

Called to Get Over It

2 Samuel 6:1-11

Dr. M. Craig Barnes
Sunday, July 15, 2001

Real Audio (2 MB)

In the words of Solomon, "for everything there is a season, and a time for everything under the sun. . . a time to weep and a time to laugh . . . a time to mourn and a time to dance. And, we could add, there is a time to be hurt and a time to get over it. Maybe you have been hurt for quite a while. Isn't about time to get over it?

Shortly after the terrible civil wars with Saul were over, King David realized that he had assumed leadership of a discouraged and divided nation. So he decided that Israel needed to recover the Ark of the Covenant. This was a great idea. It would inspire and unite the people. It would also make Jerusalem, David's new capital, not only the political center but the spiritual center of the nation. Certainly God would be thrilled, David assumed. We have no record of David praying or asking God about this good idea. Why bother praying about that which can be attained with a little hard work? David would have made such a good Protestant.

The Ark of the Covenant was given to the Hebrews when they were still in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. It was an ornate box lined in gold that served as the Mercy Seat for Jehovah. It also served as a symbol of the presence of God who journeyed with the people. The closest thing we would have to this ark in the church today would be the sacraments: physical symbols of the mercy of God who is with us.

Thirty years earlier the Ark had been captured by the Philistines. But they encountered so many headaches after taking possession of it that they dumped the Ark at the home of a man named Abinidab. So David got a few soldiers together -- thirty thousand -- and marched off to Abinidab's front yard to ask if he could have the Ark. Not surprisingly, Abinidab agreed. In addition to giving David the ark, he also gave him his two sons Uzzah and Ahio to help him get the Ark to Jerusalem. We are not exactly sure whose idea this was, but they decided to carry the ark on a brand new ox cart.

So away they go to haul the Ark of the covenant off to the new capital of Jerusalem. Soon a parade broke out. "David and all the house of the Lord were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals." I didn't even know the Hebrews had castanets.

Thirty thousand strong, the parade marched along until somehow the stupid ox stumbled. Uzzah, who had been walking beside the ark just in case something like this happened, put his hand up "and took hold of the ark" to steady it. Then we are told, "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah." And God struck him dead on the spot. The dancing stopped. The parade came to an abrupt end. And David became furious, saying, "Forget it! Leave God's precious chair over there. . . at that guy's house." So the Ark of the Covenant stayed at the roadside home of a man named Obededom while David sulked back to Jerusalem.

What went wrong? For starters they weren't carrying the Ark properly. When God gave them this symbol, he made it clear that the ark was always to be carried on the back of the Levite priests. Even the priests were forbidden to actually lay their hands on the ark, because this thing was just too sacred to be grabbed by human hands. So the priests were supposed to carry the Ark by running poles through its gold rings. If David had done his homework he would have known this. And even if he had, it must have seemed cumbersome -- poles, little gold rings, priests. They put the ark on a brand new ox cart. What did God expect? God doesn't expect us to understand or agreed with his commands. He expects us to obey them.

But I do not believe God struck Uzzah dead only because David didn't fulfill the letter of the law. David

had never been particularly good about the letter of the law. God didn't get angry when David took more wives than the law allowed, and some of those wives were already committed to other husbands. Nor did God express outrage when David ate the Holy Bread in the temple just because he was hungry. David and God were connected not just by standards. They were connected by the heart. That's precisely why God was upset.

What angered God was the heart of David that rushed to grab the Ark because he found a use for God in his new capital. What angered God even more was the carefulness of Uzzah who had a plan to keep God safely contained on an oxcart.

When you honor the commands of God, even the ones that don't make sense to you, you affirm that God is God. He is wholly other, and he will not be either grabbed or contained. Earlier, when the Philistines captured the Ark, they thought they had grabbed hold of a good luck charm. They carried the ark around on an oxcart. But hauling God around on an oxcart is always a bad plan. God will not be captured by those who've found a use for him, whether it's the Philistines or an anointed King. He will not be contained by those who plan to keep him safely in a box.

Poor ol' Uzzah. He was just trying to be careful. It was such a cautious plan to put the Ark on an oxcart. It wasn't like he had strapped the thing to a mustang. He was carefully attending to the sacred box while David was dancing his heart away with castanets at the front of the parade. Why did the Lord's anger burn hot against Uzzah? Why didn't he strike down David?

I think it is because God has never been as offended by our impulsiveness as by our careful plans. That is because your carefulness will domesticate God, who refuses to be tamed. Are you confused about why God killed Uzzah. Well, so was Uzzah. Welcome to worship! Eugene Peterson has written we ought to put signs on the front doors of all churches that say, "Beware of the God." It is the Holy One whom we worship. He will not be confined by your understanding or careful plans to keep him contained.

In contrast to Uzzah, David was never careful with God or anyone else. He began his life fighting bears and lions. Then he taunted a giant, toyed with the king, and hid out with the Philistines. And anytime he got disappointed he always took his anger out on God. So isn't it interesting that God tolerated David's anger, but killed Uzzah for his carefulness. Why? Because anger is an emotion of the heart. You can bring your anger and hurt to God in worship, but your carefulness will always prevent you from knowing him.

Uzzah was dead before he touched the Ark. He died spiritually the moment he thought he could keep God safely in a box. Do you think you understand God because you own a Bible? That's a box. Do you think God will protect you because you come to church? That's another box. Do you think God will make your plans come true because you pray? That's a small box.

When you go to work tomorrow, do not pray that God makes your careful plans a success. Pray that you may become a part of the unimagined plans of God that day. Throughout the day tomorrow God will be doing incredible things. If your focus is on the little box called the committee meeting, or the deal, or the dinner that has to get made, you will miss all of the miracles. And you will get upset because the miracle-working God didn't confine himself to the box you created.

While David was sulking in Jerusalem, he heard that God had blessed the home of Obbedom where he left the Ark of the Covenant. David then illustrates again why he is remembered as a man after God's own heart. He gets over it. He chooses to stop being angry.

David goes back to the home of Obbedom. This time he brings some priests with him to carry the ark correctly. The parade to Jerusalem begins again. But after the priests take six steps, David stops everything, sacrifices an ox, and then he dances his way back to Jerusalem. Isn't that wonderful? He slays the ox! He sacrifices Uzzah's careful plans and his own anger at God. Then he returns to dancing before a God he does not understand.

G. K. Chesterton has written, "The whole secret of mysticism is this: we can understand everything only by the help of what we do not understand." (Orthodoxy p. 25) Whatever your great argument with life may

be, whether you realize it or not, it is first of all an argument with God. We don't actually get over things as much as we get through them. And at the heart of every heartache is a disappointment with God who did not do what we expected. But those expectations were small boxes that you have been carrying around on an oxcart. Until you give up keeping the Sacred in a box of your own comprehension, you'll never be free to recover your dance steps in life.

Maybe the time has come for you to slay an ox. You were hurt a long time ago: your heart was broken by someone you trusted, a job was stolen away from you, or your parents weren't careful to love and nurture you. You have tried to get on with life, but the hurt has followed through on job, relationship, move after another. The hurt feels like an ox that slowly trudges behind you wherever you go. You're never going to get over the hurt until you sacrifice it and all your justifications before God. I can promise you that God won't explain himself or the hurt any better than he did to David. But as you honor a God you cannot understand, you'll get your joy back.

Sacrifice the ox! Give up the careful plans that didn't work, and the hurt that has followed you for too long. Because you'll never be able to dance with an ox.

O God, instead of getting over our hurt, we have befriended it and grown comfortable as victims. Today in an act of worship we give it up to you, asking that the dance to life may finally return. Amen.