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Bridge Street United Church  
July 14, 2024  
Readings: II Samuel 6:1-19; Psalm 24; Mark 6:14-29

### On Trying to Control God

Ever done the right thing from mixed motives? I mean you have supported some good cause or volunteered to help in some worthy endeavour because it was a good thing to do but also, perhaps, with another motivation on the side. Maybe in our late teens or early twenties we agreed to help in some cause, or offered to help plan an event, because it would give us a chance to work alongside someone in whom we had a romantic interest. Maybe as adults we have agreed to become involved in a particular project or to serve on the board of some organization because we could make a connection or develop a relationship with someone. That connection could be advantageous for some future position we wanted to hold or possibly an employment opportunity for one of our children. I mean, the cause was a good and worthy one, and we were happy to support it; but we may have had other hopes along the way. These are all examples of mixed motives, doing some good thing because it was a good thing to do or a good endeavour to support, but maybe hoping that there would be some other little benefit for us, in addition to doing the right thing.

Today's reading from II Samuel recounts an example of mixed motives, but one that can raise other questions for us. The story concerns David's decision, and subsequent efforts, to bring the Ark of the Covenant, or the Ark of God, to Jerusalem.

Now we might well wonder why this action was significant. The Ark of the Covenant was the wooden box containing the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments had been

inscribed. Two carved cherubim adorned the top of the box. God was believed to be present between the cherubim. It was ancient Israel's most sacred religious item. It had been constructed during the time the people of Israel were in the wilderness on their journey from slavery in Egypt to a new life in the Promised Land. When the people crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land, the Ark was carried by priests at the head of the procession into the river, with the people following. As religious symbols have sometimes been used, especially in the ancient world, it was occasionally brought into battle with the army, something that the people of Israel probably interpreted as a means of assuring God's presence with them. For example, at the battle for the city of Jericho, where, according to the Biblical account, the people of Israel marched around the city once per day for seven days before the walls of Jericho collapsed and the city was taken, the Ark was carried as part of that procession.

According to a story in I Samuel, in the time of the priest Eli the people of Israel suffered a significant defeat in a battle with their traditional enemy the Philistines. As a result, the people of Israel requested that the Ark be brought from its location at the temple in Shiloh into their subsequent battle with the Philistines. The Ark meant that God would be with them, and they would triumph. Such was not to be. The Israelite army was defeated, the Ark was captured by the Philistines, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who had accompanied the Ark from the temple and into the battle, were among those killed in that encounter.

I would note that the belief that the presence of the Ark would guarantee victory plays a role in a piece of relatively contemporary culture. How many of you have seen the early 1980s movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark?" The movie is, of course, a fictional adventure story, but a part of the plot reflects this ancient belief in the power of the Ark's presence in battle. In the movie,

the reason the Nazis, who are in competition with Harrison Ford's character for possession of the Ark, want to have the Ark is the belief that it will make their military forces invincible.

To come back to the Biblical account, the Philistines find the presence of the Ark to cause problems in whatever location it is placed, and so they put it on a cart hauled by oxen and send it in the direction of Israel. It eventually ends up at a place called Baale-Judah where it resides for some twenty years. It is to that place where David goes to move the Ark to Jerusalem.

Now David is a complicated figure. He was a deeply devoted follower of God. He could, and would, admit when he made mistakes, not always a common feature of leaders. It was a quality that endeared him to the general populace. In the days when he personally led his army into battle, he was revered by his men. He inspired deep loyalty in them and in the circle of confidantes with whom he surrounded himself. At the same time, he was a highly political animal, we might now say, figuring out what he needed to do to achieve absolute control of the country and the expansion of its territory and influence. He was utterly ruthless in achieving those ends, including the elimination of anyone who could prove a threat to him. He was arguably Israel's most successful king in terms of his military achievements and the amount of territory he added to the realm. His humanity, the range of emotion he showed, especially with his family, his willingness to acknowledge mistakes and wrongdoing, not to mention his military and political successes—these qualities made David the beloved figure of Israelite history. David was the closest to an idealized monarch the people had known, his many real faults notwithstanding.

So, one can read this story of David wanting to bring the most significant religious symbol of ancient Israelite religion to his new capital city of Jerusalem as an indication of his deep devotion. He wanted this symbol where he could provide it with a proper home. One could

read the story that way, and there would be truth in that. But David was a shrewd political leader. Scholars almost universally agree that David also had a political motivation for moving the Ark of the Covenant, or the Ark of God.

David had only recently gone from being the king of Judah, or what was called “the southern kingdom,” to being the king of a united Israel. The ten northern tribes of Israel, or the so-called northern kingdom, had stayed loyal to the house of the late king Saul in the immediate aftermath of the death of Saul and three of his sons in a battle against the Philistines. But now those northern tribes switched their allegiance to David, and he had this united kingdom.

Jerusalem, a city David had captured earlier from a people known as the Jebusites, had become the military and political centre not just for Judah but for this whole united Israel of which David was now the king. So David had good political reasons for wanting Jerusalem also to become the religious centre of this newly united nation. If the Ark was in Jerusalem, Jerusalem would be the religious centre, as well as place where the royal palace was and where the military was headquartered. It would strengthen David’s position. It would make Jerusalem even more the centre for the kingdom. If the Ark was there, people from the northern kingdom would need to come to Jerusalem, as they had once gone to Shiloh, when they made a religious pilgrimage to this central symbol of their faith.

Further, the Ark of the Covenant had been located in the former northern kingdom. While significant to the religious life of all the people of Israel, it was especially so for those northern tribes. So David bringing this central religious symbol south to the capital city of the entire country—well, you can see the advantage.

I do not want to suggest that David was not sincere, that is, I do not want to suggest that he did not have religious motivations. But it is also hard to dismiss the idea that he did not have

political motivations at the same time, political motivations that were more than just sub-conscious. Israel was continuing in a process that began when Saul became king of moving from a loose confederation of tribes, each of which had significant autonomy, to an increasingly centralized kingdom, a kingdom like the others in that part of the world in that day.

I think that is what is going on in this story. And then within it there is the strange, indeed troubling, death of Uzzah. In the story, Uzzah dies after he does something good, namely, tries to steady the Ark as the cart in which on which it is travelling hits an uneven patch as it reaches the threshing room floor. In that day, it was believed that only the priests could touch the Ark. Uzzah's death was seen as falling within that prohibition, even if his touch was innocent.

But maybe there are two points to the incident, one in the narrator's mind and another one that may carry more significance in our day. In the story, David reacts in anger and in fear when Uzzah dies. David gives up the effort to move the Ark. He has the Ark taken to a non-Israelite family in the area and housed with them. Three months later, when it seems that the Ark has not caused problems there, but has indeed seemed to bring blessing to the family, David comes back and has the Ark recommence its journey to his capital city. I think one point for the narrator is that David cannot control, and will not be able to control, God. The Ark was that most central symbol of ancient Israelite religion, and God was believed to be found between the two cherubim on its lid. So, where the Ark was, God was—not only there, but most certainly there.

I think the other lesson, one that was picked up by later generations of the people of Israel and certainly is one we need to remember, is that the misuse, or the potential misuse, of a religious symbol does not destroy its power or importance. We may be troubled by the misuse, indeed offended by it, but such misuse does not undercut or undermine the importance of that symbol for us as a people of faith.

When I read this text and thought about this story, and about what I think the story was intended to convey, my mind went back to an incident in Washington, DC, in early June of 2020. In light of last evening's events and the attempt on the life of former President Trump, I debated this morning whether to drop this illustration. However, I decided to keep it, helped in part by what made me comfortable using this illustration in the first place as I was writing the sermon, namely the fact that this particular incident brought criticism from across the American political spectrum.

You may remember that the death of George Floyd in the spring of 2020 led to significant unrest in a number of American cities. Early June, 2020, saw a group of protesters, troubled by their sense that George Floyd's death was the result of an embedded racism in American society, camped in Lafayette Park, close to the White House. President Trump had been particularly critical of the protests going on in a number of American cities. One evening, at his request, police cleared the protesters in Lafayette Park, and President Trump, accompanied by some key cabinet officials and the American military Chief of Staff, walked through the Park to a nearby Episcopal Church where President Trump had a photo taken of himself as he stood in front of the church, holding a Bible rather high in front of him.

His action produced a storm of criticism primarily because his actions were perceived to run counter to the right of Americans to protest peacefully. But it was the comment of a Republican Senator, Ben Sasse of Nebraska, that caught my attention. Sasse criticized President Trump's action in an interview the next day, commenting: "I'm against clearing out a peaceful protest for a photo op that treats the Word of God as a political prop." Trump was, of course, the nominee of Sasse's own party. And Sasse certainly disagreed, as did many, with what he saw as an inappropriate reaction to a peaceful protest. But he also picked up what he saw, correctly in

my view, as an inappropriate use of a religious symbol, an effort to use a religious symbol for politically partisan purposes. For American Protestants the Bible historically has been, and still is, the central, most important, religious symbol in their practice of Christianity. It was neither the first, nor will it be the last, time a religious symbol has been misused for political purposes.

My further observation, which I think was important in this story, and is important for us now, is to remember that the misuse of a symbol in no way undercuts or destroys the importance of that symbol for people of faith. President Trump's misuse of the Bible in this instance did not make the Bible less important for American Protestants, though it may have raised questions about the Bible for some non-Christians. David's at least potential misuse of the Ark of the Covenant, and I think he certainly had mixed motives here, did not undercut the importance of that religious symbol in ancient Israelite religion.

But this story does suggest that we need always to be as clear as we can about our motives in anything we undertake. It also suggests, at least to me, a need for us to think carefully about how we use religion and religious symbols in engagements with issues in our society.

The God whom we worship is not a God we control. But the God whom we worship is one who made us, who loves us, and who keeps us, and it is to that God, known to us most fully in Jesus the Christ, and present to us now and always through the Holy Spirit, that we offer this, and every day, honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

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