

**July 15, 2018**  
**2 Samuel 6:1-15**  
**When We Try to Move God**  
**Michael Stanfield**

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim. They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark. David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

When 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. The 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. David was angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. David was 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 for three months; and the Lord blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

It 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; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us Pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer.*

Some Bible stories just seem so weird that we try and forget all about them. For many, this morning’s Old Testament text is one of those. But when we refuse to pay attention to a passage of scripture that offends our modern ears, we often miss the excavating of a rare gem.

What do we make of this strange ancient tale surrounding the moving of the Ark? Well, first, some background information is in order – particularly where the Ark is concerned – especially since it’s probably been a while since many of you have seen “Raiders of the Lost Ark” – right?

The Ark was basically thought to be home to the presence and glory of God. It contained the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, the rod of Aaron, and supposedly, a golden pot of manna from the days when the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness. The Ark was about the size of a large trunk, maybe 4 feet by 3 feet by 2 feet, give or take. The instructions for transporting this Ark were quite specific. It was always covered in a certain way with skins and a

blue cloth, virtually concealed as it was moved from one location to another in the 40-year wandering in the wilderness before reaching the Jordan under Joshua's leadership.

The transportation people entrusted with the job of moving God in the Ark were the Levites and particularly the priestly class.

It was to be carried by means of two poles threaded through brass rings on either side, as porters might carry a settee for a Far East King. There's nothing in the biblical instructions about an ox-cart. In fact, it would have been immediately understood by an Israelite reading this passage that David was putting everyone in danger by the way he was allowing the Holy of Holies to be handled...

Understood as it was to be the holding chamber of God's essence, the Ark was linked to a number of miracles. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan before entering the Promised Land for the first time, the waters of the Jordan parted as those carrying the ark stepped foot into the water. And as the Israelites moved into the Promised Land, they encountered formidable resistance at Jericho. But the priests carried the Ark around the city for a week, and on the seventh day, the walls came down.

This was the beginning of the Ark's association with military success and it became a sort of military talisman or mascot which, in "Raiders of the Lost Ark" is why Hitler is so interested in possessing it.

Now, as we look at today's text, the Ark which had been captured by the Philistines years earlier, is about to return to its true home – like a trophy being returned to the city to which it belonged.

In a much earlier battle with the Philistines, Israel had been losing so they had decided to take the Ark into battle – but this time, it did no good. Israel learned then that God could not be used anytime they wanted for any *thing* they wanted. What God wanted was faithfulness. That sometimes might mean going to battle but it did not mean God's purpose was for his people to be world conquerors. So, with God's favor withdrawn, the Philistines rallied, and in the subsequent battle, soundly defeated the Israelites. The Ark was captured, and two of the priest Eli's sons, Hophnea and Phineas were killed.

Now, years have passed. The leadership of Israel has fallen first to the prophet Samuel and then to their first king Saul and now to David. Since David was anointed king, the Philistines have been hunting for him to try and annihilate the Israelites once and for all. But David meets them, and the armies of Israel defeat the Philistines – without the Ark. David then gathers 30,000 men to retrieve the Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines and bring it to Jerusalem.

But the thing is, David pays no attention to the dictates of the scriptures concerning the handling of the Ark; instead, he puts the uncovered Ark in a cart, and the procession to Jerusalem begins, accompanied with music and dancing. The cart hits a pothole or something, and Uzzah a soldier with blood on his hands – and not a levite priest – who is walking beside the cart, reaches out to steady the Ark with that hand, and he dies immediately because he has dared touch the uncovered Ark of with a sullied hand.

This is a definite buzz kill, and the Ark goes no further. It is placed in the hands of a certain Obed-edom and there it stays for three months. This family is subsequently blessed because of its presence. And so David decides to move God again, and this time he does it right – according to the dictates of scripture...

On the one hand we are appalled at the idea of God striking someone down for being lackadaisical about the way he handled sacred and holy things. On the other hand, that reaction speaks volumes about how we 21<sup>st</sup> century Westerners view the holy and the sacred. The fact is, we dismiss such attitudes as the magical thinking of children and primitives – something we sophisticated, enlightened, post-modern people moved past a long time ago.

We cannot even imagine how a story about God striking down a man for being callous about handling things associated *with* God could possibly have any relevance whatsoever. In fact, it just seems outrageous. But perhaps that is not so much an indictment of the ancient biblical writers as it an indictment of us.

I mean, I will admit that being struck dead for mishandling the Ark is a bit of overkill – pardon the pun. Nevertheless, it speaks to the gaping disparity between an ancient's understanding of, and attitude towards, the Holy and our own. The sad truth is that there is generally nothing that we Westerners, as a whole, hold as sacred and holy any more. In fact, I'll go one further – not even present day Christians have an objective, agreed upon sense of what holiness is or that it really even exists. As a result, our world suffers and is the worse for it. In fact, it is coming apart at the seams.

It is why I like Rudolph Otto, who wrote a little known but extremely important book way back in the 1930's entitled, "The Idea of the Holy." It's important because it describes better than any book I have ever read, in modern vernacular, what holiness is: a human experience that seizes and controls the human subject – where that subject is its "victim" rather than its creator. Otto termed this the experience of the 'numinosum' that is, the experience something that is caused by an act of will *outside* the will of the human subject.

Building on Otto's definition of the holy, Carl Jung defined religious *faith* as the loyalty, trust, and confidence toward the possibility of experiencing the holy by participating in some ritual, rite or religious activity and what he called "the subsequent alteration of consciousness..." 'Religion,' Jung thus says, is the term that designates the attitude peculiar to a consciousness which has been altered by the experience of the numinosum."<sup>1</sup> Ultimately Otto called this experience the "Mysterium Tremendum" or the "tremendous mystery".

Holiness rightly understood, therefore is not a static state inherent in an object but an autonomous experience of the great other that humbles us. It is a profound experience of reality. According to Otto, the mysterium tremendum includes five Aspects:  
First is **Awe-fulness** - That is, AWE-FULNESS – awe, coming from a kind of religious dread; it is a shuddering before deep unfathomable mystery, it is a kind of "unnatural fear". "The awe or 'dread' *may* be so overwhelmingly great that it seems to penetrate to the very marrow, making one's hair bristle and one's limbs quake. But it may also steal upon one almost unobserved as the

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<sup>1</sup> Jung, Psychology and Religion, Terry Lectures, 1938, pg 6.

gentlest of agitations, a mere fleeting shadow passing across one's mood. It therefore has nothing to do with intensity but is a feeling of uncanniness. So, although this experience in the end would fall into the category of a pleasurable one, the moment of it is also one that can only be described as at least somewhat fear-inducing.

Second is **Overpoweringness**. This is what Otto calls the 'creature-feeling'. Here he makes a distinction between the head knowledge of having been created by one's maker and the gut experience of that reality that makes one feel small and insignificant. P. 17. This aspect has with it absolute unapproachability, majesty, being dust and ashes. It is the experience from which true religious humility springs. From such an experience, one no longer has to *act* humble for one has truly *been* humbled.

Third is what Otto calls **Energy/urgency**. There is an infusion of Vitality, passion, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus. Past Christian writers referred to this as 'quickenings'. This fills one with a new purpose that is impervious to suffering because it either fills one with meaning or it puts one on the right life-long path for ferreting out that meaning with passion and a new confidence.

Fourth is what Otto calls the **Holy Other**. It is the experience of encountering some "One" who is totally other than anything else one has ever experienced. This strikes one dumb with absolute amazement. It is that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the 'canny' and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with wonder and astonishment. P. 26 (It is that, says Otto "which rationalization and scholasticism have a tendency to exclude." p. 27). It, in effect, remains absolutely beyond our understanding and is not even, in theory, intelligible but is absolutely real in a way that nothing else is. p. 29.

And fifth and finally is **Fascination**. This Holy awesome other is nonetheless uniquely attractive, having a potent charm. While shuddering before it, there is a strong impulse to turn towards it – even to make it one's own. One experiences love, mercy, pity, and comfort all in their absolute form. Bliss or beatitude more rightly captures it. (p. 31). This is the wonderfulness of the experience – the experience of perfect grace (p. 32) – the peace that passes all understanding. (p. 34)

***Mysterium Tremendum, the numinous, the Holy***. When there is no clear avenue to experience this in a contained way with some guidance and understanding, then one will experience it negatively as an assault on their sanity. I have people outside of the church come to see me all the time who have had such profound experiences and believe they are quite possibly losing their minds. Or yet others who know their experience is from God but sadly, do not see Church as the place where they and their unique experiences will be understood or appreciated.

The problem is one of proper containment – just as it was for those Israelites moving the Ark. And the Church is in a unique position to provide the world with this containment if we can just understand this calling. We say the church is the holy body of Christ but sure don't act like it. As those who are entrusted with the Holy, like David and Uzzah, we take too much for granted. The materialistic and reductionist attitude of American Culture is *certainly* not a proper container for the experience of the numinosum – in fact, science will be the first to dismiss such a thing as

nothing but – nothing but, the misfiring of a few neurons. And sadly we, the faithful are influenced heavily by this attitude.

Thus, most Churches are broken down into 2 types: those who equate religious faith with following the literal dictates of the bible, and those who equate faith with being a kind of political service group dedicated to social justice. Both are devoid of the one thing that sets a holy people apart – being the conscious containers of experiences of the numinous which alone sets the agenda for everything those people *are* to be and to *do*.

When we do not take the holy seriously, we become callous and thoughtless and empty. In the secular world it means there is no reason to be civil and no reason to try and have empathy because that requires acknowledging our ultimate vulnerability before the almighty. In the Church, it means we argue over theology that we demand always be rational – and social issues that we demand always be just – neither of which is necessarily grounded in what it should be – the non-rational experience of, or constant connection to, the Holy One of Israel, Jesus, the Resurrected Christ. If it were, we would spend more time being awed and graceful and loving and less time fighting amongst ourselves and hurting one another.

God grows a people only when the people take God's Ark seriously – that is when they handle the Presence of God with care and humility – when they make room not just for diverse ideas *about* God but for diverse experiences of the Living God him – *or her* – self (since experience of the holy is ultimately beyond gender categories).

I can tell you – there are discerning people out there hungering for that – hungering for the sacred and the Holy. What they tell me is that they have gone to churches where the bible and ritual are taken seriously but where biblical literalism get in the way of being open to God's Spirit on social and political issues so that the ritual feels hollow; so they have gone to churches where social justice is the main focus but they don't like that either because somehow this is ineffective in leading them to what they really crave: the *mysterium tremendum*; an experience of the holy.

What they are saying is that they have recognized that their very souls are sacred and they cry out to be linked with a community that recognizes and honors that. That cannot be done with ordinary rational consciousness only. That is done when the proper container is prepared and tended to by a worshipful attitude that takes the possibility of the numinous seriously, treating it with the utmost respect and honor. It is an attitude of humility before the power and radical love of God...

What is your Ark? What is sacred to you? What do you value and care for because you have experienced the holy in association with it, so that it upsets you when others are callous towards it? We are not used to thinking this way. But maybe if we did, we might more easily discern a true calling...

Traditionally in the church, the Communion table and the baptismal font have been such containers. They are the traditional Christian symbols of a mysterious presence. We thus tend to handle these objects with extra care. But it is time we faced the fact that the *mysterium tremendum* is not confined to orthodox Christian symbols.

When I was with my son, Carl on the Appalachian Trail, I could tell that those Mountains were his Ark. I observed a marked reverence in him for that space. And so that informs his social and political stances. He is passionate about protecting the natural world rather than allowing economics to dictate its exploitation. For him God *is* in the mountains and the Lakes and the seas and the forests. Mining, overfishing, polluting, denuding is no different than Uzzah's callous, blood-stained hand reaching out to steady the ark. And the result is the same, people either are dying or will most certainly die as a result.

What is your Ark? What is holy to you? How are you handling that – carefully, thoughtfully and passionately or callously, mindlessly and indifferently?

Let us pray. Gracious God, forgive our callousness when it comes to your presence. Open us to it and once experienced, give us the courage and strength to keep it carefully...

Now bless these gifts that they may create opportunities for the experience of your presence. We Pray in Christ's name, amen.