

The Ark is Brought to Jerusalem

Passages: 2 Samuel 6:1–19

I want to start today's sermon by talking about **church architecture**! In an article in Thursday's Herald, Elizabeth Farrelly compared the architecture of the newly-rebuilt Anglican church, St. Barnabas Broadway (a "low church"), with that of the old "high church" structure known as Christ Church, St. Lawrence. Farrelly argued that **these two very different structures say a lot about the way the people who attend these churches see/ understand God.**

- For the low-churchman, God is near (immanent); He's "my best friend" ...a companion on the journey of life. As Farrelly puts it, God helps me to "look after the world and to reach my full potential". There is an intimacy... a familiarity... with God. And church architecture implicitly encourages this understanding. Barney's new church is basically a large theatre-style auditorium. The focus is on the sermon. The sermon usually proclaims the presence of God in the midst of God's people through Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.
- For the high-churchman, however, God is mainly understood in terms of His transcendence. He is the Creator of the Universe. Not only is He big, He is 'holy'; full of glory, majesty and power. He is wholly 'other' – a non-material Being who exists in "exalted otherness". And high-church architecture reflects this prevailing attitude about God by using vaulted ceilings and a over-proportional sense of vertical space. Subdued lighting and stained-glass windows complete the 'other-worldly' atmosphere. All this is designed to enhance the vertical experience of God Almighty; any fellowship between God's people holds secondary importance.

Now, I like what Farrelly is saying here-- that two different perceptions of God are conveyed through these two types of church architecture. That's because I grew up in a high-church. I remember the feelings of awe and wonder. But I became an evangelical when I was around 20, mainly because of my experience of the immanence of God. In Jesus, I knew God was close to me—my Saviour and friend.

So, it makes me wonder: **Why we can't have both!** Why can't we have both a low -church and a high-church understanding of God expressed in our architecture? Why can't we live in the truth of a God who is both immanent and transcendent? Why can't we hold both the personal intimacy of a **loving Saviour** and the 'unknowable otherness' of **the Almighty** in tension with each other?

I raise this question today because I believe that this is the main focus of today's passage from **2 Samuel 6**! Here are two stories, bit of which concern the transportation of the Ark of the Lord to Jerusalem. But, as I read them, I come to the conclusion that each of these stories was never meant to stand alone. They were intended to be read together... to be combined as one story in order to better reflect the true nature of God! Indeed, the Ark itself was meant to be a reminder to Israel of both the Transcendence and the Immanence of God! Look at 2 Samuel 6:2—God **the Almighty** dwells between the cherubim! He is 'other' **and** He has come near.

But the problem with us human beings is that we tend to swing in one direction or the other. We tend to be **either/or** people and not **both/and** people. We are either high church or low church. We either believe that God is distant, separate and wholly 'other' to us (like Nick Cave's "I don't believe in an interventionist God") or we believe that God is one of us... (or in Joan Osborne's words, "just a slob like one of us!") He's either transcendent **or** immanent. He's either mysterious and unknowable **or** He's almost

too well known. We just can't seem to hold these two seemingly opposite ideas in tension. And that's why this chapter is so hard to read!

Think about the first half of the chapter in which Uzzah is killed by God while trying to keep the Ark from falling over. This is a difficult story for any modern evangelical to digest, particularly as we look at God from a low-church perspective! I mean, here is a man who, for the past 20 years, has had the Ark stationed outside his front door! If you go back to 1 Sam 7:1, you'll read the story of how the Ark came to his father's house and how his brother, Eleazar, was given the job of watching after it. One can only imagine that, over this 20 year period, Eleazar's brother Uzzah would have become fairly familiar with the Ark.

One day, King David comes and announces that the ark of God is finally going to be moved. As it is being moved, the oxen who are pulling the cart suddenly stumble. (You have to ask, "Why did they stumble? Did God cause them to stumble?" After all, a threshing floor is perfectly flat!) Without thinking, Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady it. Remember, Uzzah knows the Ark well. After 20 years together in the same house, he may even think that, by now, He and God are best buddies and that he is doing God a big favour by keeping the Ark from falling!

When we consider the reasons why God took Uzzah's life, **could it be** that Uzzah has made the classic, evangelical, low-church mistake of understanding the Ark in terms of God's immanence without any thought of His transcendence? Could it be that Uzzah's death is not because God isn't friendly, but because Uzzah has **presumed** upon that friendship and thus forgotten God's 'otherness'?

Think again about the story: When Uzzah reached out his hand to stabilize the Ark, was he saying to God, "Let me help you!" ??? as

if God is just one of us... “just a slob like one of us, trying to find His way home!” Was Uzzah was being too friendly--too buddy-buddy, unwilling to acknowledge that God is separate from His creation and therefore He is beyond our help, control or manipulation! If so, then God’s response will not shock us as much. God is saying, “You’ve got the wrong idea, Uzzah. I have no need of human help!”

Vladimir Lossky once said; “If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible; something which is inferior to Him!”

Of course, we must not put all the blame on Uzzah. Three other points must also be factored in here which show us David’s part in this catastrophe. First, God had never been consulted about moving the Ark from Uzzah’s house. This means that Uzzah was acting only under David’s orders. His eyes, in other words, were on a man, David, and not on the God who stands over David!

Secondly, the whole reason why David was moving the ark to Jerusalem was in order to shore up his own political power base. David wanted the twelve tribes of Israel to worship together in one place. And so, this move of the Ark was part of his political strategy to establish Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel.

Thirdly, in his haste to accomplish his own agenda, David never stopped to consider the proper way to transport the ark. More than likely, he remembered the way the Philistines had sent the ark back to Israel-- on a newly constructed ox cart-- and so, he thought, “I’ll do the same thing!” But this was in direct conflict with the way God had outlined in the Law of Moses. In the Law, God commanded the Ark to only be transported using two long poles, carried by four Levites.

In other words, David's entire plan to bring the Ark to Jerusalem was built on **presumptions!** David, in a low-church approach to God, thought of God as his friend...his helper...the One who would help David to fulfil his dreams and plans.

What this means is that Uzzah's death occurred because both King David and Uzzah had, over time, presumptuously developed a non-chalant, non-reverential, buddy-buddy approach to the Almighty!

You may be saying: "But this doesn't give God the right to take Uzzah's life, does it?" Well, that's exactly what David must have been thinking! Clearly, the death of Uzzah took David completely by surprise, shaking up his comfortable understanding of God. That's why he becomes "angry" with God (v 9). Then, he becomes "fearful" of God (v 10)! In verse 11, he publicly announces that he wants nothing more to do with this God by calling off the procession! Not only does David reject any blame but, in David's mind, it is all God's fault! God has acted unfairly...in a way that, David believes, is inconsistent with His nature! David only wants to see God through the lens of His immanence. For David, God is the One who comes near to endorse and bless his plans and ambitions.

But David is pulled up short! For that is not God's nature-- at least, it's not the entirety of who God really is! For although David (like most of us low-church evangelicals) may struggle to understand God's action against Uzzah, in the end, the only explanation is to say, "God does what God does simply because God is God!" It's not an intellectual argument. It's may not even be an argument that satisfies. But it is the only explanation we are left with! Indeed, it may be helpful to remember that this is not the first time that God has acted this way in relationship to the Ark! Back in 1 Samuel 6, God already put 70 men to death because they dared to look inside the Ark!

Now, what can we say to all this? Can it be that all we are left to say is what Job said when God took his entire family away from him: **“The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!”** It’s a high-church response that is based in the transcendent nature of a God who is beyond our understanding! This is exactly where Psalm 99 takes us as it reflects on the inherent tension between God’s immanence and His transcendence found in the Ark. In the end, all the Psalmist can say is; “The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble. He sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake!”

Let’s move on to the second story embedded in today’s chapter—the story of David passionately dancing before that Ark as it comes into Jerusalem.

Now, here’s is a story with which evangelical, low-churchmen like myself, feel far more comfortable! In this story, God is graciously Immanent—He comes near in loving condescension! Indeed, as David dances before the Ark of the Lord, he gets so caught up in a personal connection with God’s presence that he strips off his clothes and dresses himself in an ephod (described in the Book of Exodus as an elaborately embroidered linen garment worn by the high priest). David is one with God in the expression of his worship. Moreover, the ephod that he is wearing means that his dance is the peoples’ dance. As King and High Priest, David represents the entire nation by wearing the names of the 12 tribes on his chest.

What we have, then, is a snapshot of an intimate God, personally engaged with the rawness of humanity in a dance of worship.

But there’s an interesting counterpoint to the story: Michal, David’s wife, can’t understand what David is doing! In fact, she despises David for such a public show of, what she thinks is, self-

humiliation. Why? I see it as a classic high–church, low–church conflict! David, the low churchman, is confronted by the high–church attitude of his wife. While he revels in God’s presence, she keeps her hands strictly down by her sides! While he gives in to the immanence of worship, she pulls back with an austere vision of God’s transcendence. (It’s no wonder why, at the end of the chapter we’re told that Michal can’t have children. Although some see this as God’s curse on her, I simply see it as a problem of severe incompatibility between David and Michal—their worldviews are so different that they no longer sleep together!)

And so, what’s the point of these 2 stories found together in 2 Samuel 6? I think it’s clear: We can no longer be “either/or” Christians. We can no longer identify ourselves as either high–church **or** low–church. We can no longer focus on either God’s transcendence **or** His immanence. We can no longer be satisfied by siding with either Michal **or** David in their approach to God. **Rather, we must live within the tension of “both/and”**, learning to move freely between these seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum. As Richard Keyes says, “God is immanent, close to us, available to us. But that does not make Him a tame God, controllable, at our disposal....God is also transcendent. He is great beyond greatness. He is Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. But that does not make Him distant, impersonal, arbitrary, or beyond moral categories.”

What happens if we hold onto one aspect of God’s nature and forget the other? Too much focus on God’s transcendence breeds a vertical religion where God is cold and distant and demanding... and we are fearful of Him. (No wonder the high–church is dying!) But too much focus on God’s immanence breeds a horizontal religion where we take God for granted—He’s here to serve us and help us to fulfil our potential. We lose the awe and mystery of faith. (No wonder the evangelical church is also losing members— As they say, “familiarity breeds contempt”.)

What the church needs to find is some sort of balance between these two aspects of God! Indeed, when you think about it, this is exactly the God we see revealed in Jesus Christ! In Him, we see **both** God's transcendence and His imminence. In Him, there is a dynamic tension of both natures. And Jesus makes this clear every time He utters, what seem to us to be, contradictory statements:

- "I am from above and you are from below!" ...and "I am in your midst as the one who serves".
- "Don't touch me for I have not yet ascended to my Father!"... and "Unless you eat of my flesh and drink of my blood, you have no life in you".
- "All judgment is given to the Son"... and "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world, through Him, might be saved."

Of course, since the Incarnation of Jesus as a man, there has been a greater emphasis (a corrective) on the OT view of God's Transcendence. In Jesus, God has come near. He has also come by His Spirit to reveal the immanent beauty of God by living inside His people. Having said that, the Book of Revelation (speaking of our future) seems to place a bulk of its emphasis on the Transcendence of God. In other words, there are times when one aspect of God's nature will need to have a greater emphasis in order to correct and fill out our perspective!

For, ultimately, God calls us to hold both aspects of His nature in tension. Only then will we be able to truly understand the Triune God, engage as His people in His world, and find satisfaction in reading His Word.

Let's pray.