Year B: 2 Samuel 6; Ephesians 1
July 12, 2009
Grounded Grace

I believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, that all Texts are inspired. How else can we explain that communities of faith have used and preserved these Texts for thousands of generations. I believe Scripture is inspired, from the first telling of the stories, to their writing, to their use in worship and our daily prayer practices. But. I confess, when I came to this week's lectionary Texts, I doubted this belief. In Samuel God strikes a man dead; and the Gospel Text is the story of John the Baptist's beheading. Inspired? I wasn't! In contrast, Ephesians is a wonderful passage, a blessing...a hymn praising God's glory and grace. But a sermon from only Ephesians struck me like eating ice cream for dinner! No matter how great the ice cream...made with local, organic cream and no preservatives. Well, you get the picture! But I kept reading these passages, waiting for their Inspiration, waiting for the Breath of the Living God to breathe Life into these Words... waiting and listening for the Divine Voice to whisper Good News. And then I began to feel the Wind of God's Inspiration blowing. My prayer is that you too will experience God breathing and speaking through these words.

Let's turn to the Samuel passage, 2 Samuel 6. In the prior chapters, David has been made king, has in fact become a great king. We know this information so well that we may fail to see how unlikely his kingship was in his time. David was a shepherd. Some have described this as the lowliest occupation—they're unclean nomads, no place to lay their heads, sleeping in fields, living with animals. David is also the youngest son in his family. Social and cultural structures expected oldest sons, not the youngest, to be chosen. But the

Holy One of Israel has always chosen the least, those rejected by social, political, and religious structures.

Ch 5 begins with "all the tribes of Israel" coming to David and saying to him, "Look, we are your bone and flesh." Just as Adam and Eve were each others bone and flesh in Genesis 2.23, just as they were part of each other—physically, biologically, socially—so Israel claimed the same strongly bound connection and relationship with David—a youngest son, a shepherd. And v 10 says David grew greater, stronger, more powerful, wealthy. David had become a great king, by all measures.

Chapter 6, our lectionary for today, begins with David gathering Israel—a huge gathering—and together they set out to move the Ark of God to Jerusalem. We've only begun, but we need to pause a minute. They're moving the Ark of God. The writer in v 2 tells us that the Ark is "called by the name of YHWH." This isn't a disposable detail...but an inspired detail. Remember that Jewish people don't say God's name—it is too holy. Instead they say The Name, or *Adonai*, recognizing the Power of God, that God is Other. With this piece of information, the writer reminds us that the Ark of God—called by the name of God—is not distinct or separate from God. The Ark contains the Tablets, what we know as the Word of God. The Ark holds God's presence.

We moderns might want to say the Ark was a symbol of God's presence, and while that may be true as we understand it, the ancients didn't make that distinction. For the people of Israel, God's presence was in the Ark. When the Ark was in their midst, God was in their midst. And if the Ark was God's dwelling, because God is holy, the Ark is holy.

As 21st century Westerners, shaped by the Enlightenment, we have a hard time getting into a worldview that believes and experiences God as One who dwells in an Ark. We

point to its materiality and say, "It's a wooden box! God doesn't live in a box or can't be confined by a box, no matter how holy it is!" While there is certainly some truth, what we fail to see, what we fail to understand, is the truth of *their* worldview, and of other worldviews. We want to put God in heaven, separate and apart from earth. But God cannot be taken out of earth, cannot be separated from earth. God is not only Creator, but is the Divine Being and Breath that breathes and gives being to all life, to all that is physical and material, including the Ark. God's Word is not only words on a Tablet or in our Bibles, but God's Word is made material, is made flesh, in Jesus, in us, in our world. Our God cannot and will not be separated from God's Word, and God's Word cannot and will not be separated from earth, or substance. God's Being is present in all. And all is present in God.

So back to the story. David and the people are moving the Ark, they are moving God's dwelling, God's presence. They're moving the very Being of God. This is no small undertaking! Ahio is leading this big procession—big not only in number but big in significance—he is leading the procession while David and the rest of Israel are following with big music and big dancing! It isn't a solemn procession; it's a joyful, noisy one. They are taking God's dwelling to Jerusalem. The Ark that has wandered in the wilderness and from encampment to encampment will have a home.God will be at home in Jerusalem, the home of their king. It's a great occasion and they're elated.

The lectionary skips vv 6 – 12. But this sermon includes them. In v 6 we hear that the Ark is jostled, surely not surprising given the enthusiasm and size of the group. Apparently the oxen stumbled and Uzzah, in a reflexive movement—like when a parent reaches her arm across the car seat, in front of her child as she hits the brakes—Uzzah

reaches out and touches the Ark to steady it. And God's anger flames. God strikes Uzzah. And Uzzah dies.

This seems harsh to us. Even though Uzzah would have known not to touch the Ark, known the risk of touching something holy, it seems God should have given him the benefit of the doubt. Is this our gracious, non-violent God? But this isn't a story about Uzzah or what happens to him—it's a story about God, a story about Divine power and holiness, Divine mystery and otherness. And we hear that God will not be steadied, or handled by us. When the parent reaches his arm out to protect his child—the child already buckled into a car seat secured by a seat belt—the child is already secure. The gesture is reflexive, one of protection, of care and responsibility. But God is God, the Holy One of Israel. The gesture is appropriate for parents protecting their children. But God does not need protection because God cannot be threatened. God is. God is the very Source and Breath of Life, the Living God. When asked by Moses God's Name, God responded, I AM. Our God is a Present Tense God. Death and threat do not and cannot exist in an eternally present God.

The Text is clear that God acts and Uzzah dies. Everything about this story makes us want to question God... or else ignore these verses because they don't fit into our image of God, into our understanding of how the world works. But perhaps we have forgotten—we in the West, in 2009, so used to technology and science and all sorts of other human abilities being able to fix and solve and prevent—that we forget we are human beings and not gods. Our theologies are so well researched and argued that we begin to think we know God. When biblical Texts fall outside of our understandings, we set them aside, or we reach out our hands to steady God's image, to fit God into our image, mold God into our needs, shape

God to our worldview. This story reminds us that God cannot be domesticated. Divine Power and Presence... Divine Mystery and Being cannot be reduced to human ways of knowing and doing. When Adam and Eve reached for the apple, they did so wanting to be like God...reaching...touching …consuming...assuming God was within their reach. When we reach—whether for the apple or to steady the Ark—our actions, our default actions and desires are reaching to replace God with ourselves. We have the best intentions, but too often, without thinking, as though God is limited, weakened, needing us.

God doesn't need us. God wants us...not because we are smart or good. God wants to love us, even if we are shepherds, even if we are the least. God wants to be in relationship with us. From the beginning God has longed to be our God, wanted to be our Breath, to be at home in us, to be our Life. We get a glimpse of this in Ephesians. God's desire to be in relationship with us, to be our God, is richer and more satisfying than the best scoop of ice cream ever could be.

Paul writes in Ephesians 1, vv 3-5, Blessed be the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God who has blessed us in Jesus. Blessed be the God who destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will, to the praise of God's glorious grace that God freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. And in vv 7 & 8: according to the riches of His grace that He lavished on us. This passage ends with v 14: this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of God's glory.

We may ask or wonder if this is the same God as the One whose anger flamed against Uzzah. Yes. We Christians are apt to think of the OT God as an angry God, who needed Jesus to improve His public relations image! But Paul was, of course, a devout Jew

and the Samuel scroll was part of his Scriptures. The God that Paul is blessing and praising is the same Triune God!

That this Ephesians passage is paired with the Samuel story is a gift to us. There are several ways I hear these Texts speaking to each other, and to us. Paul writes in v 5 that God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus according to the good pleasure of God's will. God destined us to be children of God because doing so delights God. Making us sons and daughters gives God joy. As children of God, we are "bone and flesh" with Jesus. We don't need to reach out to handle or steady God.God has already reached out to us. It is the good pleasure of the Eternally Present God to reach out to us, making us God's offspring!

Another connection between today's Texts is God's Presence and glory. Twice in this passage Paul writes, "to the praise of God's glory." The word "glory" holds a range of meanings, including "presence." Listen to how this word is used in the Scriptures Paul would have read:

> 2 Chronicles 7:2 The priests could not enter the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house.
>
> Isaiah 2:10 Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from the terror of the LORD, and from the glory of his majesty.

David and Israel moved the Ark of God. This same God, whose glory was with the children of Israel in a cloud, in the Ark, in the Temple, this same glory dwells in us. Our Triune God is at home with us, in us, and around us.

The final connection between these Texts begins with a frog. The other day I was with a friend and in the course of our conversation, to make a point, she said that if you put a frog in a pot of boiling water, it'll jump out. But if you put it in cold water and bring the

water to boil, it stays. While I'd heard this before, I was completely silenced. There was something about the frog that connected to this sermon...and then I got it. I wondered if I am like the frog that is now sitting in boiling water and I don't know it. Have I been handling God for so long that I am no longer sensitive to the Fire of Divine Power? And if I am, how can I experience the glorious grace that Paul describes in v 6 if I have been deadened? How can we experience the riches of God's grace if we are no longer sensitive to the Unknowable Power of God?

This is Good News! God's glorious grace...the riches of God's grace are surely unimaginable and God is ready to lavish grace and glory on us! We have seen God's grace and glory in Jesus. And it is Good News! We can set aside the burden of needing to know...and be free to experience the glorious grace of Unknowable Mystery. We can put down the burden of trying to save the world... and be free to experience the glory of God's salvation. We can put down the burden of trying to earn God's favor...and be free to experience being children of God, having Jesus our Christ be flesh and bone with us.

We cannot fully explain or know the mystery of Divine Glory. It is not ours to know; but we can know that the Glory of our Triune God is pervasively present, dwelling in us, among us, all around us. It is a gift to us, from the God of David, and the God of Uzzah, the God of Paul, and our God.

To the praise of God's glorious grace! Amen.