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THE ARK IN ITS HEYDAY

Good Shepherd, Berkeley

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Proper 9: 2 Sam. 6:1-5, 12b-19 (actually read as 6:1-19); Psalm 24; Eph. 1:3-14;
Mark 6:14-29

Was anyone having flashbacks to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* during the first lesson? We had the ark at its most powerful and unpredictable today: it zapped Uzzah, who was only trying to be helpful. It scared David enough that he had second thoughts about the whole idea of bringing it into his new capital in Jerusalem. Instead, he dumped it on the household of Obed-edom and waited to see just what it would do to them.

Just to make it all stranger, Obed-edom wasn't even Israelite. He was a Gittite – from Gath, a Philistine city. Maybe he was one of David's loyal mercenaries, who had stuck with him through all his days in the wilderness before he became king. David would need somebody that brave and loyal to take on such a dangerous assignment. Maybe Obed-edom is the real hero of this story.

If we look back over all the stories about the ark of the covenant, these two recurring themes are always there: power and unpredictability. God commands Moses to make the ark, in the first place, and fill it with powerful objects. He is also to create the tent of meeting to house it during the wilderness wanderings. Nobody but the priests and levites can get close to it. The levites carry it when the people go on the march. But even they don't actually touch it: it has rings on the sides, into which long poles are inserted, and they carry it by the poles.

Later on, at the entry into Canaan, Joshua tells the levites to walk into the River Jordan with it, and the Jordan actually stops flowing! The whole people pass across. And then when the levites finish crossing over themselves, the river resumes its normal flow.

Later still, we find the ark residing in a temple at Shiloh. But when the Israelites take it out to the field of battle as a way of forcing God to help them, it does exactly the opposite. It lets itself get captured by the Philistines and taken home as a trophy of war. But once they get it home with them, it starts doing terrible things to them, knocking over the images of their gods and afflicting the men with something variously interpreted as tumors, hemorrhoids, or, in our tasteful modern terminology, erectile dysfunction.

The Philistines send it back. And for a long time it winds up in a small town called Kiriath-jearim (a name meaning, roughly, "Forestville"). Nobody could figure what to do with it, since the Philistines had torn down the temple at

Shiloh. Then David found it and decided to claim its power for his new capital, with the results we just read about.

It's a great story, isn't it? It still revs up all my ten-year-old enthusiasm for blood and guts adventure. I guess it worked pretty well for Hollywood, too.

It may be a bit awkward, though, from the theological side. What is one to say about it? God is dangerous and unpredictable. Well, yes. We knew that already. Probably anybody who has survived as far as mid-life, let's say, has experienced this as part of the basic realities of life. Life is dangerous. Life is unpredictable. This is true whether you think of it as the work of God or the work of nature or the work of chance or whatever.

Still, in the context of Christian faith, centered in the life and teaching of Jesus, do we really want to be making a big deal of this story? Should we be reading it on a Sunday morning? Do we want to accommodate the God of the ark, zapping Uzzah for his temerity in trying to be helpful?

The people who put our present lectionary together apparently thought not. In fact, they actually left the bit about Uzzah out. I'm the one who put it back in this morning. And I did that because this is actually the center of the whole story. If you don't read that bit right in the middle of it, you can't figure out why the trip got interrupted, what the ark was doing at Obed-edom's house, or why David was so relieved to hear that it was behaving politely again. Sorry, if you don't want the zapping of Uzzah, you'd better skip the whole chapter.

So what do we get out of all this, theologically? Well, there's at least one very important point: there's no owning God. However much we may think we know about God, however much we may think we can predict God, what we don't understand is always more than what we do. Whatever we think we know, remember that this is the God who said to Moses, "My name is 'I am who I am.'" That's not so much a name as a riddle. No one is ever going to get a corner on God.

And there's another important thing here, too. Our knowledge of God isn't like our knowledge of textbook subjects. We keep getting confused about this. We think that if we just memorize the right formulas about God, we can apply what we've learned as a form of theological engineering and produce desired results.

Religions keep getting caught up in that illusion. It's the origin of theocracies – and also their downfall. Because God, of course, doesn't respond to our engineering, unless by getting a good laugh out of it. And maybe shedding some tears over it, too, because we can't seem to get past this desire to take control of God and God's power.

Uzzah was well-intentioned. But that's not enough. In order to know God, we have to learn a lot about ourselves and our limits, too. Think of him as a

metaphor, an image of a medieval Inquisitor, a Puritan preacher in early Massachusetts, an ayatollah in present-day Iran. They were all trying to be helpful. They all thought that they had to take control, that they understood the power, that it could be managed (not unlike electricity) in order to build the pure society, the obedient society, the society that God would have to love and protect and certainly not zap without warning. Two of my three examples, the Inquisitor and the Puritan, were forced to give up long ago (though their modern followers keep trying to revive their mission). The third set, the ayatollahs, will wind up going the same way sooner or later, though they'll do their share of damage before that happens.

This isn't all there is to be said about God, of course. It tells us more about how we go wrong than about how, with God's help, we might go right. But that's an important gift, even if a limited one.

It reminds us, after all, that the way to God isn't a well-mapped highway paved with learning and posted with excellent, clear signage. It's more like a footpath, posted with historical markers that may tell you more about others' problems than about how you can get where you want to go.

And we walk along that footpath, sometimes alone, but mostly in small companies, supporting one another with trust and hope and love. Being absolutely confident that you know the route in advance won't help you. In fact, if you trust the map more than your eyes, it will probably lead you right into a swamp with hip deep mud and, quite possibly, an alligator. It may even get you zapped for your good intentions.

But it's amazing how a little humility and persistence can sometimes win out where supreme self-confidence fails. As I said, the most interesting figure in this story may be the one about whom we learn least: Obed-Edom. He agrees to be the test site for the apparently fearsome and dangerous ark and finds that, when entertained hospitably instead of being used for its power, it's actually a blessing.