

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, July 14, 2024
10am

Text: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Theme: Worship with Rejoicing: Gathering to Worship

[prayer]

Psalm 132 begins:

Lord, remember David—

all the ways he suffered

2 and how he swore to the Lord,
how he promised the strong one of Jacob:

3 “I won’t enter my house,
won’t get into my bed.

4 I won’t let my eyes close,
won’t let my eyelids sleep,

5 until I find a place for the Lord,
a dwelling place for the strong one of Jacob.” (CEB)

This psalm is a remembrance of David’s passionate lengths to return the ark of the covenant to the people of Israel, the same story we heard in our reading from 2 Samuel. For the remainder of this summer, we will be spending time in the Old Testament lectionary readings, beginning with this story and ending with the consecration of the Temple.

The ark was a gilded box made from acacia wood with carved, winged cherubim on the top (Exod 25:10-22; 37:1-9). Inside rested the Decalogue – the stone tablets on which Moses recorded the Ten Commandments, which was the beginning of the Torah, the Law.

The ark represented the throne of God. It was the chief symbol of the LORD’s presence with His people. When Israel was living in the wilderness, the ark resided in the Holy of Holies inside of the Tabernacle, and the Israelites followed the ark,

carried on the shoulders of its priests, as they journeyed through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The ark was a physical representation of the warrior God who had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and made covenant with them to be their God. It reminded Israel of God's accompaniment through battles and all manner of hardship. And it symbolized the hope of God's promised victory over Israel's enemies.

In 1 Samuel 4, two Philistine victories over Israel in battle led to the loss of the ark. For the next twenty years, it was held in Philistine territory – not exactly lost, but certainly neglected. In the meantime, the political drama of Saul and David unfolded. David eventually defeated King Saul, became king over Israel, conquered Jerusalem as his capital city, and then overcame the Philistines (2 Sam 5:17-25). After he has done all this, he summons an army of thirty thousand men to bring the ark home.

Why did David want to bring the ark to Jerusalem? To honor YHWH as Israel's God. But David's motivation was not entirely pious. He understood the symbolic power of the ark and astutely leveraged that power to cement his reign as Israel's new king.

But the ark's power was not purely symbolic.

The lectionary leaves out a short but important piece of this story. David and his army go to Baalah to collect the ark from the house of Abinadab, who has been caring for it ever since custody passed from the Philistines back to Israel. And as they are proceeding toward Jerusalem, the oxen that are pulling the ark stumble, and the ark tips as if it is going to fall off the cart. Uzzah, one of Abinadab's sons, reflexively reaches out to steady the ark...and God strikes him dead for daring to touch it.

We are shocked and troubled by this anecdote. David was, too. He gets angry at God; then his anger turns to fear (vv. 8-9). He is so afraid of the ark that he leaves it at Obed-edom's house for a full three months before he feels brave enough to continue the journey to Jerusalem.

Uzzah's death is a terrifying reminder to David of the untouchable holiness of God. The ark is not a religious symbol he can co-opt for political power. The ark is holy,

filled with the power and presence of God. By touching the ark, Uzzah violates the boundary between the profane (the common, the everyday) and the holy. He treats the ark casually, and he pays for it with his life. David is humbled. David has been successful in his endeavors so far, but the credit must go to God. The Almighty reminds David just Who has made him king over Israel.

In our experience, worship is seldom this risky. Do we acknowledge that when we gather in this space to worship, we are gathering in the presence of the same power that struck down Uzzah? Encountering God is a risky business, not to be treated casually or lightly, but with reverence and awe. Do we approach worship casually? Is it just routine? Or, like Isaiah in the Temple, do we expect to meet the power of God in this place?

We cannot contain or manipulate God's holiness. We can only prostrate ourselves before it and worship it with all our strength.

Jesus commands us to love the Lord our God with all of our strength (Mk 12:30). This is exactly what David does as he leads the ark into Jerusalem. "David, dressed in a linen *ephod* [priestly vest], danced with all his strength before the Lord" (v. 14). (The text implies that this is *all* that David wore – that apart from the ephod he was dancing naked at the front of the procession.)

Unlike our neatly ordered Sunday service, where Bill and the liturgist and I make the short walk to the altar to light the candles and pray, the procession into Jerusalem is a party! It's like the winning Super Bowl team has come to town. This procession is a ticker-tape parade – loud and messy and chaotic as the whole of Israel turns out to watch David dance in ritual ecstasy before the ark. Every six steps David stops and sacrifices both an ox and a calf. The route to the tent sanctuary on the temple mount, where the ark will rest, is bathed in blood. We're a reserved crowd here at CUMC, so this worship scene feels downright tribal.

Worship consumes David. He has learned his lesson. He cares only for the holiness of God. Now the patron of the ark, he is the keeper of Israel's religious traditions. The city feasts. Burnt offerings and offerings of well-being are made, and blessings are pronounced on the people in the name of the LORD (vv. 17-18). All this worship has the effect of a coronation celebration, and rightly so. YHWH is being installed as Israel's divine sovereign – the sole object of their worship and

devotion. God's enthroned presence, represented by the ark, now resides in the heart of David's city.

Meanwhile, David's wife, Michal – the daughter of Saul – observes all of this from a palace window. Michal is utterly disgusted by David's behavior. She believes it is unbecoming of a king. She calls David an "indecent person" who shamelessly exposed his naked body before God and all of Israel (v. 20).

Before we judge her too harshly, Michal has good reason to be bitter. For years she has been a pawn in the political game between Saul and David – a powerless woman caught between two powerful men. Once she loved David, deeply. But no more. Her haughtiness is a product of her suffering. I wonder: How many people who look upon our worship with judgmental hearts are trying to hide the wounds the church has given them, the suffering we have caused?

Even so, Michal is an observer of worship, not a participant. In her character we find a mirror we ought to hold up to ourselves. We are tempted to treat worship like a commodity we consume, a product that exists for our pleasure. Worship should be passionate, yes, but it is not entertainment.

This is David's response to Michal: "I was celebrating before the Lord...and I will celebrate before the Lord again!" David did not dance for Michal, and he did not dance for Israel; he didn't even dance for himself. He danced for the LORD. He was willing to suffer any humiliation to honor his God.

When we gathered in this space this morning, did we bring the same zeal for worship that David brought before the ark? Or did we come as mere observers? Why did you choose to come to church this morning? If you worship at home, why did you choose to turn on your television or computer and tune into this livestream? Was it habit or a sense of duty? Was it a hunger for community, a need to be with familiar people? Perhaps you came seeking a spiritual encounter – an answer to a question, a solution to a problem, solace in your suffering?

These are not all bad reasons. But are any of these things ultimately what worship is for? Why do we worship? Why do we gather week in and week out in this place? What is the purpose behind the things we do in this hour?

For the next seven weeks we will seek to answer those questions for ourselves by using the story of King David to help us reflect on the various parts of worship. You may have been going to church your whole life and still have questions about the flow and purpose of worship: Why do we have a call to worship? What is the purpose of the sermon? Why is it important to pray together? Perhaps you knew the answers to these questions at one time or another, but you have become distracted by the routine of it all. When we do things repeatedly, we sometimes need to be reminded why we do it. In August you will have an opportunity to fill out a survey on our worship practices here at Community UMC and reflect on what creates meaning in worship for you.

There is beauty to be rediscovered in our worship routine and the rhythms of our liturgy. Liturgy comes from the Greek word *leitourgia* and it means “the work of the people.” Like David, we believe that worship is an act of public service to our God. It is not primarily about our needs and our spiritual fulfillment, but about remembering who God is and who we are. The people of Israel defined themselves as those gathered around “the Lord of heavenly forces, who sits enthroned on the winged creatures” (2 Sam 6:2). As Christians, we define ourselves as those gathered around the cross: The children of God, disciples of Jesus, and worshippers of the holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We gather week in and week out to remind ourselves of God’s identity as our sovereign and our identity as His people. And this work of re-remembering – piecing together who God is and who we are – nurtures our spirits for the work of building for God’s kingdom on earth. We are gathered in to worship so we can be sent out in mission.

For David, worship was life. Worship was not just something he did. It was not a specific time of the day or week. Worship defined who he was – just look at the Psalms. David lived his life as an offering to God. As we will see in the coming weeks, sometimes he got that terribly wrong. He allowed his impulses to lead him astray. He would get confused over the object of his worship. But through it all he allowed the rhythms of worship to shape his life. And so, he stands as a testament and encouragement to us to also allow the rhythms of worship to shape our lives, to live our lives as an offering to God.

We call our sanctuary here at Community UMC the Celebration Hall because that is what worship ought to be – a celebration. Sometimes, like the procession of the

ark into Jerusalem, it will look like a party. Other times it will feature lament. But always worship is a celebration of the good things that God has bestowed on us.

The story of Israel's worshipful rapture as the ark is returned to Jerusalem is a foreshadowing of the same worship that we will experience on the day that Christ returns, triumphant in final victory, come to permanently establish his kingdom on the earth. Revelation 7 foretells a great crowd gathered around the throne of God "from every nation, tribe, people, and language," crying in a loud voice,

"Victory belongs to our God
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb." (vv. 9-10)

On that day there will be feasting and dancing and ecstatic praise as we dwell in God's presence for all eternity. And like all the people of Israel who welcomed the ark into Jerusalem, everyone is involved in the act of gathering because we cannot gather without one another.

"Let's enter God's dwelling place;
let's worship at the place God rests his feet!" (Ps 132:7)

Please rise as we sing "Holy Ground."