

**Sermon - "Storyline: God-Struck"**  
**1 Chronicles 13; 1 Chronicles 15**

**Preparation**

Imagine this scenario with me. You enter into an art gallery; maybe it's the Museum of fine art. Considering the content, it may well be the Smithsonian. As you enter you find that each piece of art is inspired by the same story. It begins with a beautiful canvas, one artists attempt to capture the story of Creation. A mix of dark and light structures and shapes being formed together as if out of nothing. As you move along you find a representation of the garden. The two human figures at the center of the bright greens and reds and blues seem to be in close proximity to the central figure of the larger story. Perhaps the artists shows the man, the woman and God walking in the cool of the day, hand in hand in hand sharing together in the joy of the Creators work. So far so good, two paintings, both beautiful and comforting.

Its as if all of the sudden the mood of the artist changed drastically. The light colors are gone. Darkness seems to dominate the themes of painting after painting, as if something was broken. Occasionally, a representation of divine power, the parting of a sea or glory shining down from a mountaintop. As you travel deeper into this story, as you experience each story as a piece of art, they become more and more difficult to look at, more and more difficult to interpret.

*// Mark Twain once wrote, "God is always punishing...punishing innocent children....punishing unoffending populations...even descending to wreak bloody vengeance upon harmless calves and lambs...if God had a motto, it would have read, 'Let no innocent person escape'". //*

There is an image burned into my memory. It's one of my first movie memories. The movie the Raiders of the Lost Ark with Harrison Ford. Set around the time of the Second World War the main character travels the world in search of the Ark of the Covenant, the very ark that our text today speaks of, the Ark of God, God's throne and footstool. The Nazi's have captured the Ark and, just as the Israelites did in their first encounter with the Philistines, were determined to carry the Ark in front of them in battle – where God's ark was, there too was God, and the army carrying God in a box would no doubt be victorious. This mix of history and fiction culminated in the scene I will never forget. As a relatively young child, maybe too young to see this, the image was the most grotesque and awe inspiring my young mind had ever encountered. The

Ark was opened and leaders and soldiers in the German army peered inside. From inside the Ark came a spirit so powerful it literally caused the faces of every man and woman to melt – every single person, besides Indiana Jones and his lady friend of course, were killed instantly in the most grotesque way imaginable. Apparently in Hollywood, all you have to do to avoid death at the hands of the Almighty is close your eyes...if only Lot's wife and others were in on that little secret.

### **Information**

A movie or a painting of 1 Chronicles 13 would no doubt be a difficult one to look at. Not for its grotesque content, but for the image it paints of the central figure in the scriptures, the image is paints of God. Mark Twain would understand its meaning. God is at it again working out the evil and malevolent desires of his heart. One scholar attempts to explain away the story of Uzzah, the man killed by the hand of God for touching the Ark, for trying to keep the Ark from falling from a shaky ox-driven cart [...9:45, read the text]. He says that *//“Uzzah, with the best of intentions in the world, instinctively put out a hand to steady the Ark, and having done so was horrified at his own action, and overcome by fear suffered a heart attack or something of the sort.”//* Scholars have a habit of making excuses for God, of trying to find good, logical explanations for the actions of God in the scriptures. The story of Uzzah and the Ark is an important one to discuss, but we have to first realize the context of the story to better understand the difficult image we encounter.

We remember back in our story. The Ark of the Covenant was the most important religious symbol in all of Israel. The Ark contained the tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain, the tablets inscribed by the finger of God with the Ten Commandments, the foundation for Old Testament Law. It is also said to contain manna, the substance sent from the heavens to sustain the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness. However, the Ark wasn't important because of what it contained, rather for what it represented. It represented the literal presence of God with his people.

Now, Old Testament law is specific concerning the care and transportation of the Ark. Housed in the tabernacle when the people camped, the priests carried it as they wandered in the wilderness. Leviticus and Numbers provide guidance for the carrying of the Ark. It was to be

carried on the shoulders of the Levites using poles. It was never to be touched. The place where the Almighty rested his feet was holy, it was separate, and it was to be handled with the utmost reverence and respect. The rules were clear and non-negotiable. To treat the Ark as just another religious symbol was an abomination.

As we have seen in our Storyline readings, the Ark would eventually be seen as more than God's footstool. Like the Nazi's in the Raider's of the Lost Ark, the Israelites enlisted the power of the Ark in battle against the Philistines. Surely if the Ark, the presence of God, precedes us in battle we will be victorious. They are rewarded for their superstitious use of the Ark with utter defeat and the loss of the Ark. The Philistines captured the Ark and all hope seemed lost. The Philistines carried the Ark away, in their own tradition, on a cart pulled by oxen.

After the reign of Saul, once David was fully enthroned as the King over all of Israel and Judah, it was time to bring the Ark back to the people and place it in its permanent home, Jerusalem. David consults the people of Israel and they all agree that it was time to bring the Ark to its rightful place. Under the watch of King David and the ranking officials in Israel, the Ark is secured and transported...on a cart pulled by oxen. So quickly the Israelites turn away from the desires of God and they adopt the patterns and traditions of the nations around them. Just as the Philistines carried the Ark, the Israelites did away with poles laid upon the shoulders of the priests and moved the holiest object on earth on a cart pulled by oxen.

The animals stumble, the cart becomes unstable, and Uzzah reaches out to catch the Ark. Uzzah was literally God-Struck; struck dead immediately for his actions.

At the end of the story, verse 12 says that David was afraid of the Lord that day...what does the bible mean when it speaks of fearing God? I have a tendency to build things up in my mind making things seem larger and more incredible than they really are...this has caused me to be disappointed at certain moments of my life. Three events stand out that were bigger than I could have ever imagined – my wedding day, the day my children were born, and, as odd as this may sound, the first time I visited the Grand Canyon – it was like looking at a painting. At all three events I remember tearing up because my mind simply could not understand what I was looking at. Was it really there? Was I dreaming? I guess it's fair to say that at all three events in my life, I was overcome with awe. Those speechless moments where it's more about the

way the room feels than what is being said. One visitor to the Grand Canyon explains it like this. //“It was so beautiful I was drawn to it. I had to see it, to get near it. I knew I couldn’t do anything too foolish near the edge, but the same awesome beauty that caused me fear drew me toward it.” // And the closer you get to the edge the more dangerous it becomes. As we draw near to God, I believe the fear the bible speaks of describes the awe we experience at certain points in life; but, I believe that fear of God also means fear. The kind of fear you experience as you stand at the edge of a cliff, realizing that one lazy step could send you to your death. True fear is rational...a handful of visitors die every year at the Grand Canyon, some due to, as one website puts it, “overzealous photographic endeavors”. David, seeing the death of Uzzah play out before his eyes truly feared God.

So what exactly did Uzzah do to offend God? What was so horrible that God demanded Uzzah’s life that very instant? I came across a story of a man riding a public bus in Denver, Colorado. The bus stopped and the driver pressed the lever causing a mechanized ramp to extend from the side of the bus and lower to the curb below. A man in a wheel chair, his body severely paralyzed and twisted, rolled his chair onto the ramp with great skill. You could tell he had done this before. The man rolled forward and took out his change for the cost of the bus ride. Just as he was preparing to pay, his chair began to roll back toward the open doorway. The man, as if he had done this before, grabbed a wheel of his chair and brought it to a stop – but not before the bus driver had lunged forward to grab the man. When the crippled man looked at the bus driver he had an expression of sadness not gratitude on his face. “So, you really didn’t think I could handle myself after all, did you?”

A professor at Princeton Seminary says, //“The fact that the story of Uzzah’s death rubs us the wrong way, offends our modern sensibilities, may be a sign that we have outgrown the story, we have evolved beyond it...or it may be the sign that we are being reminded of something important that is missing from our understanding of ourselves, our and faith, and God.”//

Did Uzzah believe that the ground would hurt the throne of God? Remember the Ark itself was the earthly representation of God himself. Did Uzzah believe that God needed a hand? Maybe Uzzah believed that his own hands were cleaner than the dirt below. Sometimes, our immediate reactions to a situation reveal more about our true beliefs than our words. If you could ask Uzzah about his core beliefs, he would have likely said all the right things, speaking

with great reverence for God. He would have known the stories of the faith – I’m pretty sure King David didn’t just pick a guy off the streets to stand next to the Ark as it is being brought into Jerusalem. Yet when the cart faltered, Uzzah’s reaction reveals his true belief – Uzzah didn’t fear the Lord. Uzzah’s God is so weak that if the box falls, God falls. If the box breaks, God breaks. One writer puts it this way. “This is a God so weak that this God needs the help of the likes of Uzzah to make it across the street; an empty shell of a God trapped inside fragile religious symbols.”

As harsh as this may sound, the worship and reverence of God is not to be taken lightly. Are we as offended by bobble-head Jesus and the t-shirts that read, “Jesus is my homeboy” as we are by this story? What concerns God most is not the specific content of our worship; it’s the content of our heart for worship. God does not look down, focus his eyes on our bulletins, and judge the quality of our worship by the titles of the songs we sing. He judges each individual heart as we approach the throne of God. One writer said that the elements of liturgy in worship are the things that we get away with in the presence of God without being killed instantly. Are we worshipping a God that is so weak that he needs our help across the street? Are we worshipping a creation of modern culture whose image appears on t-shirts and greeting cards? Are we worshipping a God that is so distant that we aren’t sure if he is actually paying attention at all?

### **Inspiration**

One thing we can say for certain: the God that David worshipped and sought after was no weak, distant or culturally acceptable God. [...9:45 read 1 Chron 15:1-3; 25-29]

David danced...he danced the first time when the Ark was rolling in on the cart. That dance turned into trembling fear. David left the Ark, gathered his thoughts, and three months later tried again. This time making sure that he and the Israelites are in full compliance with God’s law as they attempt to bring the Ark to its home in Jerusalem. This time, a reverent people transport the throne of a holy God into the city and God is pleased. The arrival of the Ark into Jerusalem is seen as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham, Moses and to David.

The king danced. Not a dance of foolish irreverence, but a dance of joy. A dance of celebration that God is with his people and his promises are being fulfilled. But this message is not simply a call to dance, its not an argument for a new element in our worship.

In college basketball, no rivalry is greater than Duke/North Carolina. Duke fans are serious about their role as cheerleaders. At one home game, the fans were given the following instructions. "This is the game you've been waiting for. No excuses. Give everything you've got, and we will walk away the victors. The arena should never be less than painfully loud tonight. At the coach's request, please focus on our team tonight. Better to bring our team up than put theirs down. Especially coming out of timeouts, we need to be incredibly loud. During their free throws in the second half, forget the novelty stuff, just be unbelievably loud. This is a huge game. Stay in the bleachers and go crazy." One Christian writer noted, "Perhaps we Christians have something to learn here." I would respectfully disagree. It says a lot about our true belief about who God is and who we are if our worship is merely a reflection of our passion for organized sports. It must be more. God deserves more. Demands more. It's not about the dance; it's about the heart.

### **Transformation**

This God we are taught to fear, this awe inspiring Creator of the Universe is the same man who walked the earth, who died on a Roman cross, and who walked out of the garden tomb three days later. To not be afraid of the man who walks out of the tomb, resurrected, is to not fully grasp who this man is; who this God is. But it is with the kind of fear that makes us want to crawl closer and closer to the edge that we are to approach God. It's the beauty of the Grand Canyon, so dangerous to stand at the edge, to risk the possibility that the earth may crumble beneath your feet, but so beautiful that you are drawn to it. It is this God that demands and deserves our deepest reverence. This is not a God to be marketed and used in advertising; this is not a God whose image is to be used as a joke or to sell a silly t-shirt. To feel completely safe in the presence of God may be evidence that we are not in the presence of God after all. Jacob was afraid as he wrestled with God at Bethel; Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God at the burning bush; Jesus' disciples fall in terror when God speaks from the heavens and they are terrified when Jesus reveals his power by calming the storm.

Many of you may be reminded of C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Upon hearing about Aslan the Lion, the Christ-figure in Lewis' *Narnia*, one child asks, "Is he safe?" Mrs. Beaver says in response, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you." Not safe, but good.

As we inch toward the edge of the canyon, filled with fear, we are filled with a joy that is indescribable – a joy that cannot and should not be contained. Perhaps that joy is seen in our dancing, our joyful singing, our quiet reflection, or our peaceful reverent demeanor; regardless, to encounter God and not walk away with a sense of pure joy is less than a full encounter with the living God. David, having witnessed the death of the God-struck man standing near the Ark, fully aware of the power of God, danced in his presence. Danced in a way that a king shouldn't dance with a reverence and joy that offended even his own wife. Sometimes, the presence and power of God is so awe-inspiring that even God-struck kings have to dance.

One scholar puts it this way:" the Holiness of God is awful in the ancient sense: full of awe; wonderful and terrible at the same time. We are at once drawn to God by strong chords of love and adoration, and frightened of God, filled with the overwhelming awareness that God is unlike anything in our world." We need a God whose presence and power is to be taken seriously more than a god that need our help to cross the street.