



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Ark of the Covenant" (Facing the Giants Series)

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Sometimes my first response to an incident is godly and smart. Sometimes it is not smart. Recently I had the wrong first response, one that could have endangered my life.

A week before Pam and I went to California for vacation, we ate at a restaurant with Kirk Leavy in the Ala Moana Shopping Center area. Don't ask me the name because I don't want you to know the name, because it's not fair to the family that owns it.

When the bill came, I started to figure out how much tip I needed to give, and so my head was down. Suddenly I heard the waiter yell and saw him run out the front door, and I thought, "Golly, I guess someone didn't pay his bill and just ran out."

Then I saw Pam running for the door, and she turned to me and said, "That man took my purse!" I immediately jumped up from the chair and ran for the door. It is amazing how fast your mind can think when the adrenalin hits.

But what I am about to share, I need to say right now, "Don't do what I did."
Kids, if you are here, do not do what Pastor Dan did. Adults, don't do what Pastor Dan did.

They always say that when you get robbed, let the robber go. Let him or her have your money. Your life is more important. The robber might have a knife or a gun. Let the robber go. That is the right advice.

But no, for me, my first response was to run out the door. And as I was running towards the door, I had decided that from the top of the stairs that led down to the street, I would fling my body parallel to the ground so I can land on the thief, grab him by the shoulders, and spin him around with the centripetal force of my body. I didn't care if I was going to get hurt.

I'm serious. That was what was in my mind. I was fully engaged. Full of testosterone and adrenalin. At that moment, I was also wishing I was a lifetime member of the NRA—wanting the full right to bear arms.

When I got outside to the top of 20-plus-steps staircase, I could see that the thief was running away on the sidewalk about 30 yards away. He was being chased by the waiter who was yelling something in either Chinese or in English with an accent like "stop that man!" And behind him was my wife. If it weren't so serious, it seemed like some kind of Will Ferrell or old Peter Sellers movie as I watched them run down the street.

So I took off down the stairs, but on my way down, three words quickly came to mind: Crocs, skinny jeans. I was wearing Crocs and had

just washed my jeans. I had left my jeans too long in the dryer, and so they were really tight! I was running down the stairs realizing I didn't have much speed, and all thanks to my Crocs and skinny jeans. I'm serious.

By the time I got to the sidewalk, the thief, the waiter, and Pam were even farther ahead. Darn Crocs and skinny jeans! I tried to run really fast but my crocs just weren't giving me the traction I need, and then there were my skinny jeans not giving me the flexibility that I needed either.

I finally caught up with them, but the thief jumped into a get-away car that was waiting in a nearby parking lot, and car and robbers zoomed away up the street. Pam yelled, "Dan, call the police. They have my house keys and car keys!"

Right! And so I reached for my phone in my back pocket only to find out that I didn't have my phone! I had left it in the restaurant. So I turned around, ran back down the street, up the stairs, and into the restaurant. And there was Kirk Leavy who said to me calmly, "Good thing I stayed here, Dan. You and Pam ran out and left your phones on the table. You left your wallet and all your credit cards right on the table."

Within 30 minutes the thieves had hit our credit cards for two \$1000-dollar charges at a New Jersey liquor store.

Somehow they had scanned or called in our numbers to waiting accomplices somewhere else. What an organized crime!

We lost our house keys, car keys with the electronic fobs, credit cards, Pam's driver's license and passport. Pam now had no ID. And to think that we were leaving in six days for vacation in California.

Before our house insurance kicked in, we had lost close to \$2,000 after adding up all the things lost and the cost of having to replace house locks, car locks, electronic fobs, cash, and other things. And I'm on vacation!

Now this will all come together in my sermon about making sure your first response in life is the right one and God's holiness. So let me read our passage today from 2 Samuel chapter 6. Turn to your Bibles.

2 Sam. 6:1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand.

2 Sam. 6:2 David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubim.

2 Sam. 6:3 They carried the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart

2 Sam. 6:4 with the ark of God; and Ahio went in front of the ark.

2 Sam. 6:5 David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

2 Sam. 6:6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah

reached out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen shook it.

2 Sam. 6:7 The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God.

2 Sam. 6:8 David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day.

2 Sam. 6:9 David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?"

2 Sam. 6:10 So David was unwilling to take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite.

2 Sam. 6:11 The ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months; and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

This has got to be one of the toughest Bible passages for me to preach on. So glad the staff gave this to me to preach for my return.

First, to get everyone on the same page, let me tell you what the Ark of the Covenant is.

When Moses was traveling with the Israelites in the wilderness, God told him in great detail—as recording in Exodus chapters 25 to 30—how he was to build an ark (a three-foot long box), transport it, and put it in a traveling tent, otherwise known as a holy Tabernacle, as Moses and the millions of Israelites walked towards the Promise Land.

The ark was a small chest made of acacia wood, which is from the same family as koa wood. The ark was about 3 feet long, 2 feet wide,

and 2 feet tall. The inside and the outside of the chest were overlaid with gold.

On top of the ark was a mercy seat with two cherubim or angels, also made of gold. God said in Exodus 25:22 that he would meet with Moses from above the mercy seat and would deliver His commands for the Israelites.

The ark would be housed in an ornate tent made of ten curtains of fine, twisted linen—blue, purple and crimson yarns, and cherubim again would be skillfully worked into them (Exodus 26:1). God was at times present in the Tabernacle.

If you go to Exodus chapters 25-30, you can read more about this movable Tabernacle that also had inside of it lamp stands and an altar with gold and bronze grating. Priests would worship God there on behalf of the people.

There were intricate detailed instructions of how to transport the ark when moving it. And to NOT follow them to the "T" would result in death. No kidding!

Inside the Ark were three things: First, the Ten Commandments. In fact, it was just after Moses received the Ten Commandments that God told him to build the ark of the covenant. (Ex. 25:21)

Second, inside the ark was a gold jar, a bowl containing manna, the wafer-like bread that miraculously came out of the sky on a daily basis to feed the one million Israelites in the wilderness.

And then finally, the third item: Aaron's staff. God made Aaron's staff to miraculously bloom (Numbers 17:10) when He chose the house of Aaron, also known as the Levites, to attend to the ark and the Tabernacle.

Now from Moses, let's go centuries later to our passage today that covers the period of King David. Here's the context for our Bible passage. The ark of the covenant is in a tabernacle in the city of Gibeon.

How did it get there? Israel was always at war with the Philistines. After another overwhelming defeat where 4,000 Israelites died, the Israelites decided to take the Ark into war with them, like a good luck charm.

They thought this holy box would protect them. They had not realized that they had slipped into idol worship of the Ark rather than worshipping God. So because the Israelites were not worshipping the true God, they lost the battle. Forty thousand Israelite soldiers were killed and horrors of horrors, the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines!

Eventually, the Philistines began to think they had received a curse because their people started getting sick and were dying. They suspected that it was because of the Ark of the Covenant. So, they put the Ark in the city of Ashdod into the temple of their chief god named Dagon.

But when the Philistines woke up the next morning, the statue of Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the ark of the Lord. Dagon's head and both hands had been cut off upon the threshold, and only Dagon's trunk was left.

The Philistines were terrified. Aside from that, the people were getting tumors, so they decided to move the Ark to the Philistine city of Gath where more tumors broke out, and so they decided to send the Ark away to the city of Ekron where again people broke out in tumors and many died.

So the Philistines finally said, "Enough!" And they built a cart and loaded the Ark on it, hitched two young cows to it, and sent them out on the road towards Beth Shemesh seven miles away where the Jews lived.

When the Jews of Beth Shemesh saw the Ark, they rejoiced! But they made a big mistake by looking inside the Ark, even though Moses warned the Jews never to look inside the Ark or even touch it or they would die (Num. 4:20).

What happened after they looked inside the ark of the covenant? Seventy men of Beth Shemesh died. So the Israelites had the Ark transported to a man named Abindadab, who properly took care of it. And for 20 years God blessed Abindadab.

So now we come to our passage for today. King David sees how God has blessed Abindadab, so he orders that the Ark be brought to Jerusalem to ensure God's blessing on the entire nation. Big parade with the Ark! Music! Dancing! The ark is on its way when one of Abinadab's sons, Uzzah, sees that the Ark is falling off of the new cart as it's being pulled by the oxen, so he puts out his hand to keep the Ark from falling. In other words, he touched the Ark, and God immediately strikes him down.

David gets angry with God for killing Uzzah and wrecking the parade, but then he gets afraid of God. David cancels this procession and orders that the Ark be moved to the house of Obedom, where it stays for three months, and the Lord blesses Obedom.

David hears of this 90-day blessing and thinks hey, the coast is clear, that maybe all is well, so David brings the ark into Jerusalem with great fanfare. You can be sure this

time they followed God's orders to the "T" as he told them years before how to move the Ark in a cart so that it doesn't fall and no one gets killed.

Okay. What does this all mean in a practical, real, applicable way for you and me? No worry, no worry. Pastor Dan will try to make sense of this all and bring it all together.

We know from Scripture that the Israelites were told about how to handle the Ark of the Covenant. They were supposed to carry the ark on four poles with four gold rings fastened to each corner of the Ark. The poles were to remain in the rings and never to be removed. The Ark was also never to be touched. They were told that God is a powerful God. They were told that He is almighty and holy, just as we sang today.

So here is the shocking truth about God. You and I are the man Uzzah in the story. If any of us touch God we will die. As the book of Romans says, "For the law brings wrath." (Rom. 4:15)

The law kills. You break God's law, then you die if you come to God in your sin. If any of us come into His presence without precaution, we will die. Actually because of this story, a pidgin phrase came in existence, thousands of years later in Hawaii. When someone does something wrong, you say in pidgin, "Eh, wasn't me... was the Uzzah guy!"

But seriously, because God is a Holy God, He cannot have sin in his presence. No one with sin can touch Him, or be near to Him. Did not God say to Moses in Exodus 3:5:

Exodus 3:5-6b "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground....and Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."

Exodus 33:20 But,” God said, [to Moses] “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

Jewish commentator Robert Alter says that touching the Ark may not have been so much of a punishment as it was a consequence. He wrote that there was so much power of God on that ark that anyone who touches it died. It would be something like touching a live high voltage power line. It’s a natural result of disobedience.

Before going inside the Tabernacle, priests tied a rope around their ankles so they could be pulled out in case God’s presence killed them.

What kind of God is this? I thought He was supposed to be affectionate? I thought He wants to be close to us? I thought He was loving?

Listen. There is a wide continuum of how people view God. On one side, there is the view of a mean God. Make one mistake and He will get you. He is a perfectionist. Cruel. Tough. Way on the other side—which might be the view of our post-modern society—is the God who is highly permissive. Anything you want to do is fine with Him because He loves you. Sin all you want have any kind of lifestyle you choose. It doesn’t matter because God will forgive you. This sentimental God has no standards or expectations.

In the continuum close to this sentimental side is the view that God is so accessible we forget to respect His position as the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, and the Creator of the Universe.

In this part of the continuum, God and Jesus are seen as the informal buddy whom we can slap on the okole and say “Howzit.”

He is the God to whom we are so informal that sometimes we treat our prayers with incredible equality as if He is one of us on equal standing. Our prayers can be so informal that it is kind of like, “Hi ya God, Dude, you da man. So I JUST wanna say, golly, you are cool. I JUST wanna say, you are okay. I JUST wanna say, shaka brah.”

Don’t get me wrong. I believe God is accessible, and we can talk informally but let’s REMEMBER to whom we are talking to.

When we do congregational prayers here during worship services, you’ll notice that often times they are memorized or read. Why? Is it because we just like being formal? No.

If you were speaking on our church’s behalf to the President of the United States, or to the Queen or the Prime Minister of England, or to the King of Jordan, or to the Emperor of Japan, I would hope you would be prepared and not just try to wing it and make it up as you go. Or would I be more respectful?

I think we have lost the tension in American Christianity of respect and being relational. We are so informal that we can forget God’s position and holy divine presence. Worship then becomes more like entertainment, and church attendees become critics of how a Sunday program went rather than, HOW DID I DO? What is my part as an attendee, my part and participation in worshipping the almighty holy God? How well did I listen to God and what He was trying to tell me?

It’s not “How did the band or the choir or the soloists or the preacher do today?”

Rather, it should be “how did I do today in my singing and attention and prayer and respect and awe and worship of God?”

You will be judged on your performance more than the worship leaders. So if anything, critique yourself after each Sunday. For it is out of true worship that justice and service and generosity come. Out of always wanting entertainment for worship comes a SELF-CENTERED AND STINGY FAITH.

We create in our hearts the idea that it doesn’t matter if the Ark is carried properly or if we touch it, because it is not that holy. Keep in that tension of knowing God as loving, but RESPECT Him too.

On our website and app, you can see, hear, and read our sermons. Notice that in my written sermons or articles for the church that I always capitalize the pronouns that refer to Him. It’s a capital “H” to show respect. It’s Him, He, His not him, he, his with smaller capital letters. It’s my way or remembering this is a Holy God.

In the ancient Hebrew culture, they wouldn’t even say or fully spell Yahweh – name for God. Instead, write “YHWH” all out of respect for the Holy God. If you touch God, if you come too close in His presence, you will die.

In our Bible passage, King David gets angry with God. He feels, “Here I am bringing in your ark, God, having a big party and parade, and you wreck it by killing Uzzah!”

One commentator said that the Hebrew word used here for “angry” is the same word for the “anger” that God has for the Israelites who are disobedient. So the gall of it all! David thinks he’s like God. He thinks he is equal. David gets angry with God as if David has divine righteous anger because God messed up or because God didn’t act the way David thought He should.

You and I can be like David sometimes. We get angry with God for not behaving the way we think He should, as if we are taking the higher position. But we must live in that tension that as followers of God, we cannot put God in a box, in an ark, so to speak.

Emotionally or theologically, we will want to box God in but we shouldn't. How, why, what God does – we will never fully understand. He can do what He wants. It's not about us. Trust and faith in God means trusting God **EVEN WHEN** we don't understand Him. At this point we are all thinking, "Wow, God is not approachable. I need to stay away."

But then, surprise! Here is where it all changes—in the New Testament! Something amazing, phenomenal, fantastic, brilliant happens. God comes to earth in the form of a man. No other religion has a story like this. Others might have prophets or really good people leading them but Christianity believes that the almighty God Himself came to earth and became fully human while fully divine. He came to earth as Jesus Christ.

And this Jesus....are you ready for this..... CAN be touched! He can be hugged. He can have His feet wiped. He is fully approachable. He hugs children. We can get close to Him. Incredible! Jesus tells us something really important about God...His heavenly father. It's bad news/good news.

Bad news: You cannot be in God's presence in heaven because you have sin in you and have committed many sins. Touch Him and you will die. Touch the Ark and you die. Only those without sin can be in God's presence in heaven.

And now the good news: Jesus, who is God, says, "I will take on all of your sin and the punishment you

deserve, and I will die for you so that you will have no more sin when you meet God in heaven. And then you can touch the face of God. You can be in His presence because your sin has been forgiven and paid for."

You see, Jesus is the new Ark of the covenant. The Ark is not a physical box like in the Old Testament. By asking Jesus into our heart, we allow Him, the real spiritual ark of the covenant to live in us and go wherever we go. The Ark is in us if we commit our lives to Christ. And God as Jesus, we can touch.

And again, what was inside the Ark in the Old Testament? The Ten Commandments, and Jesus said He is the fulfillment of the Law. With His Holy Spirit we will want to obey God naturally not because we have to. That desire is written in our hearts.

What about the bowl of manna, that heavenly bread inside the Ark? Jesus said He is the bread of life. And in communion, every time you eat this bread do so in remembrance of Him. He will sustain us. Does not his birthplace Bethlehem mean house of Bread? He will give you enough bread of faith to eat every day—manna for a day.

What about the rod of Aaron that supernaturally bloomed into buds and flowers and produced almonds? It meant back then that Aaron's family would be the new priesthood that could approach God. But now Jesus is the High Priest and we don't need human priests to get to God. Get to Jesus and we get to God. You can confess your sins, pray to Him, talk directly to Him and not need an intercessor.

Jesus Christ fulfills the three items inside the old Ark of the Covenant. We want Him to be the living Ark in our hearts. May our first response be godly ones. And may our response be like King David at the end

of the story. For at the end, even though David didn't fully understand God for why Uzzah died, he trusted God. He trusted Him so much that he could dance, celebrate, and parade down the street with the Ark to take it back to Jerusalem.

That is our choice – to still follow God, and have Him reside in our hearts, even though we may not fully understand Him. What is your first response to this message today? Are you willing to bring Jesus into the Jerusalem of your heart today?

This morning you have the chance of making a real commitment to follow Christ and have the living Ark of the Covenant in your hearts. Not rules and regulations but a true relationship with the living Holy, loving God who died for you and who deserves to be your Lord, Savior, and Friend. Let's pray.