

SERMON: 2018/07/15 (8th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - 2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19; Ephesians 1:3-14 & Mark 6:14-29

[Invite children to the front.]

Jesus was a great teacher.

In fact, as a Christian, I think He was the *greatest* teacher.

(He was God after all.)

And during His time on earth, *many* came from far away to learn from Him.

But, before His baptism and transformation by the Holy Spirit, He himself had a mentor called John the Baptist.

And they were *very* close:

"B.F.F.s."

And like Jesus, John had no compunction - no fear - about criticising the naughtiness - the lies and greediness - that he saw in the world around, including by the kings and priests.

Well, no one likes to be "told off" do they?

We all like to think that we're too clever and special - and this is especially true of leaders - and so one local ruler, Herod - that's not the king who tried to kill the baby Jesus, by the way, but his grandson (who had the same name) - got so angry about all the true things that John the Baptist was saying, captured him, cut off his head, stuck it on a fancy plate, and brought it to dinner as a centrepiece!

[Bring out a covered platter and reveal a cantaloupe with sad face sitting in a "soup" of ketchup.]

Yuk!

But as sad - *and horrible!* - as this was, this murder is helpful in that it is a sign - a foretaste - of what Jesus predicted was going to happen to Him: the most important death *ever*.

Let's pray:

... in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul writes, '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'.

(...all wisdom and insight He has made known to us...His will')

Like most good Episcopalians - and Lutherans and Presbyterians and Methodists, etcetera - we approach the Scriptures on Sunday morning using a system called, "The Revised Common Lectionary."

And I've mentioned before, that that "schematic" - or method - has us this summer exploring how the Davidic monarchy in Israel became established and fared through the books of *Samuel* and *Kings*; and also examining the ministry of Jesus according to *Mark*.

Well, the RCL - the lectionary - isn't a flawless tool:

Although it facilitates regular attendees to 'hear the breadth of salvation history', [n.1] '[i]ts preparation was heavily influenced by [what's euphemistically called [see: n.2]] higher criticism (and liberal theology)' [n.3] that, occasionally, "skips" over incidents or pronouncements that are troublesome to modern ears, but this is less helpful than those who devised it believe, and we mustn't miss out and redact God's revelation of Himself to suit our current tastes and fashions - indeed, this is the very theme of my sermon: to welcome *all* of God's wisdom *all* the way into our lives.

Permit me, therefore, to fill in "the blanks," and read to you this morning's missing verses, six through twelve:

(And remember: David has recently recaptured the Ark from the Philistines (who had stolen it) and now has to find a place to put it to keep it safe (from being stolen again). And he decides to issue a detail of some of his finest warriors [2 Sam. 6:1 - 'the chosen men of Israel' - N.R.S.V, and in the N. L. T.: 'the elite troops in Israel'] to escort it to his new capital city, which had - as I was saying last week to the kids - famously strong, thick walls, [see: Psalm 48:12-13])

Therefore, and I quote, '[w]hen they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it. And t]he 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. ...and David [became] afraid of the Lord that day; he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" So David was unwilling to take the ark of the Lord into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household. [Then i]t was told King David, "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...'

Okay, in other words: the ark was being carried up hill on an ox-cart towards

Jerusalem, surrounded by musicians and dancers and a bodyguard [v.5], and hitting a bump in the road or a pothole - both of which must have been ubiquitous on the mud-tracks that the Israelites used as "roads" - it slips, and for one precarious second tottered as if it were about to fall off! [v.6]

And think what this was: a box of *solid* gold [Ex. 25:11] containing the Creator's top ten rules [v.16] - "the Decalogue," spoken from His very mouth to Moses on Sinai in the midst of a volcanic eruption [19:18], and written by that greatest of prophets on a pair of stone tablets [34:1-27].

Nothing was more precious;
nothing more sacred to these people.

And so one of the men protecting it, a soldier - 'Uzzah' - quickly acts - *instinctively* - and steadied it with a hand.

And then dies - boom! [2 Sam. 6:7]

From something like a massive coronary or a seizure - we don't know.

(Now, this is described as "an act of God" by our author, but is not, in fact, claimed as such by Him.)

And all the onlookers are shocked.

No one dares speak.

"What the heck just happened?!"

Not knowing - and apparently terrified - David orders the Ark to be diverted (from going to the palace) to another's nearby residence (instead): *Obed's*. [v.10]

A friend.

And then everyone just dispersed, embarrassed.

But, over the course of 'three months', stories of remarkable things begin to circulate - of miracles and such like - happening to Obed and his family and friends, [v.11].

Not only are they not cursed or beleaguered by having the Ark and its contents in their lives, but the *very* opposite.

(And you can see (in the passage) that we don't really know *exactly* the details of the advantages that they enjoyed in that period, but David's super-quick response to the rumours in getting the Ark (back) for himself [v.12] suggest he was made to feel very jealous indeed by what he heard.)

But what *had* he been thinking?

To hold God's commandments at "arm's length" the way he had?

Well, this whole tale can be read as an allegory.

I think we can locate ourselves in it, seeing ourselves in the various characters.

So, are you like David?

Do you leave those expectations of God - His desires, plan and pattern for your life - in another building? (Namely, this one.)

Or do you take it (all the way) home with you?

And right into the very heart of your life and work and relationships?

Yes, those expectations - those "commandments" - are a double-edged sword: Uzzah died *physically*, and the the way of Jesus - the "way of love" - requires that we "die to self;" they demand from us sacrifice, adjustment, adaptation; that we give up certain *commonplace* behaviors and habits and attitudes *even as*, with the other "hand," they offer us dignity and structure and purpose and (a robust, enduring) morality.

And we all know this to be true - Christian and non-Christian, though we might quibble and argue about some of the finer details.

And so we might hesitate to fully embrace the Biblical vision.

We "pick n' choose."

All of us, to some extent.

"Cherry-picking" what feels useful and palatable, and the "judgment calls" that that involves are largely determined by the wider, impenitent values of the culture-at-large; by the approval of others; by the question of what is cool or "P.C."

But notice what happens in the text.

Obed - whose been handed this seemingly "radioactive" "hot potato" by his king - suddenly gets these (unexpected) "great blessings" [v.11, C. E. V.] (that should have flowed first and foremost to David).

And the whole episode is really quite comedic!

David gives over to him what at first appears to be a "bum pass" - you know? In Football (or rugby!), when a team-mate throws you the ball just as the opposition are bearing down, and there's no time to react or pass it on except to take this big hit with all of the attendant discomfort and potential injury.

And when you see that happen on the field, no one is fooled.

Everyone can see that you were scapegoated.

And that the person who threw you the ball - and who is supposed to be on your side - is a selfish coward.

And that was David.

Because he was afraid of what happened to his servant Uzzah...

who did the right thing, lets be clear; who was bold and stretched out his arm to uphold what was precious to God even as others shrunk back and prevaricated - those others accompanying that convoy who were willing to participate in the

celebration of the Ark's return - and so *look* pious and committed, but who, at a moment of crisis, merely watched as another leapt forward alone - isolated.

And Obed saw the "tall" cost of holiness being paid, but he took the risk too of obedience, and demonstrated - *witnessed!* - to the whole community that it was a far better thing to be *wholeheartedly* faithful than to compromise and lose out.

And thanks to him, David comes to see this too.

And, having been convinced, becomes *giddy* with excitement, and loses *all* of his earlier inhibition [v.12b-14] - even in the face of the ridicule of Michal [v.16].

So, where are *you* in this story?

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Meyers, Ruth A. (2007), *Using the Revised Common Lectionary*, Cincinnati, O. H.: Forward Movement, 3.
2. Why do I disparage the term as a "euphemism?" - "'Higher criticism" has, by a kind of convention, been specially associated with the Old Testament, and, by a strange perversity of use, restricted to those who maintain views hostile to the old traditional beliefs... It is as though a judge upon the bench is only really a judge when he sums up adversely to the person before him.' (Sinker, Robert (1899, *"Higher Criticism": What It Is, and Where Does It Lead Us?*, London: James Nisbet & Co., Ltd., 2-3.)
3. Ring, Alexander (January 1998), 'The Path of Understanding: The Development of Lectionaries and their use in the Lutheran Church - [A Paper] Presented to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod General Pastoral Conference, Bloomington, M. N.', available at <https://www.blc.edu/comm/gargy/gargy1/AlexRing.gpc.html> (accessed July 11, 2018).