

God's Work is Messy Business
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
October 25, 2015

2 Samuel 5:1-5; 6:1-5; Psalm 150

I'm glad that Kaia did such a good job today of describing the Ark of the Covenant so that we are not confusing it with Noah's Ark! Today, no one really knows whatever happened to the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark is one of those antiquities that was lost, perhaps forever, to the sands of time. Like Jason's Fleece and the Holy Grail, it captures our imagination still. Here's the most important thing to know about it: the Israelites cherished the Ark of the Covenant, they felt like when it was with them, they were invincible.

Have you seen the late 80's classic action film, "Raiders of the Lost Ark"? In the movie, there is this entirely fictional scene where Nazi treasure hunters discover the Ark of the Covenant during one of their excavations. They open it, and thrust their hands inside to pick up its contents, only to find dust that sifts through their hands. That's precisely the moment when everything electrical goes haywire... the bulbs in their spotlights begin popping, the cave goes dark and a ghostly mist begins moving out of the opened ark. Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) tells his companion Marion to close her eyes just as the mist becomes a number of flying ghosts, which turn into beams of fire. These beams of light and fire attack the Nazi's and melts their faces off. Pretty gruesome stuff! Clearly, the Ark of the Covenant is something you don't want to mess with!

But back in the day when the Judges ruled, before a King sat on the throne, the Philistines did just that – they messed with it. One day the Israelites took their Ark into battle against the Philistine army, who were a much stronger, better equipped fighting force. Initially the battle was going well for the Israelites, but then the tide turned and the Ark of the Covenant was captured. The Philistines took it back to their headquarters as spoils of war.

A number of years later, the Ark started making the Philistines sick, so they decided to return it. And this made the Israelites happy... at least for a short time. You see, the people had a bit of an identity problem. Their rulers were not centralized, and they were always considered the underdog. They wanted to be taken seriously.

So with the Ark back where it belonged, the Israelites decided that it was time to demand a king. A monarchy would allow them to pass on a legacy, just like all the other nation states which surrounded them. With the new leadership of their very first king, Saul, their attention shifted. The Ark was forgotten; it became a dusty relic packed away in some forgotten closet, perhaps never to be seen again.

And it stayed that way until their first king died. The next king, Ruth's Grandson David (ten generations removed)¹, decided to dig deep into the past, retrieve the old relic and use it to unite the people around him. The problem was that King David had never been taught how to respect the tradition and how to care for the ark and carry himself around it. And that's the part of this story that comes after this big party that we heard about today!

¹ There were ten generations between them.

David's first mistake was to send all those soldiers out with a cart to retrieve it. What he didn't realize was that the Ark of the Covenant was supposed to be carried by priests. With the heavy ark weighing on their backs, the priests were supposed to feel the weight of God's presence with them. The only people who put the ark on a cart before were Philistines.

The second mistake David made was when he forgot to offer a sacrifice when he dug that ark out of the dusty closet. Sure there was plenty of singing and dancing and certainly they made a big racket. It was almost like David wanted all of the perks and benefits of this precious object, but he didn't want to invest in the work, time or money that the Ark demanded.

When this circus finally arrived from Baale-Judah, a terrible thing happened. The oxen who were pulling the cart lost their footing and the ark began to fall. One of his young soldiers, Uzzah, reached out to steady it. No one told him that she shouldn't touch such a holy thing! The poor, clueless guy was killed on the spot, just like what happened to those Nazi treasure hunters in the movie.

David reacted a lot like a little boy who has had his toy taken away from him, he was angry. But the anger was soon replaced with fear, and eventually he understood how reckless he had been. So he tried to make amends. Along the way, David learns the hard lesson that God is God, and he is not.

Not much has changed – we, like David, also live in a forgetful, disrespectful time. We knock down mountaintops to get at the precious metals in the soil. Instead of treating those we meet with kindness and respect, we point fingers and pass blame. Media outlets do their best to entertain us with the

Kardashians, rather than inform us about real issues, like the Syrian Refugee Crisis and Black churches burning in the South. In the business world, we see kings of industry cut corners, betray trust and destroy their companies, dissolving the jobs and in some cases the retirements of thousands of people. In so many places we have lost our sense of reverence and respect.

Our blessings didn't magically appear. The people who came before us sacrificed to create all that we have come to take for granted -- our institutions of higher learning, our civic infrastructure, our economy, even our church. They built it for us, not to ravenously consume, but to shepherd, steward, improve and then hand to our children and our children's children and so on. We are just a link in a chain, not the whole.

But while we may have forgotten, it is also true that all is not lost. There is always hope that we too can be reshaped and remade. Jesus taught that our God is one that is always giving second chances, always pointing us toward redemption.

After David got over his anger and fear, he tried to bring out the ark again, but this time he did things a little differently. First, he dug around and found an ephod, a priestly robe, which served as a sign that he was taking this treasure seriously. Next, he gave up the cart. Finally, after those who bore the ark had taken six steps, they stopped and David offered a sacrifice -- not one, but two. Once David had yoked himself to the care and reverence of the Ark, THEN he danced.

There is hope for us, too.

Two years ago, a memorial service was planned for Lt. Col. Roy Tisdale, a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, at Central Baptist Church in College Station, Texas, home of Texas A&M. As if the tragic loss weren't bad enough, protesters from the Westboro Baptist Church planned to bring their message of hate to the memorial, as they have with so many others.

Now, this could have been just one more sign of our communal lack of compassion and respect, except something else happened. When A&M students got word of the Phelps protest, Twitter and Facebook lit up. Without a single leader or formal organization, students began to show up at the memorial. Wearing their school colors, they formed a silent wall around Tisdale's family. They were standing to defend, protect and honor the one who lost his life protected the many. And the church took their hate somewhere else.

What motivated those young people? The temperature that day was over 100 degrees. They could have stayed home and assumed someone else would show up. But they didn't. They came together and, almost by instinct, they became part of something much larger than themselves.

Beloved, we live at a time when respect for the whole and a sense of how we are connected to those before and after us is rare. But like David and those young people, it is what we are made for. It is what we are hungry for.

We want to be part of something more important than ourselves. That's what Jesus teaches us, and where God calls us to be.

So I ask you: What is that thing for you? What are you living for that's so much bigger, so much greater than you are? What keeps you up at night? Perhaps if you've forgotten, today it is time to remember and recommit. If you aren't sure, maybe you will get a hunch this week – in something a friend says, something you see, a tweet, a Facebook post – and then you'll follow it.

Follow it. Don't say, "Someone else will take care of it." There is no one else. Christ has no hands but yours. And even one person doing the right thing can make all the difference in the world. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.