

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Back to School

Sermon: The Almighty's Address

I Samuel 4:5-11

When the ark of the Lord's covenant came into the camp, all Israel raised such a great shout that the ground shook. 6 Hearing the uproar, the Philistines asked, "What's all this shouting in the Hebrew camp?"

When they learned that the ark of the Lord had come into the camp, 7 the Philistines were afraid. "A god has[a] come into the camp," they said. "Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. 8 We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness. 9 Be strong, Philistines! Be men, or you will be subject to the Hebrews, as they have been to you. Be men, and fight!"

10 So the Philistines fought, and the Israelites were defeated and every man fled to his tent. The slaughter was very great; Israel lost thirty thousand foot soldiers. 11 The ark of God was captured, and Eli's two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

I Corinthians 3:16-17

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? 17 If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

Psalms 36:5

Your love, Lord, reaches to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the skies.

Sermon

Kids were trick-or-treating in the neighborhood, and they came to a door that had a bowl of apples - and a note - "We're not home. Take only one apple. Remember, God is watching." A few more doors down, same kind of deal, a bowl of candy out front, nobody home. But a kid left a note for everybody else, "Take all you want, God is watching the apples down the street." Where does God reside? We are continuing our look at the life of Samuel which began several weeks ago. You may remember that the Word of the Lord was rare in those days. God never showed up like he did in the past. But this changed with Samuel. God started popping up again. Or maybe the nation once again paid attention. This morning I wish to touch on some of the past historical assumptions that people had on the presence and place of God and what that means for us today.

Much of this morning's scripture is about the ark of the covenant. Now, if you've seen Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark, you have a good understanding of what the ark looked like. After watching that movie in sixth grade I started skimming through my Bible thinking "Hey, there is interesting stuff in here!" Anyway, the ark was made out of wood and overlaid with gold, roughly four feet by two and a half feet and two and a half feet in height. It was very ornate with cherubims and the like, and on top was a throne-seat where the Lord was to invisibly sit. There were rings attached to the side of the ark where poles were inserted and the ark could be carried, but only by the priests. Inside the ark, legend has it, among other things were the original stone

tablets brought down by Moses with the Ten Commandments. This was indeed, an important ark. And the mind set of the people at that time was that the ark was God's actual manifestation on this earth. If you stood before the ark you were in fact standing before the Almighty Himself. The entire history of these people, these Israelites was literally wrapped up in a box. This was their identity, this made them who they were. So if you wanted to write a letter to God in the those days, all you'd do was to address it to the ark, care of the temple, Town of Shiloh, Israel 97045.

But there is a danger to having your national identity tied up in one basket, or box as the case may be as this morning's scripture proves. If the early Israelites had a rival for territory in their new homeland, it was the Philistines. Those darn Philistines...Israel was relatively new in Canaan, the Philistines were relatively new and they were constantly fighting to see who would be the ones to stay...in this new land. In this particular case, the Philistines were the aggressors and camped just shy of Israelite territory. The Israelite army went out to meet their arch enemy and through a bitter and bloody battle, lost. Israel lost about four thousand soldiers in this battle. The army retreated back to their homeland and the leaders looked for a reason why they lost. They concluded that the Lord wasn't with them, and hence, they got whooped. So the logical plan of action was get God involved in their cause. They went to the temple where Eli was still doing his thing, Samuel a young man at this point, and the soldiers checked out the ark just like you would at the local library, which didn't make the Eli the head priest too happy. He made his sons Hophni and Phinehas go with it as its caretaker. Hophni and Phinehas were also going to be priests in Shilo, to take over when Dad was gone. But they weren't good boys. They took the offerings for themselves, slept around with the ladies that hung out at the temple, they shook down the locals - not good kids. But off they go on this battle to help Israel beat the Philistines, carrying the Ark. Can't go wrong if you have the Ark. And they threw another battle, and this is the fight that is in our morning's scripture. When the ark came into the Israel camp, the soldiers shouted with joy, shouted with new spirit, shouted with gusto, so much that the earth resounded. The Philistines heard their shouting and found out that the ark was going to be in the upcoming battle. "Gods", they said, "have come into the camp", they said. So the Philistines start shouting their battle cry and Israel, now with the strength of the ark, the presence of God, Israel is still shouting their battle cries and they join the Philistines in battle...and lost. Again. This time 30,000 men are lost, the ark is taken, and the two priests responsible for the ark also perished. Imagine what this loss did to the Israelites...in essence, the mind set was that their god was overcome...their god was defeated.

Apparently the ark offered no guarantees. Israel had to find a new definition and idol for it's identity. If you like Paul Harvey and the Rest of the Story, this is what happened next. When Eli, the head priest back at the temple found out about the ark and his two sons, he fell over and broke his neck and died. When the wife of Phinehas (one of the priest carrying the ark) found out that the ark was taken, that her husband, brother in law and her father-in-law was now dead, she started in premature labor and she didn't make it either. Her kid was named Icabod, which means, the no glory, or the glory is gone. We know the name Icabod from Sleepy Hollow, giving a hint of his demise in that story. Anyway, the ark was carried back to the coastal cities of the Philistines and placed in the temple of their god, who's name was Dagon. Now the next day when the Philistines woke up, they found their idol of Dagon face down in front of the ark. They put it back up only to find it in the same position the next day, except this time its head and hands were cut off. Not only that, the town had a plague of mice and diseases. So that town sent the ark to the next Philistine town down the coast, only to have the same thing happen. All in all, what happened was that the ark basically took a seven month tour of the Philistine territory until they finally got tired of having the thing and they just gave it back to the Israelites with some small token guilt offerings. All of these events took place, scholars estimate, around 1050 B.C. The Israelites got the ark back, but they had to re-evaluate their idea on where God could be found.

So they went to the next logical place: If God isn't in the ark, then he must be in the temple. We still find it in today's language. The church is the house of the Lord, isn't it? We pray here, we worship here, when we think about God, our mind easily slips to the notion of a church. So it was for the Israelites. God's awesome and mighty power was to be found in the temple. People went there to be healed and to ask for miracles. And for

the next five hundred years, it turned into the same kind of idolatry that was placed on the ark. The ruling class and the priests believed that the temple gave them outside sanctuary from outside military forces. Hey, if we got the temple, we can never be taken over, right? Well, they never learn. Around 587 B.C., despite the warnings of prophets like Amos and Hosea, Jerusalem was taken over by the new and powerful rising Babylonian Empire. The ruling class and property owners were taken back to Babylon, present day Baghdad, hundreds of miles away. Well, the temple apparently didn't offer any guarantees either. The Israelites are just having a bad millennium, that's all. Their ark got taken, again, their temple was occupied, where else is God to be found? That was the big question for the people in exile in Babylon. How could they worship or receive help from a God whose temple was so far away. This is where Ezekiel helps us out. Ezekiel was one of the priests in exile and he had a gift of seeing visions. Anybody ever hear the song, "Ezekiel saw the wheel". Ezekiel translated his vision of the wheel as a sign of God's mobility to be in and out of the temple, to be in and out of Jerusalem, to be in and out of Israel's borders, to extend clear to the clouds, to extend to the heavens, the farthest reaches that mortals can go. Our God is not a God that can be confined to a box, confined to a building, but our God is a God that is everywhere. We cannot understand God's infinity because of our own finitude. But how many times do we idolize things around us? Are the walls of this church sacred? They mean a lot to us, there is a lot of history to them, but is the structure different than any other building? I remember leading a youth class once at another church, and this kid dropped some language that wasn't quite appropriate for the setting. And the kid right next to him said "You're not suppose to say that, you're in church". And it got me thinking on their idea of where God can be found. I don't think you should act any differently inside church than you do outside church, or maybe I should say, "Act like you're inside the church even when you are outside the church". Like it or not, you can't hide from God. On the other hand, you're never out of reach of Grace from a loving God. As for temples, the Apostle Paul writes to us that we are God's temple. We are made in God's image, aren't we? God is closer to us than our very breath, for he is the creator, sustainer, and giver of life. In that sense, we are something like the original ark of the covenant. The ark was a holding devise for God's holy covenant, the ten commandments. Aren't we a holding devise for what is in our heart? Our very being..God's image? Each and every one of us is holy in that regard, and each of us has a little bit of God within us. Don't we hold in ourselves a covenant to God, at our baptism, our confirmation, our affirmation of faith? We do. And this covenant is that God will never forsake us, leave us, abandon us, as Jesus says in Matthew: "And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age".

Maybe I didn't answer the question on where to find God, but I'm sure if you look in your own heart, you will find a good starting place to begin that journey. If anything, we can open our hearts to let God into our being, into our homes, into our workplace, into our lives so that we can indeed, answer the question "Where is God?" to all who may ask us. We are that temple of God's presence. Lets give him room. With God in our hearts there is nothing that we can't do! If we all bear a covenant to God, then yes, we can make the earth resound, we can make a huge difference in the lives that we touch, and we can shake the foundation of this city, and people can ask, "what is this great shouting that we hear" and we can respond by saying, "God has come into our camp. God has come into our lives, God has come into our hearts and we cannot be still because of this excitement, because of this great love that overwhelms us and we feel a great passion to serve and to heal the wounds of our brothers and our sisters, to show that God cares through us. Let it be so. And we shall not be defeated by anyone for we are indeed, children of God.