

“Kill-Joys”

II Samuel 6, Eph. 1:3-14

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In the Old Testament lesson last Sunday, David became the king of Israel. In this story, David has made Jerusalem the *political* center of Israel ... the place where the king lives. But he also wants to make Jerusalem the *religious* center of Israel ... the place where God lives. In the past, God’s presence had been symbolically located in the Ark. This was not a boat like Noah’s ark, but a large box, made of wood and covered with gold and containing the stone tablets of the law that God gave to Moses. The ark was a holy object that was brought into battles and often gave the Israelites the power to defeat their enemies. But for many years it had been sitting in a house several miles outside the city. David decided that it was time to bring this symbolic presence of God to Jerusalem. The ark would validate David as king and Jerusalem as the holy city.

The text mentions a woman named Michal. She was the daughter of Saul, the previous king. About ten years earlier, after David killed Goliath, Michal told her father that she loved David and Saul said David could marry her if he killed 100 of the enemy Philistines. For David this marriage was a way to gain political power. Soon after they married, Saul tried to kill David; Michal helped him escape, and David went on the run and never came back for her. So she was left alone. Her father then gave her to a man named Palti to be his wife. Several years later, when Saul died and David became king, he wanted Michal back, so she was taken away from her weeping husband, who seemed to really love her.

So does the Bible or the newspaper have the weirdest stories? There has been a lot for the media to discuss the last few weeks. But King David may have an even more bizarre political story. David was a master of political intrigue and maneuvering. He got what he wanted no matter how much killing it required. He had multiple wives and concubines, many acquired for political advantage rather than love. His children would have provided plenty of fodder for news what with the murder, rape and incest they committed.

And yet David remains a heroic leader through all of these antics. But as you know from reading/watching the news, it's not easy to define a heroic leader. Can they be flawed? Does it matter that they are flawed? Does committing adultery make a person unfit to hold public office? Or are we more irritated by the hypocrisy of people who preach family values but don't practice them? We will return to those questions a bit at the end, but first let's look at this puzzling story of David.

David and his guys put the ark of God on a cart and headed for Jerusalem. They were dancing and singing and celebrating the presence of God. But then, the oxen stumbled, the cart shook, and the ark of God was sliding off the cart. Probably out of instinct Uzzah reached out to steady the ark. And God was angry and struck him dead. That put a damper on the singing and dancing! What a kill-joy God could be!

WHY? Uzzah was just trying to help. Why would God strike him dead for that? This angry action does not seem to fit with the overall character of God.

The text does not say why. Some commentators say that Uzzah treated this holy object too casually and was punished for it. Other commentators insist that Uzzah was proud and arrogant and thought he could manage God. There is no evidence in the text for this explanation and it seems like an attempt to excuse God.

The best explanation I read of this event was one commentator who suggested that Uzzah slipped on the oxen droppings and hit his head on a rock and died. The author of the story may have attributed his death to God, but Uzzah just died from an accident. That may be a stretch but it makes a lot more sense to me and fits better with the character of God expressed in Scripture.

Uzzah's death did make David rethink his motives. David was angry with God for "bursting forth" on poor Uzzah, and David was afraid enough to wonder how he could presume to take the ark into his care. When he began the trip David may have been presumptuous enough to think that he could manipulate the presence of God to serve his political ambitions. But God was not confined to this box and would not be manipulated.

David decided to park the ark for a while with a man who lived in the neighborhood. Three months later David learned that God had blessed the man while he cared for the ark, and so David decided maybe he needed that ark after all. David seems

to think of the ark as a giant good-luck charm. If he can get the ark to Jerusalem, God will bless David and the city as well.

So once again, the ark goes on the move, but this time David is extremely cautious, and after six steps David makes sacrifices to God. And there was singing and dancing and wild celebration and David danced with the best of them. But when the procession reached the city, David's wife Michal looked out and saw David carrying on, and she "despised him in her heart."

After the ark arrived safely in Jerusalem, there were more sacrifices and a big banquet. And David went home, where he was met by a furious Michal. She was sarcastic about his behavior, especially the fact that he was not exactly modest and king-like in his dancing and his dress code. She was a kill-joy, who squashed his enthusiasm. David responded just as angrily, and reminded Michal that God had chosen *him* to be king and to replace her father Saul.

Again, the commentators exercise a great deal of imagination trying to explain this story. Most of them say that Michal was an angry, bitter woman who had no religious experience herself and therefore did not understand David's expression of religious fervor. Well, perhaps. But after years of being a tool for her father and David's political maneuverings you can see why she might be angry and resentful.

But what if she saw something in David that most other people didn't? What if she saw a guy who knew how to play to the crowd? What if she understood that David knew exactly how to turn a situation to his advantage? What if she didn't think his religious zeal was genuine?

The text does not give us answers. We don't know for sure the motivation of either David or Michal. But we do see a great deal of potential for ambiguity. David could have been deeply religious. He could have been overcome with joy at the fact that the ark was coming to Jerusalem. But he could also have been thinking that now he had the ark, and God, just where he wanted them.

Listen again to his words to Michal. "The Lord chose *me* in place of your father and all his household. The Lord appointed *me* as prince over Israel." David has a strong sense of vocation here. He is God's man and God chose him, but it's easy for this sense of calling to become arrogance and superiority and privilege and entitlement. It was easy

to move from “I am chosen” to “I can have what I want and do what I want because I am the king.”

Our political and religious leaders are flawed humans. They may hold office, they may be Christian, but neither the office nor the claim to be religious should give them a privileged position. They are still sinful. We should not be so surprised that they are flawed. But we should be very skeptical of claims to moral superiority.

We are flawed humans. We all have our mixed motives, our times of hypocrisy, actions that don't match our rhetoric.

We spend a lot of energy defending public figures (and sometimes ourselves) for their misdeeds. Perhaps that is because we do not really know how to deal with human flaws. Do we excuse them as long as they say they are sorry? Do we laugh it off with “boys will be boys”? Do we immediately remove them from office? Give them a scarlet letter? Or separate the personal life from the public life?

I am not sure, but it's well worth thinking about these questions. Two ideas:

It can be useful to listen to the critics. Not the millions of know-it-alls on the blogs and radio call-in shows, but all of us, especially politicians, should have people around us who are not afraid to kill joys, who can say “What are you thinking?” and “You shouldn't be doing that” and we will listen. It can't be someone who works for us and probably not someone who lives with us. They may not always be right, but we need someone who will tell the truth when we don't want to hear it.

We might also rethink what it means to be called/chosen/elected (in a political sense!) It's not about us. It's not about our egos or our entitlement or our power or our desire to achieve fame or fortune or influence. Politicians are called to serve the public welfare, not their own egos. That's not to say they have to be flawless, but a question worth asking is why they are in office and for whose benefit they are in office.

The Ephesians passage offers a ringing description of this kind of calling. God calls, God chooses, God elects (here in a religious sense), God gives gifts. And the point of God's calling is not to feed our egos or make us feel entitled to wealth and privilege. God is calling us to bring praise to God and to be God's hands and feet and voice in the world. God's calling can make us confident, but it can never make us arrogant.