

The Ascent of the Ark

Stories about the Ark of Yahweh in the Bible are always fascinating, and this is where the account of the rise of David takes us today in our lectionary text, 2 Samuel 6, as read for us this morning.

Last week we took a broad-brush look at the life of David in the context of history and then what we called a sort of moral/theological lens of history, and the way the Jews and we Christian folks locate David at the crux of salvation history.

The first line of the NT being, ***The genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*** (Matt 1:1)

We also observed that the take-away lesson from that overview of David's life was, interestingly, in the decision of the narrator, to tell the story as an unvarnished history, with how David's journey of the heart was a reflection of, at times, the very best intentions and actions, and then at other times how he slipped into sin.

We concluded that we are to learn that genuine spirituality can only arise from honesty with God, ourselves and with others. That self-delusion is the most destructive of all personal choices.

You may have noticed that our Psalm for the week is 24, the Psalm of Ascent that celebrates this scene. David dances before a large procession accompanying the Ark of Yahweh into the city of Jerusalem from its long exile in various places. The Psalm, it is thought, was probably sung antiphonally, during the procession described in today's text.

***Lift up your heads, O gates!
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is the King of glory?
The Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, mighty in battle.
Lift up your heads, O gates!*** (Psalm 24:7-8)

I'll return to Psalm 24 when we look for our take-away from this scene of the procession.

So let's talk about the ark a bit.



There are two Hebrew words for ark. *Tebah*, which means ark as in Noah's ark as in Genesis 6. But in reference to the Ark of Yahweh, *arōn*, meaning a wooden chest.

Moses was instructed to build this *arōn* in Exodus 25. It had a golden top with two angels on it, the mercy seat. In antiquity cherubim were the adornment of a throne. Basically it was a reliquary that held the "covenant" Exodus tells us. ***You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you.*** (Ex 25:16).

It is actually Hebrews 9 that describes its contents as the ***tablets of the Ten Commandments*** (see Heb 9:1-5).

There I will meet with you and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant... (Ex 25:22)

The symbol is that God sits upon the covenant and seals it with the very Presence. So powerful!

It was thus, the throne of God, upon which the Presence rested (not in, as with idols, which were imbued in the idol, as you might recall we discussed in March in the message, ***Are Idols Still a Thing?***). I think this is an intentional distinction of our narrative.

In our story today the ark is finally going to find a rightful place of rest after its two centuries of wandering, beginning with Moses and the Exodus, where the command to build the ark was first given.¹

In Numbers 10 we have the Song of the Ark.

So they set out from the mount of the Lord three days' journey with the ark of the covenant of the Lord going before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting place for them, the cloud of the Lord being over them by day when they set out from the camp.

Here Moses speaks to God directly at/through (?) the ark:

Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say,

***“Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered,
and your foes flee before you.”*** (Num 10:35)

And as they take their first steps toward the land that God promised: ***We are setting out for the place that the Lord said, ‘I will give it to you.’*** (Num 10:29). In forty years they actually cross over and in the next 200 years they eventually more or less fully occupy Canaan.

It is the Ark of Yahweh that leads them, it is an emblem of God’s Presence on that journey.

Eventually the ark is housed in Shilo, where our story of Samuel begins, and where he and his sons attend to the ***worship and sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh*** (1 Sam 1:3)

Early in the Samuel story the people are getting a shellacking from the Philistines and they send to Shiloh for the ark thinking it will turn the tide of the battle in their favour but, of course, the ark is captured (1 Sam 4). ***The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured*** (1 Sam 4:22).

But having the ark brings ruin on the Philistines everywhere they try to store it. They just cannot get rid of it fast enough because everywhere it rests the people breakout in sores, including Gath, the royal city of the Philistines. So, if you recall, they put it on an oxen cart with no driver, and they say if it turns toward the Jerusalem hills, we will know it is God who has sent misfortune on our land.

Eventually, the village of Kiriath-jearim, about 15k west of Jerusalem, says, ‘we’ll take it’.

From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord. (1 Sam 7:2)

During this period of 20 years the ark sits in a shed on the back of the property of Abinadab, forgotten, attended only by a single son Eleazar. This is symbolic of the people’s continued lack of loyalty to Yahweh, their negligence of God and the time during which they are *still* flirting with local gods.

The alternate name of Kiriath-jearim is Baalah. That is, the town of Baal. And it is no accident that they choose a property on a hill, because that is where you set up the idols of the Baals, on a hill.

It is during these twenty years that the see-saw drama between the declining fortunes of Saul and the ascendancy of David plays out.²

All this time. Sitting...sitting... in a dusty old shed. Covered by a sheet, forgotten, what will become the most amazing barn find in history!

The ark is a dangerous object and this speaks of the awesome, terrible sanctity of the Divine Presence. You can’t touch it, as Uzzah found out when David went to Kiriath-jearim to bring it up to Jerusalem after he made it his capital.

So David said, ***Well, how can the ark come into my care?*** (2 Sam 6:10) and refused to take it to Jerusalem and left it with Obed-edom the Gittite. After he hears that Obed’s house is being blessed

he again goes out to bring it home. Which he does and our passage today so evocatively records with a grand procession and dancing and music and 30,000 soldiers from Kiriath-jearim “up” to Jerusalem. Thus the Ascent of the Ark.

By the way, the ark is lost of course. Some people think it was lost in the political upheaval after Solomon died in the 10th century BCE, when the Egyptian King Shishak attacked Jerusalem, **...he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord...he took everything.**³

Significantly, there are two extra-biblical attestations to Shishak’s campaign into Palestine. One is on the Bubastite portal in Karnak, Egypt and the other is a piece of a stele (pronounced steel) found at Megiddo in Israel, now at the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem.



There are two ways you can read David’s desire to bring the ark to Jerusalem. The generous one is that he understood this great arc of history whereby those first few steps out of Egypt are finalized as the ark comes to rest in its proper, permanent home. David was acting in an entirely altruistic way; it was true self-less piety. In this view he would be consciously creating a sense of fulfillment, the great journey is over. It is a magnificent denouement to the ark’s incredible journey.

My less generous side can’t help but say this was *a very shrewd* political and religious move. Frankly, it’s clear that the ark of Yahweh had come to be viewed as a talisman and its physical presence assured God’s presence. This is a corruption of the pure idea of the ark. The Battle of the Philistines, the houses of Abinadab and Obed-edom they all experienced blessing or curse.

I wonder if there isn’t some indication that David was beginning to lose his way. That his journey of the heart had lost some of its harmony with the heart of God?

God doesn’t let David build an actual temple; he brings the ark into a tent within the city.

A temple says by its very existence in Jerusalem that ‘God is among us, God preserves the monarchy, it is divine destiny that I am your king.’

And David wants the power of the ark on his side. He wants this unspeakable, terrifying power in the heart of his city. What better way to consolidate power of his monarchy over a United Kingdom, ensuring God's protection and imprimatur on his rule and terrifying all his enemies.

Lord Acton, in 1887. "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." ⁴

From the Text

I was born and raised in southeast Idaho, which has the highest per capita percentage of Mormons anywhere, even more than Utah. I've had lots of LDS neighbors, friends and co-workers down through the years. They are wonderful people, although they seem to be able to believe some extraordinarily absurd things.

In Twin Falls, where I was born, they built a temple in 2008. There are four in the state. LDS people actually pay more money for a home that is across the street, believing that there is proximity to holiness. But what amazingly powerful symbols these temples are.

I'm sorry, I never liked it and I don't like it and I just find it all so creepy.

Here is the problem with temples. Once you say God is here or there, it creates a *religious* and *social*, and eventually a *political* dynamic that says God is ours, not yours. God is in our country not yours. God is on our side, not yours. Nobody owns God. No one people, no nation. God does not live in a temple made of hands. If we had time we would go to classical prophets and read this over and over.

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf ... to purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God (Heb 9:24; 14)

Musicians come.

The real lesson for us today in this Journey of the Heart is found in the Psalm of Ascent:

***Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
and do not swear deceitfully.
They will receive blessing from the LORD,
and vindication from the God of their salvation.*** (Psalm 24:4-6)

There is no place you can stand that takes you closer to God. There is no shortcut. There is no talisman. There is only the honest heart, purified by the grace of God in a sanctuary not made by human hands, mediated by the Anointed One, Jesus Christ our Lord. Lived out by the honesty of genuine spirituality, that of clean hands and a pure heart.

There are two places in the New Testament that the ark is mentioned. And this is how I leave you with gospel in your heart today.

It is the end of history and loud voices sing: ***The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of this Messiah, and he will reign for ever and every.*** (Rev 11:15b)

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, and voices, and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (Rev 11:19).

How is that for you Harrison Ford?

Amen

¹ "Outside the Pentateuch and the historical writings [like Samuel], the ark is mentioned by name only once in the Psalter (Ps 132:8) and once in the Prophets (Jer 3:16). This has led some to conclude that the ark was no longer in existence throughout most of the monarchical period" (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol 1, p. 387). In the NT the ark is mentioned only in Heb 9 in the argument about the "true" temple of heaven and in Rev 11:19 in the heavenly temple.

² Saul has his many victories, begins to have significant problems with Samuel and eventually becomes estranged from Samuel. David has increasing military success, first for Saul and then in opposition to Saul, he is driven over to Gath of the Philistines and eventually lands in Hebron where, after the death of Saul at Gibeon, he is proclaimed king of Judah, and then, 7 years later, of Israel as well, uniting the monarchy

³ See 1 Kings 14:25 and the parallel in 2 Chron 12. "According to Egyptian sources, Shishake also invaded Israel; a fragment of his stela has been found in the excavations at Megiddo" (*Oxford Study Bible*, p. 448). Also,

⁴ Lincoln and Obama are exceptions in my opinion. Perhaps you can think of others.