temple of Dagon and put it in cold storage in the house of Abinadab. There it stayed for twenty years.

When David ascended the throne of Israel, his first act as king was to retake Jerusalem and establish the people Israel in what would be his royal city. As the *pièce de*

*résistance* he gathered thirty thousand of his best and fiercest men and went to Abinadab where he seized the Ark of the Covenant and set out to return it once again to Jerusalem.

David's return was triumphant, a fantastic procession. If you think the Pride Parade is something, David's return to Jerusalem was all of that and even more. The writer of II Samuel says that they danced before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. Sounds like some of the floats that came down this avenue just a couple of weeks ago! It was a joyful exuberant scene, with even David joining in the dancing.

But along the way there was a little occurrence that you might miss in all the exuberance and celebration that was going on. It seems there was this teensy moment, this fleeting second, when the ark started to tip ever so slightly as if it was going to fall off the wagon on which it was being carried. A helpful man by the name of Uzzah reached up to steady the ark so it wouldn't fall. A natural thing to do. And for his efforts at tidiness and safe passage for the ark, he was struck dead instantaneously on the spot.

It is a strange turn of events. One that interrupts our otherwise buoyant celebration. But an interruption of some moment, and worth noting.

Uzzah's death, threw such a dose of cold water on the whole proceedings that David decided to wait before taking the ark all the way into the city. So the ark was taken to Obed-edom's house and there it stayed for three months until David decided that the coast was clear and they could pick up where they left off and bring the ark into the city.

So they brought out the bands again, and pasted the flowers on the floats and pumped up the balloons and started the celebration all over. And David was so overwhelmed with the mood of the moment that he did a bit of dancing in the buff that caught the eye of the young maidens of Jerusalem, needless to say, and left his wife Michal fuming mad. But that's for another Sunday (and I digress)!

Let's deal today with just that quirky little story of Uzzah, that historical footnote that nobody much remembers, and nobody much wants to. The lectionary omits the story altogether. It wants to sweep it under the rug, forget it ever happened. I guess the old gnomes of the Bible assignments just didn't know what to do with it.

It does, after all, strike at one of our worst fears about God, the possibility that God is capricious and temperamental, lashing out unfairly at the little guy who is just trying to be helpful.

In the story of Uzzah, we see a well intended servant who is doing his best with little help to see that the ark is safe and well supported and protected on the road to Jerusalem. But when they hit a pothole in the road, and it appeared to Uzzah that the ark was tipping too much to the side so that it might fall, he jumped into action and steadied the ark, putting his hand on the wood of that sacred place where the presence of God dwelt. And for his indiscretion, he was struck down. But why? Why such a massive retaliation for such an inconsequential *faux pas*? Because God is capricious and unpredictable? No, not really.

Well intentioned as he may have been, Uzzah was acting in a way that was more than he intended, assuming a role and taking a responsibility that no human being is ever meant to fulfill. He was trying to save God, trying to make God look right, trying to keep

God upright and balanced and moving forward. It is a role that none of us is meant to play, intentionally or unintentionally. We are neither God's enabler nor God's advocate. And none of us is in a position to save God.

Most of us sometimes feel as if we have to defend God, or explain God, or prop God up, don't we? A friend's husband has cancer and she asks why God doesn't help. After all, if God were really merciful and kind, God wouldn't have inflicted cancer on her husband. And there you are listening and feeling as if you need to explain God to her. "Oh God didn't send him cancer. God isn't like that. Pray for healing and I'm sure God will help you." Which is fine as long as he gets better... but what if he doesn't? What if that's not the way things unfold? Has God abandoned her?

The book of Job in the Bible picks the scab off that wound. It is a book in which the friends of Job, like Uzzah, try to do more than they should, try to explain what is more than they know, try to make sense of the inexplicable and senseless suffering that Job endures. One by one, Job's friends explain God to Job, and all the time they get it wrong. They try to coax from Job a confession of his wrongdoing, try to blame him for all that is going wrong in his life.

They tell him that evil is punished, and good rewarded, and then they try to force the square peg that Job's experience is into the round hole of their pre-conceived approach to way things should be. It doesn't work. In the end Job must stand before God empty handed, with no certainty, surrendering to God's infinite wisdom the questions which he cannot answer.

There is at that point in the book a teachable moment, as Job opens his empty hands and places them in the hands of God, who is his only hope and help. In that moment, God asks of Job, and (through Job) asks all of us, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth, and determined its measurements? Where were you when I set the base of the earth and laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?"

Job's friends do what Uzzah tries to do, control what cannot be controlled. They try to explain what cannot be explained.

How many times have I stood in a hospital room and been asked impossible, unanswerable questions? A young man has just learned that his AIDS infection has gone to his brain and there's no more that they can do, and he asks, "Why?" Or a parent in the emergency room stands beside a gurney that holds her lifeless teenage child after an automobile accident has taken his life, and the parent asks me, "Why?" Or a young mother has delivered a still born child, and is heartbroken, wondering what meaning there is in this?

Somewhere along the way in ministry, early on, in fact, I learned not to try to prop up God, not to try to say more than I know, but to listen with compassion and with love, and to realize that this side of heaven there is little more that anyone can do to explain the inexplicable ways of God than to do precisely that, be there, pay attention, share the suffering, show compassion, think before you speak.

Difficult as this story of Uzzah is to hear and to understand, it is a story that reminds us that God is more of mystery to us than certainty, more of wonder than of

explication. And God will not be tamed. God will not be sidelined nor domesticated nor put under ours or anyone's thumb.

God will not be commandeered, or put to use for the expedient ends of any political party or religious group who want to use God to push their own prejudices and pettiness by blowing holy smoke over their own self-serving designs and intentions. Just look at the Middle East for proof of that. There is little that I see of encouragement that reveals anything of the true nature of the God of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity at work there today.

God is not about to fall either *from* a platform or *for* our clever schemes to put God in our pocket. Those who try to do that, like Uzzah, even unintentionally, will be altogether confounded.

Over fifty years ago, J.B. Phillips wrote a short book entitled, **Your God is Too Small**, a provocative title. In it, Phillips pushes his readers to imagine a god who is greater than our imaginations can comprehend; a god who is more than conscience, more than a cosmic policeman, more than a sexual voyeur, a being which is greater than any human trait or finite quality raised to the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree. This is the God described by the Westminster Confession of the church which defines God as "a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth."<sup>2</sup>

Our God is too small. Actually, it's *our concept* of God that is too small. That's the **bad** news. We try to explain God and limit God and use God for our own ends. We try to get God off the hook, or put God in a box, or use God to justify our violence, our prejudice, our parochialism, our petty moralities. But God rings down judgment on our designs, and that way leads to death. No, God will have none of it, which is **good** news. For our sake it's good news.

God exceeds our expectations, God surpasses our limited horizons, God fulfills our deepest longings. For God has come to us in one who has reversed Uzzah's reach, and instead reaches for us. The One whom we would steady, steadies us. He comes as one we know, as the man from Galilee, Jesus, who brings healing in his wings, peace in his embrace, forgiveness in his spirit, and compassion in his heart.

He is the One who bears God's love in unlimited measure, shaken, pressed down, and flowing over. In him, we see the true nature of God, who is grace upon grace, and mercy upon mercy.

In him we see that God is not capricious, impulsive, punishing, nor a tyrant, hard to appease and quick to anger. God means for us to follow the way that leads to life. Which is why God is the one who has given us himself in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's beloved child. In him we see the true nature of heaven, the true heart of God, as one who would do absolutely anything for our sake, and has.

Who knows what might happen in this world if we would stop reaching out like Uzzah and quit taking matters into our own hands, acting like we had to show God what to do next to make the world a better place, to keep things in balance, or to make the world go the way we think it should. What would it be like if we lived as if God had really come in Jesus Christ and already shown us that life is triumphant over death, love is stronger than hate, and God's plans are better than our plans?

Maybe there wouldn't be so many folks ready to blow each other up, or start another war, or wreak terror in the lives of innocents, or send more soldiers into places where the world is already overly invaded. Maybe we wouldn't endanger the earth so much, or waste the world's resources, or make life so hard for all the other creatures and people on earth. Maybe we would live more like families that like each other and less like enemies who plot against one another.

Maybe; maybe if we really got that message and kept it in our hearts, and sealed it in our minds... the message that God loves us and means for us to live in peace, and live abundantly... the world might be a better place, a place more like that place where God reigns, and God's intentions are all in all, and ours are less important.

Maybe that could happen, if only we would let God be God, and not try to reach out so quickly to steady the ark.

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<sup>1</sup> I Sam 4:10

<sup>2</sup> The Shorter Catechism, Q4, **The Book of Confessions**, 7.004, (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2004) p. 175.