

Sermon Proper 10B1 July 11, 2021 Fr. Nick Smith

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19 Psalm 24 Ephesians 1:3-14 Mark 6:14-29

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

The Ark of the Covenant, the tangible presence of God. That's what young King David brings to his new capital of Jerusalem. It is a triumph for him, and he celebrates with a parade and procession, with music and dancing, with pomp and circumstance. He is showing off a bit, to be sure, wearing an ephod, an apron-like vestment usually reserved for the high priest, and wearing apparently nothing else! So, is this a moment of personal pride and vanity, or is it an occasion of praise and thanksgiving? In this case, it might be hard to tell the difference. Watching from her window, Michal, daughter of the slain king Saul and now one of David's wives, seems to think David is being an irreverent fool. Their marriage turns out to be one where little real love is lost, by the way. She sees him for the opportunist he sometimes seems to be: a young king whose good looks and good luck on the battlefield have gone to his head. Imagine, wearing the high priest's apron, just the high priest's apron, while cavorting foolishly in front of this sacred relic and historic icon, for all the city to see. She turns away in disgust.

By the time of David, this historic and sacred object, the Ark of the Covenant, has been a central object in Hebrew worship and lore for centuries. Constructed within a year after the remarkable event at Mt Sinai when the Ten Commandments and other laws were given by God to Moses, the Ark was a box, or chest, in which the stone tablets were transported. It was carried by Levite priests holding staves on either side. They bore it out in front of the assembled people when they all moved about in the new homeland of Canaan, and also when they went into battle, or so it was said. At times of rest, it was kept in a tent called a tabernacle, out of sight but seldom out of mind. It represented the presence of God. For some, apparently, it was indeed the presence of God. It was God's portable throne, from which Yahweh pronounced judgement and mercy. It was secretive and powerful, something to be feared and adored and veiled from sight, and, above all, something to be protected from blasphemy and theft.

And yet, prior to David's time it had been stolen by the Philistines. Mind you, it hadn't really been even mentioned in the historical scriptures for decades; apparently it was where it should have been, perhaps ignored by everyone except the Levite priests. God was in his little box and all was right with the world. Until it wasn't. You don't know what you've got 'till it's gone, as they say, and when the Ark gets lost, there is panic that God is absent from the community, that God's reassuring and reliable protection has been lost, and may even be doing its blessings in another, foreign community instead! Darn those Philistines over on the seacoast! Those conniving, evil Philistines who have stolen our God-in-the-box so that they will have God's blessing and deprive us of our birthright! But, dear friends, before you shake your heads cynically and ridicule the poor ancient Hebrews too much, don't we sometimes do the same thing ourselves?

Turns out, by the way, that the Philistines seem to be equally superstitious. While they are in possession of the Ark, a great plague of tumors infects their community, and they blame it on the presence of this foreign God. The Ark, they think, has brought them nothing but misery. So, they arrange to return the Ark to the Hebrews, to get rid of it peacefully despite its value as a spoil of war. Their heart just wasn't in it. It wasn't part of their religious witness. It brought a curse instead of a blessing. So, the Hebrews retrieve it, and under David's rule it is returned to Canaan. But the story is more complicated than that, and is so revealing that it is told twice in the Old Testament, once here in the Book of Second Samuel, and again in the book of First Chronicles. How does one gauge the pleasure or displeasure of God? Well, the first town to which the Ark is delivered also finds itself oddly cursed, and the Ark is moved to a second village. There it brings peace and blessings, and, after a probationary time, David decides that

it is okay to bring it to the capital. So, an elaborate procession is planned, and all the people are invited. But as the parade nears Jerusalem, the oxen pulling the cart with the Ark hit a bump in the road and it shifts as if it will unceremoniously fall to the ground. Uzzah, the attendant nearby, goes to steady it and touches the sacred relic. And he is struck dead right then and there. David is furious, furious at God, and says so! The cart is turned around and the procession is called off. The entrance of the Ark into the city is delayed until David cools down, and what we have heard this morning is the second, and successful attempt.

So, in this ancient story, full of expectations, metaphor, legend, faith, and even maybe a little superstition, we can perhaps draw back the veil a bit and see a reflection of our own relationship with God. Did Uzzah have to die because of blasphemy when he touched the sacred Ark? Or did he have a fatal heart attack from the fear of touching it? Do we sometimes put God in a box and carry the divine around with us? Do we sometimes ignore God for decades, only to lament the loss of something after it seems to be gone? Is God indeed with us? Is God present only here in this monumental and beloved Ark of a building? Some of us may remember the automobile adornment of our youth, the plastic Jesus (I don't care if it rains or freezes, longs' I got my plastic Jesus, sitting on the dashboard of my car...). Faith or superstition. Or witness? We are spending some money to have various repairs done here at 341 Main St. Repairs to our meeting house. Are we trying to sufficiently decorate a container in which to house God Almighty? To possess the divine and keep it safe and sound?

I refer you back to the hymn we sang before the Gospel. It's not scripture, but it is a lovely poem. And it speaks to this very point, I think. **God indeed is with us; let us all adore him, and with awe appear before him. God is here within us; souls in silence fear him, humbly, fervently draw near him. Now his own who have known God in worship lowly, yield their spirits wholly.** There is a fourth verse, which we omitted today...you can look it up in your hymnals if you want...which says **Come, abide within me; let my soul be thine earthly sanctuary.** Clearly we cannot, could not, should not, intend to contain God. But what we can do iconically is witness to God's goodness and power. The plastic Jesus on the dashboard of your old DeSoto, the crosses we sometimes wear, the painted rocks from Ann we carry in our pockets, the stained glass and freshly painted tower louvers, the St. Pauly used clothing box, the prayer quilts, the Evangelist Newsletter and the church website, are all witnesses to the way we feel about God. But even more important is the way we live our lives, for when we publicize the fact that we are God's people, that which we do and say is our foremost witness.

So, in the story of David and the Ark, who was right? Did Michal have a valid criticism of the way David witnessed to the presence of God? Was he being too irreverent? Was her witness more appropriate as she stayed inside and watched from the window, perhaps intending to be prayerful and reflective? Or was David's unbridled joy and silliness a better witness? Reverent reflection or giddy joy? Humbly or fervently? It's probably not 'either or', but rather 'both and', don't you think? In any case, we witness to reassure others that God's presence is real and always available. We witness to reassure others that God's presence cannot be stolen away by some dreadful philistines. We witness to remind others that it is never a helpful plan to set God's miraculous power away for decades. We witness to proclaim that, while we cannot possess God, we are rather God's beloved possession, and that the Holy Spirit of God is always flying free and close among all our human brothers and sisters. Amen.