

## Who's in Control?

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Mark 6:14-29

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Leave it to the international lectionary committee to choose two difficult texts and put them together on one sleepy summer Sunday in July. Maybe they were figuring the crowds would be low today...and they are, frankly, with some of our members on a mission trip to Puerto Rico and others on vacation...or at the neighborhood pool. The first text is difficult, but if it did not seem that way to you, there is a reason. The lectionary committee, as is often the case, regularly excises verses that are disturbing right out of biblical passages.

So, unless you are following along and happen to read verses 6-11 even though you are told not to, not to worry your pretty head over them...you'd never know that in the midst of all that celebration and dancing, a man named Uzzah was struck dead by God. Just for trying to keep the sacred ark of the covenant from toppling off its ox cart. Oh, 30,000 men of Israel saw it. But you were spared. David saw it, and it made him angry at God and scared, too. It put a damper on the whole parade. So, David decided not to bring the ark into Jerusalem that day after all.

Instead, he parked the ark of God in Obed-edom's driveway—and left it up on blocks, so to speak, for three months. When David heard that God was blessing Obed-edom as if he were some mega-millions lottery winner, David decided maybe God had cooled off enough to try it again. This time it worked...they shouted with joy, offered sacrifices along the way, somebody played the trumpet...and David danced in his underwear. It all went beautifully. But I'm pretty sure those who were carrying the ark this time moved very slowly and carefully...making sure no one bumped into them in all the excitement!

If one wanted to run as quickly as possible from the Old Testament lesson, however, they'd run right into a New Testament hard wall. This second lesson is just as distasteful—even if it does take place in the midst of a sumptuous birthday banquet. This story tells of the terrible death of John the Baptist. Already imprisoned, John is then beheaded. Then his head is served up on a platter just so Herod can save face in front of his dinner guests. Herod actually liked to listen to John the Baptist, but in the end that didn't matter. Protecting his own pride and power was more important than protecting someone else's life.

Neither story is my idea of good beach reading!

A common thread in these two stories, besides someone being struck suddenly dead, is dancing. The girl, Herodias, dances intent on death. David dances intent on praising God. Now,

some people use this text of David dancing exuberantly to make the case for using liturgical dance in worship today. Of course, others might just as easily use this same story to side with Michal, who found the whole dancing thing way too out of control and undignified. However you feel about liturgical dance and movement as an act of worship, Walter Brueggemann says that's really not the point of the story at all.

So, good grief...what *is* the point? Well, if you don't get hung up on that whole God-striking-Uzzah-dead-on-the-spot moment, then the point is David, of course, David solidifying his power base by bringing the ark, the symbol of the very presence of God, into his new capital city of Jerusalem. After rescuing the ark from its Philistine captivity, David brings it once again front and center into Israel's life. The ark supposedly held the tablets of stone Moses had been given. And maybe a jar of manna, too...symbols of God's commandments and God's grace...from Israel's beginning. They place the ark and its artifacts in the nation's capital (the first but not the last time people have wanted the Ten Commandments placed in the hall of government!). The ark resting in Jerusalem with its sacred contents is the tangible symbol, even "proof," of God's presence and favor—upon all Israel...but also and specifically upon David.

And maybe in Mark, the main point of this gruesome story is simply to let us know what happened to John the Baptist. That he died innocent of any crime, except proclaiming the kingdom of God—a precursor of what would happen to Jesus. Unlike Jesus, when John's disciples heard about his death, at least they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Jesus' disciples ran and hid instead.

Or maybe this story is placed here, in this unusual spot, to serve as a warning. To anyone who wants to follow Jesus and proclaim God's alternative kingdom, this is a warning that the world is intent on protecting its own pride and power at all costs—even murder. This story comes between Jesus sending his disciples out into the world with nothing but sandals on their feet and a staff in their hands, and their triumphant return. They'll come back with stories of healing and teaching and preaching. But between their going out and their coming in is this story of the death of John the Baptist. It is a warning to us that as disciples we will have to decide again and again what kind of power we will trust and use. Surely it is no accident that what follows immediately after that decadent and deadly banquet in a king's house is Jesus feeding five thousand people in a field of green grass, with nothing more than a five loaves and two fish. Feast enough to fill everyone...and even to have leftovers.

Now, if you can follow me around one more turn in the bend of these two stories...if we turn yet another corner we may discover that these stories are not only about—or even mostly—about David or John the Baptist or us at all.

Instead, these stories are really about God. These stories push us to confront the question of who we truly believe is in control of things...in control of the world.

David seems in control, doesn't he? And Uzzah...he was trying to keep control of the ark on that rocky road...he knew he was not supposed to touch it...but it was falling. *God* was falling! So God needed a little help! Uzzah put his hand up reflexively to give God an assist! In that little gesture, he revealed the fragility of his true belief...what he thought of God. Like us, Uzzah could likely recite the orthodox creed: "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth..." But when he reached out to grab the ark, in that moment he revealed his real faith. As Tom Long puts it: Uzzah's faith was in "a God so impotent that if the box falls, God falls; a God so weak that this God needs the help of the likes of Uzzah to dotter across the street; and empty shell of a God trapped inside fragile religious symbols. Do you see Uzzah reaching out now?" (From "The Fall of the House of Uzzah...and other Difficult Preaching Texts" by Thomas G. Long in *Journal for Preachers*.)

What of us? Back in the early 1990s, I had an uneasy feeling when Christians started demanding the return to prayer in schools because, they said, we had removed God from the classroom...as if we could remove God from anywhere! So when my son, Jonathan, started kindergarten in that time period, as a compromise Winnona Park and other schools instituted what they called, "A Moment of Silent Reflection" at the start of each day. Curious what my own "preacher's kid" made of all this at the age of 5, I asked him one day if the school morning started with anything in particular. We say the Pledge of Allegiance, he said. Anything else? I asked. "Oh, and we have "A Moment of Silent Projection." Exactly, I thought, we've projected onto our children the need for *us* to let God into the classroom, and by extension, to *let* God into the day...into our lives.

Tom Long says he is as bothered as anyone by the violence in this passage...but all things considered, he says, "I think we need a God whose presence and power are to be taken seriously more than a god who has to be helped across Church Street."

And in the story of Herod beheading John the Baptist...what if we pulled our eyes away from the gory scene to consider what it says to us about God...about who's really in control?

Herod had imprisoned John. Maybe it was because Herod's wife didn't like the way he talked about her scam of a marriage in his street corner preaching. But more likely it was because John was drawing big crowds...exposing corruption and abuse of power, inviting repentance and change. And a lot of his finger pointing was aimed at Herod. Herod meant to shut John up by shutting him up in prison. But it didn't work. John didn't shut up even in prison and his message was still getting out. The only way to silence him for good, then, was to cut off the head of that loud mouth. That should put an end to it, Herod thought. Because he thought he was in control.

Just a few years later, of course, more worldly powers combined to try to do the same to Jesus. Governor Pilate and yes, Herod again...and those Roman soldiers with their military power...and Chief Priest Caiaphas and the members of his Permanent Judicial Commission with

their priestly vestments in a full display of religious power and authority. After all, that group was in control of everything—the government, the military and the religious institution. They hauled Jesus in for questioning. They imprisoned him. They beat him. Finally they crucified him, dead and buried. That should do it. That will put an end to it, they thought. They were in control, weren't they?

Many years ago, church leaders in South Korea were resisting oppression. A Korean pastor was imprisoned for preaching and teaching the Christian faith...the kingdom of God. He was serving a two-year term in prison.

“Conditions in the prison were so grim that he began to lose hope. Day after day, he found his faith ebbing away. He stopped studying the Bible, he stopped praying, and he stopped hoping and believing. Every few weeks, the government would march him back into the courtroom and demand that he renounce his political and theological views. Finally, after months of deprivation, he had decided to give in—to recant.

“When they brought him into the courtroom, he was surprised to see his wife and several members of his church sitting in the gallery. He had not seen her for months and his eyes welled up with tears. The judge told him to stand up and called on him to renounce his ‘traitorous’ views. He stood wearily, ready to recant, when suddenly he heard his wife and his Christian friends saying with one voice, ‘God is alive! God is alive!’”

Though it was all they could say because they were quickly removed, it was enough. He stood and would not betray his faith. His confidence was renewed that God is, indeed, alive. (From a sermon by Thomas G. Long in *Pulpit Resource*, July 16, 2000, p.13.)

So, who do you believe, really, is in control? And how does that influence what you do...whom you trust?

Uzzah didn't get a second chance to learn again that God is in control. Herod *never* understood that God is in control. I have the feeling that some rulers in Iran—despite their years of theological training—still do not recognize that God is in control. David would have to learn over and over again the hard way that God is in control. And Peter may have been the first disciple, but he is certainly not the last of us, who has had to learn that God is in control. And in a way that is hard for us to understand...that really is the good news. Amen.