

### Holy? Or Horrific?

Let's talk about the Ark of the Covenant. You may recall from Exodus 25, (or from the 1981 Indiana Jones movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark), that the ark was a chest made of acacia wood and measuring two and a half cubits, by one and a half cubits, by one and a half cubits. That is, 45 inches by 27 inches by 27 inches. (Not so terribly big.) In it were the two stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, Aaron's "budding rod," and a golden urn filled with manna. The Ark was intended to be suspended on two poles, also made of acacia wood and overlaid with gold, and carried by a team of priests. The ark was believed to be the throne of God, and therefore it represented God's presence wherever it was carried. It was also believed to guarantee military victory for the armies of Israel, whenever the ark was taken with them into battle.

In our lives as Christians, do we have anything quite as holy as the Ark of the Covenant was for the early Israelites? Anything that might represent the literal presence and glory and power of God? Let's look around our sanctuary. The communion table, perhaps? That's pretty holy. All the more so when it has the communion elements sitting on top. For now, what's on top is a book, namely the book we call the Holy Bible. How holy is that? Really holy, right? Every Sunday we light that lamp to represent Christ's presence. Which definitely make that lamp very holy.

Or how about the cross? How holy is that? Have you heard of the Crusades? History buffs know that starting in the year 1095, marauding Crusaders carries images of the Cross into battle with them. And for a time, at least, it seemed to guarantee them victory. Almost like the Ark of the Covenant.

What would we say that cross represents for us? A different kind of victory, perhaps. The victory of good over evil, maybe. Of Jesus over Satan. Salvation over sin. You probably know that I have taken to wearing a cross around my neck every Sunday, to remind me of my holy, awesome vocation. What about you? What serves to remind you of your commitment to follow Jesus? A cross? Or something else?

But back to the texts that Keith just read for us. There appears to be at least three themes in them. One, the powerful significance of the Ark of the Covenant coming to the City of David, making it not just the political capital of the newly united kingdom of Israel, but the religious capital—heady stuff for its newly crowned king. Two, the joy of worshiping God with abandon. And three, what do we do with those parts of the Holy Bible that we'd really rather not talk about?

I'm sure you noticed that on the back of our bulletin, verses 6-11 are in italics. That's because the Revised Common Lectionary left them out completely. Why? Some might argue it was because those verses really aren't what's most important in the lection. Others could counter it's because those omitted verses would otherwise give the preacher fits, and introduce into the story elements that are just plain problematic, inconsistent with a God of love.

This morning's story starts with David "dancing with all his might" as he brings the Ark to Jerusalem. It's a great story, and a fun one to tell, and to imagine. In her Children's Story Judy talked about the act of worship, and even the joy of worshipping our God with abandon. Like David and the other Israelites did through their dancing. Now for us "good Mennonites,"

dancing itself is supposed to be problematic. It makes our bodies move too much. It's too sensual, or even out of control. Of course, when we find the great King David himself "dancing with all his might" as they bring the holy Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, even we good Mennonites aren't sure what to do with that. Maybe, dancing as part of worship is okay in certain circumstances.

What might it look like, what would or could or should it look like, for us to worship God with joyful abandon? Does simply standing when we sing qualify? How about singing "with all our might," at the top of our voices, like we did just now with "606" (since we don't or won't or can't dance)? How about raising our hands in a gesture of praise and surrender? How about . . . you fill in the blank. I don't have any answers for you today, I'm simply leaving you with the question.

But then in verse 6 we run headlong into this buzz saw of a problem. The priest Abinidab's two sons, Uzzah and Ahio, are carefully guiding the brand new cart on which the Ark of the Covenant is riding. It sounds like one of the oxen pulling the cart may have stumbled. Causing the cart to "shake." Putting the Ark of the Covenant at risk of falling off. Abinidab's son Uzzah, who was walking behind the cart, did what any of us would have done. He reached out his hand to keep the Ark of the Covenant from falling. Touching it in the process. Well guess what? You just don't do that. We're told that "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." No! Uzzah thought he was doing the right thing. And we thought (or at least I thought) that our God was a God of love and mercy, NOT of petty anger and violent retaliation.

What do we do with this? Here at least are a couple of possibilities. Some scholars remind us that the Holy Bible is a collection of different types of literature. You've got history, you've got poetry, you've got wisdom sayings, you've got Gospels, you've got letters. And, scholars say, this story in 2 Samuel just may come from a very ancient form of literature, namely mythology, some of which got incorporated into this otherwise fun, lovely story of David taking the Ark to Jerusalem. So maybe the lectionary editors were justified in leaving this part out, it wasn't all that germane or central to the main story. After all, it was "just" mythology.

Other scholars say "not so fast!" Uzzah should have known better than to touch it, that he got what he deserved. And after all the Bible is full of stories where God gives people what they deserve.

Still others counter that it wasn't Uzzah's fault, that he got in the way of some seriously poor planning by whoever decided to put the most holy Ark on a cart pulled by oxen, rather than carried reverently by priests. God was already miffed. Uzzah was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Right now at least, and it might surprise you, I'm inclined to go with a combination of the these last two explanations. And here is my proposed combination.

We all too easily take the holiness and majesty and "otherness" of God for granted. We start treating God like he's little more than our best friend or fraternity brother. We end up forgetting that, as the oldy praise song says, "our God is an awesome God." Maybe it's not our prerogative to say whether God can or cannot be angry, and with whom. Maybe we're way too presumptuous and casual in our worship. Listen to what one of my favorite writers, Annie Dillard, has to say about this highly presumptuous temptation.

*On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as*

*I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue live preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."*

And then there is C. S. Lewis's explanation in Book One of the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: "Aslan is not a tame lion." Aslan, you may remember, is the Christ figure in Lewis' Chronicles, and yes, he is a lion. He will come and go and growl and roar and use his claws as he pleases. Which indeed he does. Thank you, "Clive," (may we call you Clive?), for finding an honest but gentler way of teaching us about the God who is indeed among us, but at the same time far beyond us, way too holy to casually or carelessly trifle with. Aslan is not a tame lion.

Am I too casual or careless when I put on my cross Sunday mornings? Am I at risk of a sudden, well-aimed lightning strike? The short answer would have to be yes.

Our God is indeed a loving, merciful God. The Bible says that too many times and in so many different ways for it not to be true. But let us not forget that He or She or They are not a tame God. So yes, let us worship and pray to and implore and glorify our God with abandon. But let us not forget that it might not be a bad idea to wear crash helmets as we do so.

Amen.