***HOLY THINGS***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on August 4, 2024*

*based on 2 Samuel 6: 1-10*

The journey from Baale-Judah to Jerusalem was about 20 miles over rocky terrain. The royal party moved slowly through the hills of Judah traveling eastward. The purpose of the expedition was to relocate the ark of the Hebrew God. Remember the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? They were transporting the oldest symbol of God’s presence to Jerusalem.

David, a king now, had just taken possession of the city which was a Canaanite high place. Without shedding a drop of blood he’d made it his capitol. It was a brilliant stroke of diplomacy. Had he made any particular Hebrew city his capitol he would have been accused of favoring a specific tribe of Israelites. Now, by bringing the ark to the neutral ground of Jerusalem he was making his new political center a religious center as well.

The ark was a portable shrine in the form of a rectangular box made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. On either side of the ark were poles inserted through rings, enabling the ark to be carried without being touched; a very important accessory, turns out.

On top of the ark was a slab of gold called the mercy seat, and at each end of the mercy seat there was a golden cherub with outstretched wings. Most important was the fact that the ark was considered to be the base on which sat the throne of God. It was supposed that God dwelt there, invisibly present, on the mercy seat like a ruler on a throne. Wherever the ark was, there was God. So, with extreme care the ark was placed on an ox-cart and made its way uphill to the city.

The traffic was unusually heavy that particular day. The ark was surrounded by the King’s royal entourage. There were plenty of military and also royal musicians as well as a huge crowd of onlookers.

Directly after making a hard turn, the moving party crossed a deeply rutted section of road made into a washboard by the kind of rain we see here in Oregon sometimes in the Spring. It made the ark chatter, bumping up and down on the roadbed, slipping a little as it moved.

One member of the royal priesthood named Uzzah, moved by shear instinct, reached out his hand to steady the ark to keep it from jumping out of the wagon.

No one knows exactly what happened next. Some claimed to have seen a flash of something like lightning reach between Uzzah and the box of God. Another witness said that Uzzah had been breathing very heavily moments before the commotion. He may have inadvertently brushed against the ark. He was then seen clutching his chest before falling to the ground in a heap.

Either way, efforts to revive him failed. The cause of death was listed as: “Act of God.”

The coroner’s inquest determined that God had struck Uzzah down because he had reached out with human hands to steady the holiest symbol of God’s presence on earth. It’s a disturbing story --

The text in our lectionary about the ark skips these six verses about Uzzah very neatly. You can hardly see a seam here. The gap in the lectionary reading is like the 18 minute gap Rosemary Woods, Richard Nixon’s secretary, was said to have made in one of the Watergate tapes.

It is omitted as if it were an embarrassment. I mean, look; what kind of God would do such a thing? Uzzah is an innocent servant. He just reached out like any of us would, without a thought.

What should we make of this story, here in the 21st century? I mean, we can easily get hung up by Uzzah’s innocent response and dismiss the whole story as superstitious nonsense. We might counter that the compassionate heart of God, revealed to us in the teachings of Jesus, would never do such a thing.

However, I think if we read the text on its own terms, we could actually come to understand it as an ancient attestation to the incontrovertible holiness of holy things.

Which is to say that, no matter how well meaning you are, if you reach out to steady a 35,000 kilowatt downed power line, you are going to get fried – even of you are trying to protect innocent children by moving it with your hands. Electricity is electricity, and holy stuff is holy stuff.

This story does us the favor of reminding us that God is not some Good-ol’-Boy. Not some pit-bull we can domesticate as it passes into old age.

Annie Dillard once famously wrote the following – *If we really knew what the real God of the universe were capable of, we, in the church, would give people crash helmets and signal flares when they came in the door on Sunday morning. We’d strap people in their pews.*

Okay, now, let’s agree that if God exists, and God is God, then God is everywhere. To come to church, then, is to take part in an exercise in which we all seek corporately to recognize God’s omnipresence in this one particular dedicated space.

Do we behave as if that were the case? Sure. Sometimes. During our corporate prayer time, certainly, and surely when we celebrate what we call holy communion.

I will confess, though, that sometimes I, as a minster, get so focused on what should happen next during our services that I lose track of the fact that we are engaging in worship.

Some churches do a better job with this than we do. For instance, in Russia it is not unusual to see Orthodox Christians pause in the middle of the sidewalk to look up at a nearby church when it comes into view blocks away. They cross themselves and bow.

After walking somewhat closer they repeat these actions. When they reach the doors of the church they repeat them again, three times.

There really is no such thing as arriving late to church in the Orthodox tradition, unless you’re the priest. You take your time, all the time in the world, as long as you are entering God‘s house with reverence.

You know, after this shocking incident with the ark, David, himself, parked the God-awful thing outside Jerusalem for several months, just to be safe, so terrified was he.

Holy terror. Looking back, I have had two brushes with what I would call the holy.

They both frightened me to my core. The first was in 1999 when I visited Israel. I went to a dozen purported holy sites the first week. Some were just tourist traps. A few interested me intellectually. Going to Capernaum, the tiny hamlet Jesus adopted as his adult home, I was moved. You could easily imagine him right there, moving about on those two or three tiny streets.

Late in the trip, we went to Jerusalem where we visited the ancient Church of The Holy Sepulcher. We waited in line to see the place tradition insists Jesus was buried. But instead of feeling authentic it seemed to me to be just another marble shrine.

Waiting in line, there, I spied the huge gray-green rock outcropping inside that huge church that archeologists tell us was the place where Romans crucified their enemies. When I eventually approached it I was possessed by a peculiar growing terror I had never encountered ever before anywhere. It came out of nowhere for me.

I had to force myself to go up to that spot. There was this awesome, intense, terrifying energy I could not shake, not until sometime after I left the building. I cannot account for it. It was absolutely awesome.

The closest thing to that experience I’ve had since was in nature. I was about to walk into a grove of redwoods along the “Avenue of Giants” near Garberville, California.

I had pulled off the road at a place called The Bolling Grove. I was not at all prepared for my own reaction to those 300 foot monster trees. I was petrified.

It wasn’t their height, exactly, it was their immense width at the base. Those trees are just too big. I know now and knew then that it was just irrational to think that way, but the scale of the trees in that grove just went through me like electricity.

I wanted to stay near the road, but there was a large boulder with a greenish copper marker on it in the middle of the grove. I made myself go look at it – which wasn’t easy. It read:

Preserved to the memory of Col. Raynal C. Bolling, the first American of his rank to die in the World War. Had this grove not been preserved these trees would not be here today. This grove of redwoods was set aside in 1928 in an effort to preserve an America worth fighting for.

The place was holy. I don’t know how else to put it. Holy and awesome.

So, let me ask, where are your holy places? Do you have any experiences where you just felt thunderstruck? Or terribly scared? Or maybe strangely elevated?

And let me ask this: has that ever been tied to something overtly religious? Maybe you’ve encountered specific objects that moved you in an unearthly way.

On my final Sunday at the first church I ever served (this was back in 1994), we celebrated communion. I asked the worship committee if I could use a special dish and cup and cross for that service; a set of elements we didn’t use all the time. They said, yes, I could.

The dish and cup and cross weren’t much to look at. They were very plain. They had once been in the care of a pastor friend of mine a generation older than me who had served as an army chaplain in World War II.

John MacDonald had special duty near the end of the war. He had been attached to a company that entered the first death camp in Europe to be liberated. After taking stock of the horrors there, he had offered communion to service personnel who had liberated that place – men who had seen unspeakable things.

He offered them communion in the open air from the hood of his jeep using that nondescript army issue brass dish and cup and cross.

They were as plain as can be, but they were, and, for my money, still are, the holiest objects I have ever had the privilege of using to offer my brothers and sisters the body and blood of Jesus.

Among my last words to those people at that church that morning were, “Don’t ever forget where these have been, nor who they have fed.”

I’m talking about ritual now. It’s a word that has fallen on hard times, but I think it’s still a very meaningful concept. I say this because we Presbyterians are rather impoverished when it comes to ritual.

You know, I am old enough to remember the gift gIven to us by Jacqueline Kennedy in November of 1963 through the funeral she personally arranged for her husband, President Kennedy. He died on a Friday, and it was a long tortuous weekend.

In the wake of an act of unspeakable sadness and loss, she, the widow, created something much more than a funeral. She put together a series of acts of worship; a spectacle for the nation that was deeply meaningful.

It wasn’t just about her husband. The ritual she created treated the occasion and the office of the presidency with such honor that it became something of sublime beauty.

There were caissons and drums, which gave the funeral parade a depth of solemnity we haven’t seen since. Who could ever forget the rider-less horse with the single boot mounted backwards in the stirrup.

It was stunning and the television commentators treated it all with the long silent pauses it deserved.

The whole thing went back not merely to Abraham Lincoln’s funeral, which was the primary model Mrs. Kennedy used-- it went back to Roman times.

Now, why was it so powerful? Well, in ritual there is available a sense of comfort we can find nowhere else. In ritual, I think, our heart recognizes its true home.

In the winter that followed President Kennedy’s funeral, a hamster of mine died. My elementary school friends and I held a state funeral for him in my back yard in California.

There was an element of humor in most of it, of course. It was a hamster for heaven’s sake. I owned a plastic trumpet and I learned to play taps on it. As my friends carried the rodent to his final resting place in a small coffin-shaped, cardboard box, I played it.

And then, after the burial one of us lit a votive candle that we placed on a brick which sat just above that little bit of earth. In that moment a dozen children stood silently. We were, all of us, transported to Arlington – to the president’s grave. We stood there, I don’t know how long, gazing at the “eternal flame.” Something in it must have been healing.

Children love ritual. They get it. They take to it so naturally.

There is something in ritual that touches us all at a level deeper than any words can.

The Sufi poet, Rumi, once said, in true ritual, “we fall into the place where everything is music.”

“Do this in remembrance of me,” said Jesus

The way we commune with God and one another in the church is through this deeply intimate act; an act that invokes both body and blood.

We break something. We take something into ourselves. We become one with it and with that we ourselves partake of holy mystery. Whatever that amounts to.

Amen