

Be Lifted Up

2 Samuel 6:1-19

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When asked about the topic of today's sermon over the last couple of weeks, a few people responded by humming the familiar theme song music to the Indiana Jones movies.

This, of course, got me to thinking about the first of these films, a blockbuster from the summer of 1981: Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark. Hard to believe that was 40 years ago! Though there have been three more Indiana Jones adventure movies since then, I don't think I'd seen the original since it first premiered, so I persuaded my family to watch it with me last week.

Raiders of the Lost Ark is certainly an adventure movie of an earlier era. Its setting is pre-WWII 1936 and is an epic tale in which an intrepid archaeologist (Dr. Indiana Jones) tries to beat a band of Nazis in finding the Ark of the Covenant which seems to be central to their plans for world domination. Battling against his snake phobia and a vengeful ex-girlfriend Marion, Indie is in constant peril. He makes hair's breadth escapes at every turn. Ultimately, the Ark of the Covenant is transported to a secret island near Crete. After a Rabbi performs a ritual, the Ark is opened. Inside is sand, presumably all that is left of the Ten Commandments. A powerful force is unleashed and all who are present are struck dead, except for Indie and Marion who close their eyes so as to avoid seeing the Lord's presence directly. One thing is clear, there is power in God's holy presence – and the people mistakenly underestimated God's power as they attempted to abuse their own human power.

Unlike the narrative of the film in which most of the characters treat the Ark so callously, the biblical story – as told in 2 Samuel 6 – seems to reveal the people's utmost reverence for the Ark of the Covenant. Before I read that text, I'd like to share the backstory. If we head back to the narrative in Exodus, we read God's instructions to Moses to make a sanctuary for God to dwell among the Israelites. Most of Chapter 25 is filled with instructions for the construction of an Ark, which would contain and carry the "Covenant" that God would give to Moses on Mt. Sinai – the two tablets known as The Ten Commandments. The Israelites carried the Ark with them during their 40 years spent wandering in the desert, and after the conquest of Canaan, it was brought to Shiloh.

Fast forward to the OT book of 1 Samuel in which a dramatic story unfolds. There was a threat of the enemy Philistine tribe seeking to expand into Israelite territory. In this same period, there is an internal crisis of the tribes of Israel. Whatever thin thread of unity the Israelite tribes possess is unraveling (1 Samuel 2-3). Ultimately, these realities lead to the defeat of Israel, and capture of the Ark (chapter 4). Nevertheless, the Philistines do not turn out to have the upper hand. The Ark of the Covenant itself mediates the powerful presence of the Lord, defeating the Philistine god Dagon and bringing plagues upon the Philistine people. In humiliation, the Philistines finally send the Ark on a cart back to Israelite territory (chapters 5-6).

The story loses sight of the Ark for a while, but we pick up the thread of the story with one of the main characters of the drama, King David who was not born into royalty. Saul, the first king of Israel, failed to reach a decisive victory against the Philistines. God sent the Prophet Samuel to Bethlehem and guided him to David, a humble shepherd and talented musician. He brought the young man to Saul's court, where his harp was so soothing that Saul called for David

whenever he was vexed by an “evil spirit” (I Samuel 9:16). Saul was so taken with this young man that he appointed David his armor bearer.

Soon thereafter, a major Philistine battle loomed. This time, the Philistines, yielded a fearsome new weapon: a giant named Goliath, carrying a huge bronze spear (I Samuel 17:5-7). The Israelites were frozen in fear—except young David. Armed with only a sling, he picked a stone from a riverbed and slung it at Goliath’s head. David’s aim was true; the stone struck the giant and killed him, prompting the Philistines to flee. The Israelites were jubilant. Saul was compelled to place young David at the head of his army (I Samuel 18:5).

Even though David then married Saul’s daughter Michal and became a close friend of Saul’s son Jonathan, an intense rivalry developed between the young new general and the king. Saul even began to plot to kill him. David had little choice but to flee to enemy territory.

Soon the country was once again torn by war as Philistine forces gathered at Mount Gilboa, and Saul and his sons, all serving as commanders in his army, rushed to meet them. But God had turned against Saul, and the Israelite ranks were decimated. All of Saul’s sons fell to Philistine swords, including his heir, Jonathan. Badly wounded himself, Saul then fell upon his own sword (I Samuel 31:1-7).

With Israel’s army in headlong retreat, the Philistines swarmed over the Hebrew highlands. Saul’s only surviving son, Ishbaal, was anointed as his successor, supported by the northern tribes. But the southern elders went to Hebron, David’s military base, and in due course anointed David king “over the house of Judah.”

At first, David chose to ignore the Philistines and instead marched on Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:6). After capturing Jerusalem, David was then able to defeat the Philistines. Eventually, all of the regions in Canaan came under David’s control.

This is where the two threads of the drama come together – the Ark and David. Here now is the reading from 2 Samuel 6:1-19:

David Brings the Ark to Jerusalem

6 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 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. 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,^[a] the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart ⁴ with the ark of God;^[b] and Ahio^[c] went in front of the ark. ⁵ David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs^[d] and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

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. ⁷ The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark;^[e] and he died there beside the ark of God. ⁸ David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah; so that place is called Perez-uzzah,^[f] to this day. ⁹ David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, “How can the ark of the LORD come into my care?” 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. ¹¹The 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.

¹²It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; ¹³and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. ¹⁴David danced before the LORD with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. ¹⁵So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

¹⁶As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart.

¹⁷They brought in the ark of the LORD, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD. ¹⁸When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts, ¹⁹and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat,^[9] and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their homes.

It's so important to our understanding to know that the stories in 1 & 2 Samuel are rooted in a time of considerable social and political transformation in the life of Israel. There was movement economically from a marginal tribal agrarian existence to a period of prosperity that included extended trade and emergence of wealth. In other words, this was movement from tribe to kingdom grounded in a historical experience. One of the commentaries I read put it this way, "The story of this time is peopled by characters and events which seem unlikely, but the narratives of 1 & 2 Samuel understand all of these as a part of God's providence at work to bring Israel's future into being. The divine shaping of events is assumed, and even stated by the main characters. God's will is usually brought to pass through human events and personalities. The narratives make clear that divine power lies behind human drama."¹

So, I wonder – how do we think about and experience God's power in the unfolding drama of our lives? In our community? In our church? Do we seek God's presence and trust God's power in our human affairs? Or do we seek and rely on our human power to the exclusion of God's power?

As radio commentator Paul Harvey said, now for the rest of the story: At last, David could turn his attention to building a state, ruled from a proper Israelite capital. He pitched the tent of the Tabernacle to house the Ark of the Covenant, and eventually King David's son and successor, Solomon, installs the Ark in the temple. It is venerated there during Solomon's reign (970-930 BCE) and beyond. It is housed in the Holy of Holies, an inner sanctum of the Temple where only the High Priest is allowed to enter, and even then only once each year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. There is an oft-repeated, but not substantiated, legend which states that a rope was tied around the ankle or waist of the High Priest so he could be pulled out if he was struck dead by the presence of God.

The Ark seems to have vanished some 2,000 years ago. Numerous theories have arisen about its fate. One of the most well-known holds that Levitical priests moved the Ark to Egypt just before

¹ (The New Interpreter's Bible Volume II 1998, 956-959)

the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C. From there it was supposedly moved to Ethiopia, where some say it resides to this day. It turns out there are many replicas (though ancient ones) in churches all over Ethiopia.

Our story, as people of God, has continued to unfold as well. We've received the gift of Emmanuel, God with us. And at Pentecost we received the gift of the Holy Spirit! The fate of the original Ark will likely remain a mystery, much like Godself largely remains a mystery to us. While we can never fully know God, we can reverently seek God's presence and power. Perhaps we can literally or figuratively put on our Indie hats and welcome the adventure to discover how to intentionally bring together God's presence and power with our human affairs. My guess? The story will be a blockbuster-worthy one!

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