

The Ark of God
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
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Joshua 3: 7-17
Matthew 23: 1-12

What is this ark of God?

It is described as a large box — think of a steamer trunk. It is covered in gold. It has rings on the side, through which poles can be inserted, so that priests standing before and behind the ark may carry it. Later descriptions of it in the temple in Jerusalem suggest statues of cherubim — angels — on the top of it. Inside the box were the original tablets of stone on which God himself had inscribed the ten commandments and given them to Moses.

A great deal of mystery and legend surround the Ark. According to I Samuel 4 - 6, it was captured and taken to Ashdod in present-day Gaza by enemies, who subsequently sent word to David that they wanted to give it back, for calamity had fallen on them. One of the men helping to move it reached out to steady it as the wagon bumped along; he touched it, and died. It was moved to Jerusalem, and once the temple was built, the Ark went into the Holy of Holies, a place so holy that only the high priest could enter, and then only once a year. With a rope tied to his feet, lest he die while in the holy place, so that he could be pulled out!

When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem several centuries later, they were eager to explore the temple and see the stores of gold hidden there. All they found was — nothing! The Ark had been spirited away. No one knows to this day where it was taken! There is a sect in Ethiopia that says they have it, that it is kept in a small building which no one may enter! Well, would you go walking in there to have a look? Not me! You may remember the Nazis in the Indiana Jones movie, whose faces melted when they looked at the Ark! There are other theories out there as well; no one knows for sure where the ark was taken.

The Ark was the seat of God's presence. When it was captured, calamity fell upon those who took it from Israel. It was the focus of Israel's worship. It wasn't quite an idol, a statue or something, but it was close. It represented physically the invisible God who ruled over Israel.

Human beings are strange, you know? We say we worship a God who is invisible, who doesn't leave obvious signs of his presence. That is all good, we say, and then we come up with ways to mark where he is. For example, as recently as when I was a child, you would never come up to the pulpit and stuff; this area was pretty much sacred space. We see examples in Israel's history, how they created things to focus their worship, to look at and bow before.

I once met the philosopher William Barrett. He told the story of a night long ago when he was in a hotel room somewhere, very depressed. He pulled out the Gideon Bible and began to read; something he read meant a great deal to him. He copied it out on a card. He said he still had that card in his briefcase, and though he had long since memorized the verses written on it, he would fight with anyone who tried to take the card from him. It was a tangible link to that night.

God tells Joshua to have the priests carry the Ark into the new land God has given them. God's power and presence is such that even the river stops flowing when the Ark crosses it. This is the memory the Hebrews have of it, of Joshua, and their coming into the land.

What do we see here?

God is powerful. There is no other god even remotely comparable to the Holy One of Israel. Even the Philistines recognize this, as their idols fall over during the night when the Ark is present. The Most High God is the Almighty, and no other god comes close. You know, did you ever read "Christian Fiction?" I remember reading a novel by Frank Peretti once, and in it the demons were terrible, frightening powerful beings. The angels came across as wimpy and not too powerful. The truth is, as frightening as the demonic might be to us, our God is an awesome and powerful God who can handle them easily.

So there is no threat that can overcome us if we hold fast to God. There is no power that can oppose him, or overwhelm him. When circumstances threaten us, when we are scared, when we worry that we will be defeated, we can remember this: we worship a God who is more powerful than all the others.

God is involved in human history physically, in the Ark. God wants to be with us, and becomes involved in our story. God lives in human history — he did that as Jesus and continues to be among us and with us today. God commanded the Israelites to build the Ark mostly as a physical reminder of his presence with them.

One of the names given to Jesus is Emmanuel, God is with us. God is not some far-off deity who watches us with varying degrees of interest. God is with us, walking around with us, a part of our lives.

Last Sunday some of us watched the old movie, "It's A Wonderful Life," in which an angel named Clarence is sent to stop Jimmy Stewart's character from jumping off a bridge. Remember that? Clarence is played to perfection by Henry Travers. Clarence is not really too believable as an angel; he isn't powerful or strong. But he won't give up, and he stays with Jimmy Stewart until Stewart realizes the people of the town do love him.

About thirty years ago a singer named Joan Osborne had a hit with a song called, "One of Us" which asks, "what if God were one of us, just a slob like one of us?" You may not like that lyric, some people don't, but it asks a good question. What if God were one of us? Well, the good news is that God is one of us. The Almighty God who created the

universe came down in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived among us. And still lives with us! God loves us that much! Can you imagine?

Finally, we see that **God is with us, even in our sin.** Jesus didn't demand that everyone be screened and kept away unless they were worthy. He spent his time with "tax collectors and sinners" which made the holy people of his day crazy. It's as though Jesus were here in Newton, but instead of coming to see us here, he spends his time out there among the schizophrenic and drug-addled homeless people. Not all homeless people are schizophrenic, obviously, and not all of them use drugs, but some of them do. You can almost tell when you look at them. And those are people Jesus would be talking to and eating with!

Which is why we open the table here to anyone who comes in. You know, I was once involved for a couple of years in hosting the giveaway of government surplus cheese. There were all kinds of rules about who could get it and who could not, which I for one routinely ignored — at the end of the day whatever was left was given to the Salvation Army, which gave it to anyone who came in. So I also ignored the regulations, and I went toe-to-toe with a guy once who insisted I was doing it wrong. I told him to go back to his office, because anyone who stood outside in the dark and cold and waited until we opened, and then came in and humiliated themselves asking for help would get it!

The table is the same to me: here Jesus offers himself to anyone who will come, — you don't have to prove you are worthy — if you did we'd all be in trouble! But here Jesus offers us a concrete example (remember the Ark of the covenant?) of his grace! And that grace is all we need, and all we want!

Who is the Ark of God? It is Jesus: he is powerful. He is physically with us, and leaves us tangible sacraments to remind us. He walks with us in our sins. He is the Ark of God!

Thanks be to God! Amen.