

Chapter 11 The Path  
2 Samuel 6: 5-19  
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood  
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## Listening to God

With only one week left until Christmas, who here has already attended at least one holiday party? I imagine a few may have been formal gatherings, but I'd bet that none were as grand an event as what's described into today's lesson from Chapter 11 of The Path, the Bible summary we're studying together as a parish.

Our lesson from 2 Samuel takes us back to the time David was established as King of the covenant people of God. And what a momentous occasion! A grand procession with great rejoicing; a spectacular sacrifice of an ox and a fattling; music, dancing in the streets led by David himself, who we hear danced for the Lord with all his might; trumpets, shouting, and a great feast, with food distributed among all the people. A magnificent new beginning, a transfer from the old to the new, a grand event with all the elaborate trappings of the times. And there it was, the ark, the most profoundly sacred symbol of Israel, reminding the people that Yahweh, the Almighty, the Divine Warrior who had fought for Israel, is with them. An enthroned presence among the people. David's actions and this grand inaugural event all converge to proclaim loudly that there is a powerful divine alliance between David and the Almighty. And with this very public ritual, David will unite all the factions of Israel, both north and south.

But first, there's that strange story of Uzzah. As David and many of the house of Israel first make their way to Jerusalem, there's an unexpected and frightening interruption. The oxen transporting the ark stumble and the cart dangerously shifts. Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the precious load and he is shockingly struck down, for this sacred ark could not be touched by just anyone.

David reacts with anger and fear. He's angry with God for striking down Uzzah, but he's also afraid: so afraid he doesn't immediately bring the ark to reside within the soon-to-be city of David. So much power, uncontrollable power, within this ark of God!

So for a time the ark is left in the care of others, until a few months later David is ready to try again. And it's this second attempt that turned into that grand procession that established the kingship of David.

Why is the story Uzzah here? This story sounds so strange to our modern-day ears. We may want to brush it off as some kind of ancient myth of an angry Old Testament God unreasonably striking out at someone for doing something small and inconsequential. But instead of looking at this event quite so literally, I'd like to suggest a few ways to think about this strange incident and perhaps explore some deeper meanings.

First, consider that this story pushes us to recognize that God cannot be harnessed. Our Almighty God cannot be contained under our control, set aside in some metaphorical box, ready to be pulled out and used to meet our needs whenever we're ready. If we think about David's purpose, the reason for transporting the ark, David is seeking to establish all the tribes of Israel as one united nation — both under God and under his rule as king.

But David, like all of us, is human. He is a real person, a complex person, who can be faithful and compassionate, following the Almighty, yet who is also subject to sin and evil. I imagine David's motives aren't completely pure. I even suspect his actions are at least somewhat manipulative. Divine power and human political power can certainly be intentionally brought together, but it's a risky business. And although the text isn't explicit, there's probably more here than we can clearly see, something about David's desire to consolidate and hold onto power that has caused him to treat his relationship with God too casually, with tragic results for himself and others. As humankind, we can't manage God's holiness, God's otherness, nor understand all that God is. This story tells us to remember that God is God and we are not. We need to be careful about assuming what God's thinks.

I also see here a reminder that we need to be especially cautious if we believe that God is on our side or a member of our exclusive club, however we define it — by race, religion, gender, sexuality, political party, or ethnicity. God is not made in our image, nor sees through our eyes. God doesn't view a person's value or worth, the way that we do; doesn't view our actions or inaction, how we live our day-to-day lives, as we do. This truth can be so difficult for us to see, since our reality, our sense of self can't help but be influenced by all that is around us, all that we've experienced and been taught through families, friends, culture, and society. It's in the very air we breath.

We need God's help, to open our minds to see life through the eyes of another. We need God's help to open our hearts to the truth: that all are created in God's image; that all God's children are precious; and that God longs for us to live lives of compassionate caring and creating beloved community, rather than focused on ourselves and our human tendencies to divide and rank others into categories of who's in and who's out. We need to be careful when we take our eyes, our focus, away from God, and instead, align ourselves with what this world tells us is important. Even Israel's greatest king would at times confuse his will with God's will.

And finally, it's important to notice that David set aside time before trying to once again move the ark. Sure, he needed time to figure how to proceed more cautiously, but I imagine there's far more happening during these weeks of delay than figuring out the logistics of moving the ark. David would have spent time with God: time to be still, time to listen, and time to better understand the direction God was leading him in his life. Only then could he begin again. And isn't that something we all need — the time to be still with God, to seek God's guidance, and discover how best to continue on God's path?

How could our lives be changed, if we paused, especially during the chaotic or troubling or challenging times of our lives? What would we hear, if we stopped and simply sat with God, opening ourselves to the movement of the Spirit by taking some time in silence to hear that still small voice?

If you're frantically swirling in that final chaotic rush to Christmas, consider what you may really need during this time. Find those moments to be still with God. Whether it's time reflecting on a daily Advent reflection or joining us in for some contemplative time here on Tuesday or Wednesday, or taking time to pray Compline in the evening as a family, or perhaps simply taking an "unplugged" walk in your neighborhood. Intentionally find those moments to be still with our Risen Lord.

Advent is the time to reflect on who we are and whose we are while we wait. It's the time to identify those places in our lives where we've shifted away from God's path of love and compassion, where we've turned our backs on our neighbors, where we've decided to walk our

own path, instead of God's. And having found those things that separate us from our Living God, we can repent, seek God's forgiveness, and turn back towards Jesus, the Holy One.

Take the time, in these final days before Christmas to prepare for what is eternally important — to prepare your heart, your mind, and your soul — as we await the coming of the Lord. *Amen.*