

This morning, I am continuing in my summer sermon series “The power of one life,” looking at minor Biblical characters whose lives can be preached on in one Sunday. This morning, we’ll be looking at the life of a man named Uzzah, who shows up during the life of David in 2 Samuel 6 but, unfortunately for him, does not last very long. Nevertheless, his life has a lot to teach us about worship and our relationship with God.

The context of 2 Samuel 6 is that David has recently become the king of Israel, after King Saul has been killed in battle. David is 30 years old, and he establishes Jerusalem as his capital city. And the first thing he wants to do is to get the ark of the covenant to bring it back to Israel:

*2 Samuel 6:1-2 - David again brought together out of Israel chosen men, thirty thousand in all. <sup>2</sup> He and all his men set out from Baalah of Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim that are on the ark.*

The ark was a wooden box overlaid with gold, 4 feet long, 2 ½ feet high & wide. It had rings on the sides with poles that would go through it so that it could be carried. On the top was a slab of pure gold called the mercy seat, with 2 golden angels facing each other. And in the box were the 10 Commandments, and Aaron’s staff, and a golden pot with manna. But more importantly than what was inside, the ark was where the presence of God met with His people. It was the central piece of furniture in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, the portable temple in Israel, and over the ark appeared the shekinah, the kabod, the glory of God, the presence of God. As God said to Moses in **Exodus 25:22** - *There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.*

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would go in and offer sacrifice for the sins of the people, sprinkling the blood of slain bulls and goats on the mercy seat. **Leviticus 16:14-15** - *He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover. <sup>15</sup> "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it.*

So the ark of the covenant was where God had promised to meet with the high priest and dwell in the midst of his people. But 20 years before 2 Samuel 6, the ark

had been captured by the Philistines. The priest Eli's two wicked sons, Hophni & Phinehas, brought the ark into battle as a talisman, thinking that having that with them would mean they would win, but instead they lost and the ark was captured. And so the Philistines were convinced that this Yahweh was not so powerful after all, and they put the ark in the temple of their god, Dagon. But the next morning, they came into the temple and found the statue of Dagon face down before the ark. They put the statue back in its place, but the next morning, the statue was not only face down again, but its head and its hands had been broken off. And so they moved the ark around their land, but everywhere they put it, it caused calamity. And so finally, they put the ark on a cart led by two cows and sent it back to Israel. And as the men of Israel saw the ark coming, they rejoiced, but some of the men who first found it looked into the ark, and were killed. And so we read in **1 Samuel 7:1-2**, "*So the men of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD. They took it to Abinadab's house on the hill and consecrated Eleazar his son to guard the ark of the LORD. <sup>2</sup> It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD.*"

For twenty years, the ark, the place where God was most present to his people, was left in this remote place, until David came to the throne and, as his first order of business, goes to retrieve the ark. Let's pick up the story again in verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> *They set the ark of God on a new cart and brought it from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, were guiding the new cart <sup>4</sup> with the ark of God on it, and Ahio was walking in front of it. <sup>5</sup> David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.*

What a celebration. The first thing we learn from this passage is:

### 1) We need God's presence

**David knows that his only hope of success as a king, and his nation's only hope for greatness, is to put God in the proper place, to make him the center, to have the presence of God in their midst.** David understood that their power and his strength would not just come from a general belief in God or from doing good deeds, but from having the presence of God in their midst. Moses understood the same thing: many years earlier, he declared to God in the desert in **Exodus 33:15**, "**If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.**"

David understood this, that if God is not present, if it is not His strength upon which we rely, we may as well do nothing, because we have no real hope.

**Some of us need to be reminded of that today.** The Christian faith is not about doing good deeds, and it is not about some general belief in God. Think of churches who have watered down the message to doing good works – the next generation says rightly, “I don’t need to go to church to be a good person.” Nor is church primarily about community, as important as that is. **The Christian faith is primarily about having the presence of God in your life.** We need His power, His encouragement, His love, His leading. The Christian faith is about knowing God, relying on God, living in a place where you can say “if your presence does not go with me, do not send me up from here.” If you are not leading the way, I do not want to go. If you are not here this morning, there is no point in us being here. You are the center, God. You are the reason.

**How do you prioritize His presence in your day, your relationships, your work, your service?** If you do not have His presence, you are living and working in vain. How are you prioritizing His presence?

So David is prioritizing the presence of God, as 30,000 men go up to bring the ark back to Jerusalem with dancing and singing and celebrating. But then things take a turn for the worse:

*<sup>6</sup> When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. <sup>7</sup> The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God. <sup>8</sup> Then David was angry because the LORD's wrath had broken out against Uzzah, and to this day that place is called Perez Uzzah. <sup>9</sup> David was afraid of the LORD that day and said, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" <sup>10</sup> He was not willing to take the ark of the LORD to be with him in the City of David. Instead, he took it aside to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite.*

Wow. Talk about worst Bible stories ever. David wants to establish God’s presence at the center of his kingdom. And so they set the ark on a new cart, with a couple of men guiding it, and the whole house of Israel celebrates with all their might before the Lord. But then the oxen stumbles, the ark tips, Uzzah reaches out to steady the ark, and God strikes him down. The celebration stops, David is angry, and in his fear he says “How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?” Instead of

bringing it to Jerusalem, he drops the ark at the nearby home of a foreigner, a Gittite named Obed-Edom.

What happened to Uzzah here?

Remember that the Ark of the Covenant was the place most associated with the holy presence of God. The 10 commandments inside the chest were a reminder of God's holy law and expectations. Ordinary people could not come into its presence, or even look upon it. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies once a year to come before the Lord. The high priest had to wash multiple times. He was even dressed in sacred underwear. That is how special the ark, and the presence of God, was. And in the book of Numbers, God had laid out clear instructions on how to move the ark:

***Numbers 4:5-6** - When the camp is to move, Aaron and his sons are to go in and take down the shielding curtain and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. <sup>6</sup> Then they are to cover this with hides of sea cows, spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place.*

***Numbers 4:15** - After Aaron and his sons have finished covering the holy furnishings and all the holy articles, and when the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things or they will die.*

The instructions are clear. The high priest and his sons cover the ark, poles are put in place, and the Kohathites, a division of the priests, are the only ones allowed to carry the ark, and only by holding the poles. No one can touch the ark, and no one can look upon it. If even the priests touch the holy things, they will die. Now that you understand this, you can see how David's procession, while full of joy and sincere motivation, did not take seriously the holiness of the Lord, which is the reason God has told them to carry the ark the way He has.

### **What is holiness?**

As RC Sproul put it: *Holiness refers to "that sense in which God is above and beyond us. It tries to get at His supreme absolute greatness... He is higher than the world. He has absolute power over the world. The world has no power over Him. Transcendence describes God in His consuming majesty, His exalted loftiness. It points to the infinite distance that separates Him from every creature. He is an infinite cut above everyone else."*

God is holy. He is like fire, like electricity, like lightning. You can not just touch him, approach him as if he were your buddy. The ark, and the restrictions around it, were meant to communicate that God is holy. No one can see or touch the Lord and live. And to put the ark of the covenant on an ox cart? Is that how you would transport a king?

The oxen stumble, the ark tips, and Uzzah reaches out to steady it, and is killed.

RC Sproul – *“Uzzah was doing what seemed right to him in God’s presence. Uzzah assumed that his hand was less polluted than the earth. But it wasn’t the ground or the mud that would desecrate the ark; it was the touch of man. The earth is an obedient creature. It does what God tells it to do. The ground doesn’t commit cosmic treason. There is nothing polluted about the ground.”*

Uzzah takes the fall, but they all deserved to die, most of all David, for their ignorance and presumption. And so when Uzzah dies, David rightly says in v.9, **“How can the ark of the Lord ever come to me?”** How can a sinful man like me be in the presence of a holy God? Like Isaiah when he experienced the holiness of God in Isaiah 6:5 – “woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips.” Like Peter, telling Jesus, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.” Like John in Revelation, falling down as though dead.

**When I read this story, I think of Jesus’ conversation with a Samaritan woman at the well** in John 4. She is asking him about where the proper place is to worship, since the Jews claim that worship happens in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worship elsewhere. And beginning in verse 21, *“Jesus declared, ‘Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup> You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup> Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in **spirit and in truth.**’”*

I believe what Jesus may have meant is that **God is looking for people who worship him in two critical ways. In spirit, meaning they worship not just in motions but sincerely from their heart, with their whole being, with love and joy.** And in truth, meaning coming to him not just as some vague, unknowable God, or as a god of your own creation, but as the God revealed in the Bible and in Jesus – holy. Righteous. Loving. Merciful. Gracious. Just. The Creator. The

sustainer. The beginning and the end. The redeemer. The rock. The shepherd. The Lord. The Savior.

And when I look at David and those 30,000 men, I see a band of people who had that spirit part down cold. They were fully engaged from their hearts, giving God all the glory He is due. But they had neglected the truth part. They had disregarded God's words as to how His presence was to be handled. They forgot that God was a holy God. And that lack of respect cost them greatly, and left them in fear, shaken, afraid to even bring the ark into Jerusalem. **The Uzzah experience showed them that God is not a tame God. He is not their buddy. He is holy.** He must be respected and worshipped not only in spirit but also in truth. And as Uzzah is killed, the pendulum swings from ecstatic celebration to abject terror.

The second thing we learn from this passage is:

## 2) We must worship God in spirit and in truth

Emotionalism does not honor God. Just because you feel emotional in worship does not mean the Holy Spirit is moving. Unless you think that Taylor Swift concerts or Beatlemania were moves of the spirit. Just because you leave church on a high, having cried or screamed, does not mean you met with God. You may just be experiencing the power that music has to manipulate our emotions. Spirit without truth is not a move of God. But on the other hand, neither is cold truth without the spirit. Just because you say the "our father" doesn't mean you have prayed, and just because you sing a song doesn't mean your brain or spirit was truly engaged with the lyrics and with God. Worship should be according to the truth of who God is and what He had revealed, and it should engage the spirit, touch the affections, result in whole-body and spirit praise to the Lord! Our worship songs must be not only uplifting but Biblical. Where do you tend to fall on that continuum?

Sometimes in the evangelical church we emphasize the familiarity of God but neglect the holiness, just like Uzzah and David in 2 Samuel 6. We highlight the nearness and friendship of God but downplay the preeminence, the transcendence. We meet in converted office buildings, not sanctuaries with high ceilings and stained glass that remind you that God is other. We talk about the love of God but not the holiness of God. We reduce God to a weakling begging for us to pay attention to Him.

Again, RC Sproul: *"It is the confusion between justice and mercy that makes us shrink in horror when we read the story of Uzzah... When God's justice falls, we are offended because we think God owes us perpetual mercy. We must not take His grace for granted. We must never lose our capacity to be amazed by grace."*

**Who are we to come to this place nonchalantly, forgetting how much it cost Jesus to give us such mercy?** Or think of it this way: how would you come into the presence of a king, a president, a celebrity? How would you come to something important, like a job interview? Would you not show up early? Prepare yourself? Look your best? This is not said to shame you, for there is no condemnation in Christ. But have you forgotten that this is a holy God that you are meeting with this morning?

Let's continue in the story:

<sup>11</sup> *The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and the LORD blessed him and his entire household.* <sup>12</sup> *Now King David was told, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God." So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing.* <sup>13</sup> *When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf.* <sup>14</sup> *David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might,* <sup>15</sup> *while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.* <sup>16</sup> *As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart.* <sup>17</sup> *They brought the ark of the LORD and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the LORD.* <sup>18</sup> *After he had finished sacrificing the burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD Almighty.* <sup>19</sup> *Then he gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites, both men and women. And all the people went to their homes.* <sup>20</sup> *When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!"* <sup>21</sup> *David said to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD's people Israel-- I will celebrate before the LORD.* <sup>22</sup> *I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated*

*in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor." 23 And Michal daughter of Saul had no children to the day of her death.*

After a short time, David goes back once again to retrieve the ark, and brings it back to Jerusalem the proper way, dancing before the Lord with all His might, worshiping the Lord in Spirit and in truth. What changed? Two things.

**The first is that he reads the instructions.** In 1 Chronicles 15, David tells them the proper way to carry the ark.

*1 Chronicles 15:12-16 - He said to them, "You are the heads of the Levitical families; you and your fellow Levites are to consecrate yourselves and bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place I have prepared for it. 13 It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way." 14 So the priests and Levites consecrated themselves in order to bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel. 15 And the Levites carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD. 16 David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their brothers as singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals.*

David recognizes that God is a holy God and they can not treat Him or the ark as common. The second thing that happens is that David sees what happens to the household of Obed-Edom. David was afraid of God's holiness. And so he sent the ark to Obed-Edom to stay, probably because he was a foreigner in Israel – if someone is going to be killed by God, it may as well be a foreigner. But although Obed-Edom was a foreigner living in Israel, God blessed him. Do you really think Obed-Edom deserved it? **No – God blessed him by grace, sheer grace. Because the ark is not just about rules and punishment, but is about mercy, grace, and the undeserved presence of God.** God has blessed this foreigner, and when David hears this, he sees not only the holiness and justice but also the mercy and grace of God, and goes up to get the ark again. And he dances with all his might before the Lord.

**Where does this joy and worship come from? From understanding both the holiness and mercy of God.** Yes, God is holy. Yes, we have broken the law and deserve death for our disrespect and dishonor. But Jesus is our high priest. And there is mercy and grace offered to all. The sprinkling of blood by the high priest once a year for the sins of the people points to Jesus:



**Hebrews 10:1-3,11-14** - *The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. <sup>2</sup> If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. <sup>3</sup> But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, <sup>4</sup> because it is impossible for the **blood** of bulls and **goats to take away sins**...<sup>11</sup> Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>13</sup> Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, <sup>14</sup> because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

David danced before the Lord with joy, worshiping the Lord with all his heart.  
**How did he get there? By seeing both the holiness of the Lord and the mercy of the Lord.**

### **3) True joy comes from experiencing both the holiness and mercy of God**

True joy comes from recognizing the punishment and death we deserve because of our sinful rejection and dishonoring of God, and yet seeing the mercy and love we have been shown. Because holiness and mercy meet at the cross, where the Son of God dies for our sins to satisfy God's holy justice, and we are shown mercy and love. We are so wicked that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save us. But we are so loved that He did it willingly for you.

What does this mean for us? God is not looking for general belief. He is not looking for good people. **He is looking for worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth.** He is seeking men and women who have been seized by the power of a great affection, whose lives have been gripped by the gospel, who recognize as David did, "how can the presence of God ever come to me?" How can God ever want me, sinful as I am? But he is seeking men and women who do not just stop there, but recognize the mercy of our God, that even though we deserve nothing, we have been given everything through Jesus, undeserved life and salvation, peace with God, hope for the future, a Savior in our brokenness. He wants to transform you by that truth, until you find welling up inside of you an unspeakable, uncontainable, life-changing, tear the shackles off your hands and feet and set you dancing JOY!

Verse 12, again:

*So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. <sup>13</sup> When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. <sup>14</sup> David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, <sup>15</sup> while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets.*

David, the king, goes back up with the men of God to retrieve the ark. They carry it back this time. And David, down to his simple linen garment rather than his kingly robe, dances before the Lord with all his might. In spirit and in truth. In unspeakable, uncontainable, life-changing, tear the shackles off your hands and feet and set you dancing JOY! Now I know that we're a good New England church, and it's hard enough to get people to clap. But you need to pay attention to David and his 30,000 men here. I am not advocating just dancing and getting more lively just for the sake of dancing and getting more lively. I would say that there are some of you who feel like dancing, lifting holy hands, clapping, shouting out, celebrating at times but you hold back because you don't want to seem weird. And to you I say, you're not weird. You're Biblical. Consider the following verses:

*Psalm 47:1 - Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy.*

*Psalm 134:2 - Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD.*

*Psalm 95:6 - Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;*

David was not just celebrating for the sake of celebrating. He was dancing with all his might out of the joy of knowing God, the holy and merciful one. **Joy may be the greatest evidence that a person really knows God.** After all, who receives joy from religion? You receive a sense of morality, perhaps. A sense of fulfillment and purpose, yes. But unspeakable, uncontainable, life-changing, tear the shackles off your hands and feet and set you dancing JOY? That only comes from recognizing that you have been known to your depth and loved. That there is nothing left to fear, not even death. That every enemy has been defeated. That nothing can separate you from the love of God. Joy comes from having the presence of God in your life.

David danced with all his might. Have you ever danced with all your might before the Lord? Even in the privacy of your own home? Do you know that kind of joy? As Jesus said in **John 15:9-11**, "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*" There is no joy in religion, but real joy comes in knowing Jesus.

Michal his wife despised him for expressing such joy. She saw it as disrespectful and indecent. But David did not care, and seemingly God backed him, based on the last verse. David was experiencing the presence of God, and it caused him to dance and not care what others thought. It caused him to live and worship for an audience of one.

Worship him in spirit and in truth. Balance the respect with the joy, the holy with the mercy. He is the God of the universe and yet he is our friend. He is omnipresent and sovereign, and yet he is close. Worship in spirit and truth.