Ryan Sandberg played second base for the Chicago Cubs. The most memorable game in his distinguished career occurred in 1984. The Cubs were playing the St. Louis Cardinals and were trailing by a run entering the bottom of the ninth. The Cardinals brought in their ace, Bruce Sutter, to close out the game. Sutter mowed down the first two batters. Sandberg, the last batter, connected with a fastball and hit it over the left field fence to tie the game and send it into extra innings.

The Cardinals scored two runs in the top half of the 10th inning. In the bottom of the 10th, with two outs and a runner on base, Sandberg hit his second home run in consecutive innings, tying the score. The Cubs went on to win the game in the 11th inning. The game is known in baseball circles today simply as “the Sandberg game.”

Twenty years later, Sandberg was inducted into baseball’s Hall of Fame. Most Hall of Fame speeches aren’t particularly memorable. Sandberg’s speech was different:

“I was in awe every time I walked onto the field….I was taught you never, ever disrespect your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. Make a great play, get a big hit and look for the third base coach; hit a home run, put your head down and run the bases, because the name on the front is a lot more important than the name on the back. That’s respect….The guys already in this Hall of Fame did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players would swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. That’s disrespectful to them and the game of baseball. Respect! A lot of people say this honor today validates my career, but I did not work for validation. I didn’t play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that’s what you’re supposed to do, play it right, with respect.”

Sandberg has my admiration. Play your position. Know your place. Respect your teammates…. 

David, for all his flaws, knows his place. He knows that success is not his doing. The Lord has been with him. God has blessed him. He
David... dances with all his might (6:14).

endeavors to do something at the outset of his reign to symbolize God’s rule. What better way than to restore the sacred Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place.

The ark used to accompany Israel into battle. It preceded them into the Promised Land. The ark serves as a constant, visual reminder of God’s presence.

But one day in battle, the Philistines routed the Israelites and captured the ark (1 Samuel 4-7). They took the ark home with them, but it caused so much hassle that the Philistines sent it back! King Saul had no use for it, so it remained in mothballs at Abinadab’s house for 20 years until David decided to restore it to prominence.

The Ark of the Covenant is a rectangle box measuring four feet in length and two feet in depth and width. It’s constructed of wood and plated in gold. Its lid of solid gold is called a mercy seat. Two angelic like creatures called cherubim frame the mercy seat. The ark contains three objects: the 10 Commandments, a jar of manna from Israel’s days of wandering in the wilderness and a staff belonging to Aaron the priest.

Mosaic Law specified that no one was permitted to touch the ark. The ark was constructed with rings through which poles were inserted, allowing priests to carry the ark without touching it.

The ark’s return to Jerusalem is accompanied with considerable fanfare—marching band and costumed dancers. We read that “David and the whole house of Israel danced before the Lord with all their might” (6:5).

The parade route was treacherous in places. At one point, the oxen pulling the cart stumble and the ark totters. Abinadab’s son Uzzah instinctively reaches out to steady the ark. God’s anger flares and he dies on the spot.

David stops the procession and sends everybody home. He’s now angry with God; angry enough to call the place Perez Uzzah meaning “outburst against Uzzah.” He’s afraid to bring the ark into Jerusalem, so he arranges to store it at Obed-edom’s house for three months. During the interim, Obed-edom lives a charmed life. David takes it as a sign that the ark is worth the risk and reassembles the parade to carry the ark into Jerusalem. David leads the parade and once again dances with all his might (6:14). His wife, Michal, who is watching, mocks David for his undignified behavior. This is no way for a king to act. David doesn’t care. He dances all the way to town.

The most problematic aspect of this story is the matter of Uzzah’s death. It doesn’t square with our image of God as loving and merciful. Sure, people were commanded not to

Presbyterians don’t dance!
Are we allowed to become angry with God?

touch the ark, but God’s outburst seems over the top.

I appreciate Eugene Peterson’s comment in his book Leap Over The Wall. “It was not a mistake of the moment; it’s the culmination of a lifetime.”

The ark was warehoused in Abinadab’s house for 20 years. I’m sure at the outset having the ark in your living room was a really big deal. But after a while, say at year 14, the ark gradually recedes in importance. It becomes part of the landscape. Abinadab’s sons take it for granted.

Abinadab’s sons are assigned responsibility to supervise the delivery of the ark into Jerusalem. No doubt they’re familiar with the laws about the proper way to transport the ark. But the Philistines have invented an ox cart to make the job easier. It’s so much more efficient than slow-moving priests. This willful disregard for God’s law isn’t a sudden thing. It was years in the making.

I can picture Uzzah dressed in his priestly finery walking by the ark with hands folded and that distinctive holy Joe smirk on his face. What a marked contrast to David’s dancing. Just for the record, Presbyterians don’t dance; an obligatory clap is about all we can muster. David’s worship is exuberant and joyful. His giving is exuberant also—every so often David stops the parade to offer sacrifices to God. His extrava-
gance is instructive as we consider giving today. How refreshing to think of our giving as something joyful. When it’s all said and done, we give because we are grateful.

The other thing I notice about David is his anger, the antithesis of his joy. He has the audacity to express anger to God. Are we allowed to become angry with God? Aren’t we supposed to act nice and treat God with respect?

Unlike Uzzah, David’s anger doesn’t get himself killed. What’s the difference? David is honest with God. He’s as honest with his anger as he is with his praise.

Could our perception of God be too sanitized? David brings everything to God, including his anger. Read the Psalms. David brings his confusion, doubt and disappointment to God in prayer. Maybe one reason why people who have been disappointed with God don’t come to church is they think that they have no right to bring their anger and hurt into God’s presence. Such a pity!

So much for David; let’s also observe what we learn about God in this story. I know it sounds contradictory but God is both far away and near. God is both here but not confined to here. God is both with us yet beyond us.

The fancy word for God’s otherness is called transcendence. God is transcendent. He’s above us, beyond us, outside us and over us.
This don’t-touch-the-ark episode functions as a cautionary tale for David. David, you can’t play fast and loose with the things of God. You can’t manipulate and use God for self-serving ends.

There’s a tendency for those who worship and serve God regularly to take God for granted. When we lose our sense of awe for God’s holiness, we become breezy and casual about the things of God. We take God for granted. We take health for granted until we are sick. We take food for granted until we are hungry. We take God for granted until we have need of him. Consider this sobering thought: the things we take for granted other people are praying for.

Sometimes in our pursuit of God, we imagine God as our cosmic buddy. Yes, Jesus calls us friends, but that doesn’t give us license to treat God as some bubba we hang out with at the Vienna Inn. Let’s go back to Ryan Sandberg’s Hall of Fame induction speech. Know your place. Show some respect.

This far away, transcendent God comes near. We call this nearness immanence. God is immanent. God is close to us, in us, near us and with us. C. S. Lewis said, “God is both further from us, and nearer to us, than any other being.”


God’s nearness is supremely illustrated in Jesus Christ. Paul writes, “You who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:13). That’s why we talk so much about giving your life to Jesus. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.