**Gathering to Worship**

This first verse of our text for this week includes the word “again.” That means that there is more to the story. The question before the preacher in cases like this is, how much of the story needs to be told to understand and experience all that is going on here? Do we need to go back to the first gathering of the soldiers or to the saga of the ark all along the way? Maybe we do, at least for ourselves, so that we have it in mind as we prepare and deliver the sermon on this day. But the larger truth here is that we might never know the whole story—either this one woven into the history books of the Hebrew scriptures or the ones that gather before us every time we come to worship. We know bits and pieces. We know, sometimes, highlights and lowlights. We know joys and pains, when we’re allowed to. But we don’t know every detail of the stories that are represented in our gatherings week by week.

We think we know David because we’ve told his story before. We know some of his highlights and we’re aware of some of his lowlights (and will go back to some of them in this series), but do we know, really know, what’s going on here? Why does David want to bring the ark to Jerusalem? Maybe it is to honor God, to bring God home to the place where God is known and worshiped. David loved the Lord and was known to write songs expressing that love, many of which are favorites of ours today. So, of course, David wanted God nearby, or at least this earthly manifestation of God’s abiding presence among God’s people.

But some argue that David had more personal motives behind this decision—that in this newly conquered city that was not yet called “the City of David,” the new king needed something to establish his power, to make his mark on this city and these people. Maybe a little selfishness drove David to seek out this relic, this religious symbol, and bring it back home.

Can we be sure either way? No, and most likely it was a little of both. Can we take a poll of the motivations that brought your folks to worship this day? What all goes into the mix, even for those who come to lead, to sing and guide liturgy, and preach today? How pure are any of our motives? It is easy to be critical of kings like David, and indeed our expectations of them as leaders are rightly high. But mixed motives, selfishness or laziness or desire to please someone other than God, are often behind our choice to gather for worship almost any time we are here. Of course, we want to honor God; of course, we love to be in the house of the Lord; of course. But …

What about when something goes wrong? The sound system doesn’t work right, and the computer freezes up in the middle of the hymn and no one remembers the third verse. The piano goes out of tune, the altar flowers are dying, and no one noticed the horrific typo in the bulletin; and you feel as though might as well pack it in and go home. What then? Give up? David did. Well, ok, the problem was a tad more serious than a squealing microphone. But we won’t know that unless we don’t follow the lectionary’s advice.

And as often happens, the lectionary hiccups around some verses that might prove to be a distraction. Do we let poor Uzzah be heard in the sanctuary today? I think I understand the decision of the framers of the lectionary. I don’t agree with them, but I understand. It is a story too painful to tell. Too unfair? Unjust? Unlike the God we’ve come to know in Jesus? It is a story that doesn’t have an easy explanation and can derail a comfortable worship experience.

In a small town attached to a big-city church I served, there was an Uzzah-like moment that threw us all off track. A police officer who was not a member of our church but was a member of the community and known to many in the church came one day after a preschooler hit the fire alarm at the church; he had to check, even though we called and said it was a false alarm. We walked through the building together and chatted about his job and mine. and I liked him a lot. A few days after that false alarm, he was off duty and was driving when he saw a car crash through a barrier and across a yard and into the front porch of a house near the church, ending up on its side with wheels spinning and oil leaking. The officer stopped his car and went to see if the driver and passenger were all right. When he leaned into the open window that was facing the sky, the driver pulled a gun and shot him twelve times.

He was only trying to help, to keep a disaster from becoming even worse. How is that fair? How is that just? When we gathered for worship after that incident, no one directly said to me that I should explain the goodness of God to them as we worshiped. But I felt it radiate from their wounded souls. I was afraid to tell them that I didn’t have words that would explain such an event. I understood David putting the Ark at Obed-edom’s house and walking away for three months. And I understand the lectionary crafters saying, “Let’s just leave this one alone.”

David comes back. And the parade starts again and goes six steps and stops. David brings it all to a halt and throws in an act of worship. Sometimes when there aren’t explanations, worship is the best response. Then he went on and brought the Ark, brought God back home. And he danced. Stripped down, in his grief and in his joy, David danced. Mixed motives aside, he danced. Wholeheartedly, he danced. He danced, and sometimes he was alone; and other times, the city danced with him. They participated in the sacrifice and in the feast that followed. They rejoiced and shouted his name, no doubt, thanking him, crowning him, claiming him and the God who inspired him. Did they all look beyond the sight of the king stripped down and dancing and see the Spirit in tandem with him?

Probably not. Just like, no matter what you pray before you preach, you aren’t transparent, and you are seen. Sometimes God is glimpsed in you and around you, preacher. But sometimes not. But keep dancing anyway. Keep pointing to the one whose music you hear. Those gathered will appreciate it and maybe – after a time – join in the dance with you.

But what about those who don’t gather? There are those on the sidelines who keep to themselves. Who stands apart and above and doesn’t like what they see? Michal didn’t gather with them for worship that day. She stood apart and looked out and looked down, and “she despised him in her heart” (2 Samuel 6:16). She despised him. You can go on past the reading for this week to hear the argument in the royal suite, but it won’t change the truth. There are those who won’t gather, for lots of reasons, and those who come to hate what it is that we do when we worship together. It is unseemly; it is shameless in our modern era to carry on in such a fashion. “Surely,” they declare, “we have progressed beyond this worship of an unseen God.” Well, we can hate them in return and call them names and point fingers and warn folks away. Or we can just keep dancing. We can keep inviting, extending our hands even to those who refuse to gather, but just keep dancing. And gathering, mixed motives, incomplete stories, lack of answers and explanations, and all. And just keep dancing.