And all the tribes of Israel came to David in Hebron, and said, “Here we are, your bone and your flesh are we. Time and again in the past when Saul was king over us you were the one who led Israel into the fray, and the LORD said to you, ‘It is you who will shepherd My people Israel and it is you who will be prince over Israel.’”

And all the elders of Israel came to the king in Hebron, and King David made a pact with them in Hebron before the LORD and they anointed David as king over Israel. Thirty years old was David when he became king, forty years was he king. In Hebron he was king over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he was king thirty-three years over all Israel and Judah.

And the king went, and his men with him, to Jerusalem, to the Jebusite, the inhabitant of the land, and he said to David, saying, “You shall not enter here unless you can remove the blind and the lame,” which is to say, “David shall not enter here!”

And David captured the stronghold of Zion, which is the City of David. And David stayed in the stronghold and called it the City of David, and David built round the rampart and within. And David grew greater and greater, and the LORD God of Armies was with him. And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David with cedarwood and carpenters and stonemasons, and they built a house for David. And David knew that the LORD had set him up unshaken as king over Israel and had exalted his kingship for the sake of His people Israel. And David took other concubines and wives from Jerusalem after coming from Hebron, and other sons and daughters were born to David. And the Philistines heard that David had been anointed as king over Israel, and all the Philistines came up to seek David. And David heard and went down to the stronghold. The Philistines had come and deployed in the Valley of Rephaim.

And David inquired of the LORD, saying, “Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You give them into my hand?” And the LORD said, “Go up, for I will surely give the Philistines into your hand.” And David came into Baal-Perazim, and David struck them down there, and he said, “The LORD has burst through my enemies before me like a bursting of water!” Therefore did he call the name of that place Baal-Perazim. And they abandoned their idols there, and David with his men bore them off.

And David and the whole house of Israel were playing before the LORD with all their might in song on lyres and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, and Uzza reached out to the Ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen had slipped. And the LORD’s wrath flared up against Uzza, and God struck him down there for reaching out his hand to the Ark, and he died there by the Ark of God. And David was incensed because the LORD had burst out against Uzza. And that place has been called Perez-Uzza to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD on that day and he said, “How can the Ark of the LORD come to me?”

And David did not want to remove the Ark of the LORD to himself in the City of David, and David had it turned aside to the house of Obed-Edom. And the Ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-Edom three months and the LORD blessed Obed-Edom and all his house. And it was told to King David, saying, “The LORD has blessed the house of Obed-Edom and all that he has on account of the Ark of God.” And David went and brought up the Ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing.

And it happened when the bearers of the Ark of the LORD had taken six steps that he sacrificed a fatted bull. And David was whirling with all his might before the LORD, girded in a linen ephod. And David and the whole house of Israel were bringing up the Ark of the LORD in shouts and with the sound of the ram’s horn. And as the Ark of the LORD came into the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out through the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD, and she scorned him in her heart.

(Robert Alter translation)
This is a long passage, to be sure, but it moves along speedily and decisively. It is also the only time in our Narrative Lectionary Series when King David is mentioned, one of the central and greatest figures of Hebrew scripture.

David is an epic figure in the truest sense of the word. He’s one of the great characters of human history (with Michelangelo’s rendering of him a fitting tribute.) You may remember some highlights from his epic life. As the eighth and youngest son of Jesse, he was first called into service to play the lyre for King Saul, who suffered from bouts of depression. This talented shepherd boy found favor with the old King. Before long, in a truly immortal encounter with the arch-enemy Philistines, he volunteered to step up and face Goliath, the giant warrior hero. After his dramatic and unexpected victory using his trusty sling, David begins his gradual rise to power. His ascent is long and complicated. He survives first as something of a ‘freedom fighter’, evading King Saul and consolidating his power base. He creates alliances of convenience when there were none before and embellishes his reputation as a leader. Somehow, in the midst of all of this, he continues playing the lyre and composing Psalms/ballads, songs of praise, lament and wonder. Significantly, David is the first Biblical character drawn with all the colors of deepest human character, for better and worse.

His adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah who was fighting at the front against the Philistines, provides a view of a fallible man who is undaunted by his own sin. He suffers the death of his son born of this affair with unsurpassed grief. (2 Samuel 11)

In many ways, David was a ‘renaissance man’ thousands of years before the Renaissance took place. His rise to power appears just to be a matter of time, inevitable from the start. He may well be ‘larger than life’, as they say, but his story is very human, and we can learn some very important lessons from him.

One reason David captivated the hearts of so many people was his keen sense of vision and ability to see things that others did not. Throughout his life, David was able see
perspectives that others could not imagine, conjuring up solutions and possibilities from out of nowhere.

When Jerusalem was a backwater village, David saw it as a capital, (nicknamed after himself, “The City of David”). When worship in Israel was nomadic, he envisions a Temple (which, significantly, he himself was not able to build- but must pass this most famous legacy of all on to his son, Solomon.)

David is someone who did not follow normal paths. When we look at all this from our present distance, you might call him the ‘Teflon King,’ and history has continued to treat him far more kindly than he treated many others.

There is no doubt that David loved the Lord; his Psalms are plentiful of evidence of that.... but there can also be little doubt that -at times- he loved himself more. Rabbi David Wolpe notes the irony that David, whose name means “beloved,” was loved by many, and yet the Scriptures rarely describe David as truly loving anyone else. His wives served their purposes, and his sons and daughters as well, but he always seems to look after himself above all. David is a survivor. (There may be reasons for his particular psychological profile, as Rabbis have speculated for centuries, perhaps stemming from a lack of a relationship with his father, Jesse.)

I remember once doing a Bible study about the life of David, and in the end hearing a particular comment from someone that many could agree with; “What I like about David is that if God could love him, then surely God can put up with me.”

I don’t exactly know where that statement sets the bar for us, in terms of our meeting God’s expectations, but it is a helpful and realistic way to take into view the life & works of God’s anointed.

What was unique about David, unlike other Jewish notables such as Moses, Jonah, or Jeremiah, is that David had no unease about his suitability and readiness for his mission. He was supremely self-confident from the start.

What did him in, eventually, was dismissing that he was a link in the chain of God’s people, believing himself more unique than he really was. David’s fatal flaw was his hubris, which led him to think he could wrangle a solution out of any situation, independent of
relying on the mercy and guidance of the Lord... his independent streak wore very thin. That will do anyone in, every time.

Our two readings for today are representative selections of the ups and downs of David’s reign, and perhaps lessons for us along the way in our lives as well. It may seem like a stretch to find ways in which we can relate to either of these two events in our own lives, but let’s have a try, because that’s what a sermon is about, right?

Our first verses recount one of the truly high points in his life... when David is acclaimed King over all Israel. This comes after long and hard struggles, many sleepless nights, careful strategizing and skillful carrying out of plans. What is left unsaid is that though David is acclaimed King, he did not accomplish this on his own. Importantly, before he is called King, he is called shepherd and ‘prince’, both terms implying more of a lateral, collaborative connection than one of solo superiority. David is a link in the chain rather than an independent means of transmission. He is not a sole agent but has many others to rely on as one who’s been anointed to lead.

I wonder what this means to you? Were you ever elected a class officer in school; a treasurer, a club secretary, a section leader in your school band? What role of authority have you ever been given, or asserted for yourself? (Perhaps as older sibling, parent, or even caretaker?) To whom were you then responsible?

David’s story is impressive and his charismatic leadership was key to Israel’s survival, but his Achilles’ heel was forgetting that everything he had didn’t just magically appear (though it may have seemed that way.) Those who came before him sacrificed to put him in the place he finally achieved.

David was a link in a chain, not the key, just as we.

The second story in this passage is one-of-a-kind in scripture. It’s about the Ark of the covenant. The ark, the central symbol of Israeliite faith, with two winged cherubim on top, contained the two stone tablets with the ten commandments, some manna and Aaron’s rod. It has a peripatetic history: carried by the Israelites through the desert, it finally arrives in Israel. At different times the ark moves to from place to place, captured by and then recaptured from the Philistines. Now in our story it rests at Baal-Perazim, and David
resolves to bring it to his capital. God’s presence, symbolized by the ark, will be continuing assurance that David’s leadership is blessed.

Then calamity happens. One of the oxen pulling the cart that bears the ark stumbles and a man named Uzzah, fearing for the ark, reaches out and grabs it so it doesn’t fall. Instantly God strikes him down. What do we make of this story? Some have blamed it on the incorrect means of transporting the ark—it should be carried by poles on the affixed rings and on the shoulders of the Levites, not loose in a wagon (Numbers 7:9). Others see the ark as a box charged with divine energy that cannot be touched, like Stephen Spielberg’s “Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Perhaps we can take note of the insight of Rabbi Koch, scholar and mystic, who pointed out that it was the oxen that stumbled. Uzzah should have steadied the animals, not the ark. David’s reaction, however, is clear and immediate. He keeps his distance and strategizes.

For three months he lets the Ark sit. And then, presumably with Levite priests carrying the Ark the right way, it arrives once and for all in the city of David. And David, wearing a silken ephod, a ceremonial sleeveless vest, dances a Mick Jagger dance. He goes wild, rejoicing with all he is.

We don’t quite know what to do with this. The Protestant reformer John Calvin gives us a place to start; pretty stodgy — but not surprising. "Public joy, as David expressed, should always be as before the Lord, with an eye to him, and terminating in him. Otherwise it is no better than public madness, and the source of all manner of wickedness."

The Hebrews had no separate word for soul or body. They did not see them as split. Their word is nephesh. Biblical translators most often use the word "soul," which ends up being a disembodied notion; a holiness without flesh and bone.

David celebrated with his all. Body and soul; the whole nephesh. Here is where David gets it. Now he knows he’s a link. He recognizes what he’s part of. Going back to Moses and
through the centuries, David realizes that he is now part of this immortal history, too and he cannot resist. Thankfulness over comes him. Joy, too.

He must dance. His wife, Michal, doesn’t get it, but David cannot hold back.

His example is worth remembering. Seeing the connection between God’s blessings from the past brought to the present makes a difference for him. Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it. So today, David’s dance is worth remembering, not just for the wild celebration it was, but for what it meant… a connection between past and present, a link in the chain of life.

We live at a time when respect for the whole and a sense of how indebted and connected we are to those before and after us is rare. But like David, it’s what we’re made for; to be part of something more important than ourselves.

This week, we in Baltimore and all over Maryland will be recognizing and celebrating one who’s dance of life is well worth remembering, Elijah Cummings. His life and legacy, his honesty and openness, should continue to inspire us all to live in a way that is worthy of those who have gone before us, and worthy of the greatest dreams and aspirations of those who will follow us as well. As he is often quoted saying: “Children are the living messengers we send to the future we will never see.” In other words, we are the living link in the chain of life between the past and the future, and recognizing that makes all the difference in how we live.

Our lives make more of a difference than we know; we make a far bigger impact on others than we are aware. Through all the crowning moments and utter disasters we live through, we have gifts to share and a message with them.

So the message is this: God is faithful, God is love, God’s goodness is to be passed along as much as we can do. Always aware that our own brokenness and our joys are always with us, we keep on keeping on.

So, what is that thing for you to celebrate? What are you living for that’s bigger and greater than you are? If you’ve forgotten, today it’s time to remember and recommit. If you aren’t sure, but you get a hunch this week -- something a friend says, something you see, a post, an announcement -- follow it. Follow it. Don’t say, “Someone else will take care of it.”
Today, there is no one else. Thanks be to God that in the presence of the Holy Spirit, we know that even one person giving thanks, praising God and sharing that praise with others can make all the difference in the world. Amen.