

Passionate Spirituality and Worship: Dancing Lessons from King David 2 Samuel 6 / 1 Chronicles 13-16

This article may be cited, duplicated, stored, or distributed electronically for personal use, for use in a church or for use in a classroom, provided that the copies are distributed free, and they indicate the author and the URL of the article.

A. Two Realities

We will look this morning at a rather peculiar story found in 2 Samuel 6 featuring an incident in the life of King David, but before doing so I'd like to describe two contemporary realities to which I believe this passage speaks: one offers a glimpse of Canadian society at large, and the second looks at one aspect of our own denomination. These two realities and a reading of the story will set the stage for our reflection together on the relationship between passionate spirituality and worship.

1. First Reality

Before I came to MBBS at TWU, I taught part-time at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. One winter I taught an introductory course called World Religions. It was a large class of about 70 students in a fairly impersonal university setting. In an attempt to get to know the young people sitting before me, I thought it would be appropriate to begin the first day of class with some discussion exercises designed to get students talking and thinking about "what IS religion?" I was astounded at the frequency with which students explained that they no longer believe in "religion" AND a significant proportion simultaneously affirmed and expressed a keen interest and openness to "spirituality."

My students were apparently fairly representative of Canadian society at large. In 1995, a Canadian researcher compared the importance of spirituality and religion among Canadians and documented that the group that says they are **most** interested in spirituality are also the least interested in organized religion (*Transforming Our Nation*, 309). Similarly, a *Macleans* poll in 1997, indicated that 75% of Canadians are interested in developing their spiritual life but only about 25% of Canadians end up in church with any kind of regularity.

So, why is it that the church, in the minds of many, is not associated with spirituality? What is it about institutionalized/organized religion (about church) that has left so many people dissatisfied and out of touch? Why is it that pastors not immediately recognized as experts or specialists in "spirituality" in the minds of so many?

2. Second Reality

Leaders within the Mennonite Brethren Conference have in recent years strongly recommended a tool called *Natural Church Development*. This tool was developed by a German researcher named Christian Schwarz who has designed the survey for congregations as part of an extensive worldwide church research project (it included over 1,000 churches). The tool measures eight

different aspects of church life such as Empowering leadership, Gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, Functional structures, Inspiring worship, Holistic small groups, Need-oriented evangelism, Loving relationship. Instead of focussing only on “church growth” it looks at “church health” and assumes that “healthy” churches will be growing churches. So far, at least 35 MB churches in Canada have used the tool at least once.

One of the patterns that recurs over and over is a low score in the area of passionate spirituality (the way in which the survey results are scored has even been adjusted specifically for Canadians because we are not as expressive as Americans). In the area of passionate spirituality an MB church has never scored higher than fourth. Most of the times it is dead last.

How do we explain this? It could be that people sitting in the pews in Mennonite churches are too emotionally stoic. Perhaps there is too much German blood and the Mennonites are genetically deficient in this area? I don't quite buy that: I've watched Mennonites cheer for their kids at softball, soccer and basketball games, and anyone who believes that Mennonites are not able to get emotional about things that are really important to them simply does not know enough about Mennonites. So the question then is, why do we not get more emotional and passionate about spirituality and worship?

One wonders then if these two realities are somehow related. I invite you to join me as we ponder together these realities in light of a particular passage of scripture. I'd ask you to turn with me to 2 Samuel 6, to one of the more bizarre stories of the Old Testament.

B. Introduction to 2 Samuel 6 (The story is also told in 1 Chronicles 13-15)

What is happening here? Many years earlier, the Ark of the Covenant had been captured from Israel by the Philistines. The Ark had huge symbolic value for the people of Israel—it was tangible evidence of God's ongoing presence. It was a constant, visible reminder that God had worked in their lives, that he did things for His people. Its presence kept God from becoming an abstract concept. Or a remote, austere legislator of laws. It gave their worship a real historical focus. The Ark was material evidence of not only what had happened, but also of what was still going on in their everyday lives, and would continue in the future.

The nation, under King Saul had, for about 30 years been without the Ark as part of their national worship. Now David is king. He has successfully conducted various military campaigns so that many of Israel's enemies have been defeated. The entire area designated for settlement by the 12 tribes is now finally in David's hands.

One of the last battles in this conquest is the capturing of Jerusalem from the Jebusites. It is not part of the settlement area for the 12 tribes, and so David designates it as his capital city (the location of his government infrastructure). It will serve as the political centre of his kingdom. This is a shrewd political move designed to avoid showing favouritism with any one of the 12 tribes.

Now David decides also to bring the Ark of the Covenant to his new capital city which is to be not only the political centre, but also the religious centre where God is worshipped. It has been a long time since the Israelites have had a specific location that will serve as a centre of worship - consults first with his army officers, and then with all the people (this is described in more detail in 1 Chronicles 13). There is considerable anticipation with days of preparation for this national celebration, but it all culminates with one of the prominent leaders struck dead in the middle of this national parade.

What do we make of this story? Why does one person die, and another dance in what appears on the surface to be an equal attempt to do that which pleases God? And how does it relate to the questions I posed at the outset, namely, why do the actions on the part of Christians make “religion” so unattractive to those seeking after spiritual life, and how does this apply to our own attempts to understand how we might become more passionate about our spirituality?

The answer, I believe, lies in a closer look at the three main characters involved in the story, who reveal three very different approaches to worship. It may be that you recognize yourself in one of these three people and their responses. - Although David is the central figure in the story we'll begin with Uzzah.

C. The Three Main Characters - Symbolize Three Approaches to Spirituality and Worship

1. Uzzah

Uzzah is a priest, and the brother to Ahio: they are put in charge of the transfer of the Ark by David. This is an incredible honour. On the way to Jerusalem the oxen who were pulling the cart stumble. The sacred Ark slides and is about to fall to the ground. Uzzah puts his hand out to prevent the Ark from tumbling off of the cart onto the ground. And then comes the troubling sentence: “The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there before the ark of God.” That effectively ended what was supposed to be a national holiday: it was a disastrous end to David’s parade and an event he hoped would unify the nation.

The crucial question put simply, is why did God strike Uzzah dead? Thinking about this makes us uncomfortable. Is God not someone who is consistently revealed as the giver of life, patiently calling us to repentance, constantly seeking the lost, undeflected in his steadfast love for us. It makes us uncomfortable when we come across an event in which God kills. The notion of judgement we can live with, but sudden death?

The narrative (neither passage) itself does not tell us much about Uzzah. But over the centuries as Christians have reflected on Uzzah’s death, one insight reappears over and over: it is fatal to take charge of God. Uzzah is the person who has God in a box and officiously assumes responsibility for keeping Him safe from the mud and dust of the world. He represents those men and women who take it upon themselves to protect God from the vulgarity and ignorance of sinners, and those who predict how God will or will not, how God can or cannot, work.

Over the years Mennonites (including MBs) have not been immune from the temptation to keep God in a carefully defined box. And in our well-intentioned desire to keep the church pure, and to keep worship appropriately dignified and proper, we have also sometimes unwittingly lulled ourselves to sleep, and created boundaries that turned people away from the church, and away from God.

Many churches these days face conflict in the area of worship. Frankly, the real issue is never about whether we should try to be more “contemporary” or whether we should be more “traditional.” Without minimizing the importance of these decisions, the deeper issue is the question: WHY do we sometimes insist on a particular style of worship? The answer to this “WHY” question will reveal whether or not we have become like Uzzah, that is a people who are intent on managing God, and who think we know what appropriate worship looks like.

Worship is not something that can be treated as any other matter of personal preference--like picking a shampoo at the store, or buying a car. As soon as it becomes this, we have become merely religious and can no longer offer a spiritual vitality to those who join us. On the other hand, the stubborn, even careless, resistance to all change is equally deadly. Normal differences of opinion about worship (wherever two Mennonites are gathered together for worship there will be three opinions) can easily be escalated into “worship wars” by Uzzahs!

Back to our text: if we continue with the church’s imaginative suggestions, we can see that Uzzah’s reflexive act, reaching out to stop the Ark from falling as the oxen stumbled, was not the mistake of a moment; it was part of a lifelong obsession with managing and fussing about the Ark, and, more seriously and to the point, with managing God.

The Mosaic tradition outlined clear instructions for how the Ark was to be handled: e.g., it was not to be touched by human hands but carried only by a designated family of Levites on poles inserted through rings attached to the Ark (Deut 10:8; Exod 25:13-14; 37:4-5; 1 Chron. 15:12-15). Uzzah ignores, perhaps even openly defies, these Mosaic directions and substitutes the latest Philistine technological innovation—a brand new 4x4 sports-cart. This would undeniably be more efficient for moving the Ark than a bunch of boring, plodding Levites. And it promised to add a whole new touch of class to the proceedings. But it is also impersonal—it represents the replacement of consecrated persons by an efficient machine. Uzzah is the patron saint of those who uncritically embrace technology without regard for the Holy. (This passage has many interesting directions!)

Uzzah was in charge (he thought) of God, and meant to stay in charge. Uzzah had God where he wanted him and he intended to keep him there. The eventual consequence of that kind of life is death, because God will not be managed. God will not be put in a box, whether the “box” is building constructed out of crafted wood, or polished marble, or brilliant ideas, or fine feelings, or a certain way of worship. We do not take care of God; he takes care of us.

And when we, in our churches manage God, when worship becomes a function that we fuss and

fight over, then we have lost our passion for genuine spirituality and worship. Scripture posts Uzzah to us as a danger sign, “Beware of God.” Uzzah’s death is a warning: if we ignore God’s call to live in relation with him right now, the calluses on our soul grow harder, and over time it becomes, I believe, impossible to respond to God. Though things may look fine on the outside when God strikes we are surprised.

Uzzah’s death was not sudden; it was years in the making, with duty gradually suffocating the spirit of praise and faith and worship. Let me ask you, Is worship a duty of merely a function (social function) of your life? When was the last time that worshipping God triggered an emotional response in you that you simply could not control—whether this was tears, sense of joy, decision to make a drastic change in your life? Do we recognize in ourselves the characteristics of Uzzah? If so, then this story serves as a warning notice: it’s the way death.

2. David

And then there is David. His story holds the centre of this narrative. Why did David dance? He danced before the Ark, reckless and joyful and dare I say it, naked (or at least almost naked). What accounts for such a dramatic difference? David knew something about God to which Uzzah was blind and deaf.

I think it is because David lived dangerously all his life—with lions and bears, taunting giants and a psychologically unstable, murderous king, constantly running from or fighting marauding Philistines, etc. He was always running, hiding, praying, loving. David was never in a position to take care of God; he was always in a position of being taken care of by God. So, David had learned to live openly, recklessly and exultantly before God. David knew God was not a sheep to be tended and trimmed; God was Saviour and Commander. David lived life on the edge, and on this edge he knew he needed God.

Notice too that David is not very careful or proper with God. He **completely** loses his temper with God when he sees the death of Uzzah. He is outrageously furious! But what David did not see was the years that had led up to Uzzah’s death. All David saw was the interruption of his parade and national party, which rather suddenly turned into a funeral procession. So he goes home sulking and pouting. David’s anger didn’t get him killed. Why? Because he was as alive to God in his anger as he had been earlier in his praise. He didn’t like what had happened, but at least he treated God as **God**. I imagine Uzzah as being far too well mannered to get angry with God.

After Uzzah’s death David goes home to Jerusalem; he has time to think. And his anger turns to fear. The parallel passage in Chronicles gives us some behind-the-scenes information. He did some homework, and together with the Levites discovered the proper way of handling the Ark, and he admits his mistake. Three months later he is back, this time with his entire musical ensemble—harps, lyres, tambourines, cymbals, and more. This time they are going to bring the Ark home to Jerusalem right.

This time David leads the way—no more Uzzah. Imagine the risk and the courage—the last person

who led the way was struck dead! By now, everyone in the country would have heard the story. What do you think the people would have thought of David if he had simply appointed someone else to lead the way? David puts himself at risk.

How does he lead? He danced—dancing here I believe is a metaphor for worship. And he danced with a kind of reckless abandon, without consideration for public propriety. He was on the edge of mystery, of glory. So, he danced.

Now when we go about our daily work responsibly and steadily, we walk. Walking is our normal way of moving. But when we are beside ourselves with love, when we have been shaken out of a preoccupation with ourselves, we dance. This is why David danced.

If David had simply been carrying out his religious duties or conducting a political ceremony, he would have walked in solemn procession before the Ark and led it into Jerusalem with dignity. But this wasn't a duty. And the presentation of himself as the picture-perfect example of dignity was not his objective. He wasn't taking care of God, insuring that God would be properly honoured in his own life. He was worshipping, responding to the living God. In this sense, we need dancing lessons from King David. When is the last time you stepped out in courage and took a risk for God? What decisions in your life reflect your sense of dependence on God?

3. Michal

The third prominent character in the story is introduced to us near the end. It is David's wife Michal (Saul's daughter). Michal watches the proceedings and her husband's role from a window, from a distance, and sees him dancing and leaping. She is the uninvolved critical observer in this parade—ever wonder why she never bothered to get involved in the party? And then she's upset: what will people think of the king, her husband, dancing half-naked (wearing a linen ephod—like the clothing he wore when he was a shepherd boy) in the street?

Michal was first embarrassed and then contemptuous of David's dance. Michal would have been the perfect wife for Uzzah walking beside the Ark, stately, respectable, proper, in control, careful. She wanted a husband who acted more like the image of the king she had in her mind. He ought to do what other kings did, have the gods serve him, surround himself with pomp and circumstance, make himself the centre of a celebration, organize a religion that made him look important and **kingly**. For Michal, God and religious ceremony was only a social and political amenity. And as a result, she was barren.

She mocked David: David who was dancing before the Ark, reckless, daring, selfless, careless, praising. BUT alive.

Michal's sin was not the fact that she pointed out the public impropriety of David's action. Michal's sin was in thinking that David is the one who should be struck dead; it was her inability to see God at work despite the apparent public impropriety. Generally speaking, it is not a good idea to dance half-naked in the street! But she failed to see what this action actually meant. And for this she was declared barren. There's a lesson here for us in terms of thinking about how we

do worship in this place—not wrong to express our perspectives: sometimes the critics are right: we're only in trouble when we have become so distant and critical that we are no longer able to recognize a genuine work of God. And this inability to see, and bring forth spiritual life, will leave us spiritually barren.

D. Conclusion

I've tried throughout to offer glimpses into the way I think this passage offers some answers to questions I outlined at the outset. The students in my class as representative Canadians reflect a genuine desire for, and interest in, spiritual life. Why then do so many not find it in churches? Quite simply, our approach to spirituality/worship is sometimes too much like Uzzah's, whose efforts to lead worship are in reality attempts to manage God; and a little too much like Michel's, who sits, uninvolved, as a critical observer.

We need to be Davids who are living life on the edge, who are not afraid to dance when they worship, and who live life with such abandon for God that "trusting God" actually means something substantive. The lesson from David is that we don't have to be careful and cautious with God; that it is death to decorously and politely manage God; that it is life eternal to let him take care of us. To be present at the place of worship (as we are today), and not to worship, is both common and dangerous. The lives of Uzzah and Michel teach us that refusal to worship the living God results in loss of life.

May God help you as a congregation, to be as fully alive and passionate to God as David was. I'd invite you as individuals to worship God with abandon, and to ponder how your act of worship will impact your decisions and actions this week. In so doing we will meet God in a new way, and our friends/neighbours too will discover the reality of our God.