

God in a Box

Sermon text: 1 Sam 5:1-7, 6:1-6:5, 6:10-7:2

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5 When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. ³ And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴ But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵ This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

⁶ The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. ⁷ And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, "The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god."

6 The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. ² And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." ³ They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." ⁴ And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?" They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. ⁵ So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land."

¹⁰ The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. ¹¹ And they put the ark of the LORD on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. ¹² And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh. ¹³ Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. ¹⁴ The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the LORD. ¹⁵ And the Levites took down the ark of the LORD and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the LORD. ¹⁶ And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

¹⁷ These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the LORD: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, ¹⁸ and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwalled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the LORD is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh.

¹⁹ And he struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the LORD. He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the LORD had struck the people with a great blow. ²⁰ Then the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?" ²¹ So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the LORD. Come down and take it up to you."

⁷ And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the LORD and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the LORD. ² 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.

In our text this morning, the unthinkable has happened. The armies of God's people have been defeated in battle, the priests killed, and the Ark of the Covenant has been captured by the enemies of God and set up as a trophy in the shrine of a false God. The nation of Israel is in mourning, unable to understand how God could have brought about such a turn of events. The state of Israel's affairs is summed up as the wife of Phinehas the priest is giving birth. In her dying words, she names her son Ichabod, saying that "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (4:22) Ichabod, which means "where is the Glory?" becomes the question that all of Israel is asking.

You may be asking, why such fuss over a box? In the book of Exodus, as Moses is meeting with God on Sinai, he receives detailed instruction regarding every element of Israel's worship. In Exodus 25 he describes the ark of the covenant. You've probably seen pictures of it. A box, covered in gold with two angelic images on top. This is what God says about the ark: "**There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel,**" (Ex. 25:22). The ark was the place where God would dwell among and meet with his people. Through means of sacrifice, God allows his people to approach and dwell with him. The ark is often spoken of as the seat or footstool of God.

The covering of the ark is called the mercy seat, where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled and covered the people's sins. The ark was at the center of Israel's God covenants with his people, promising that he will be their God and they will be his people.

We learn that Israel, who are supposed to be God's holy people, have fallen into sin and idolatry. The wickedness of the people is shown most fully the wickedness of Eli the priest and his even more wicked sons, Hophni and Phineas. And because of the sin

of Israel and its leaders, God withdraws his presence from them, by letting the ark be taken away by the Philistines.

They wanted God to be in their presence, but on their terms and for their purposes. Israel had lost this perspective and understanding of God's presence with them. As they were being defeated in battle by the Philistines, the Israelites try to utilize the power of the Ark as a sort of magical talisman. They bring the ark into battle, thinking that it will

They say "let us bring the Ark...that it may *come among us* and save us from the power of our enemies," (1 Sam 4:3). When they were being defeated by the Philistines. Not, "let us seek the LORD, but "that the Ark may save us from the Power of our enemies." The people of Israel had turned the very footstool of God, where we had promised to meet with the people and atone for their sins, into a trophy that they try to wield for their own ends.

The people of Israel had a diminished view of God. God had become small in their eyes. Sure, powerful enough to defeat their enemies and fight their battles, but small enough to be manipulated and to serve their purposes.

While we can be quick to condemn Israel's actions, we are not immune to their temptation. If we're honest, we must admit that it's often convenient to have God on our side. Facebook debates are a lot easier to win when God agrees with you. When God is on the side of our politician or party, or platform, it's hard to argue against. While we aren't fighting actual flesh and blood conflicts, we can be tempted to use God simply to win the moral or intellectual or political high ground.

I'm reminded of when Joshua and the people of Israel are just about to begin conquering Canaan. Just before the battle of Jericho, Joshua is met by the commander of the Lord's army. **"And Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" And he said, "No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped," (Josh 5:13-14).** While the Israelites presumed that God was their side regardless of their sin, God shows them by their defeat and the departure of the Ark that they were, in fact, not on his side.

Dagon and the Ark:

And the Philistines have the same low view of God. The Philistines bring the ark back to one of their chief cities in Ashdod. The Philistines were completely fine adding ark of the Lord to their local pantheon. They've clearly heard of the mighty work that God undertook against the Egyptians, and now want to appropriate some of this power for themselves. Two Gods are better than one, it would seem. But God makes clear to the Philistines, just as to Israel, that he will be merely a trophy or talisman that the people use for their own purposes.

After setting up the Ark next to Dagon, the temple priests arrive the next morning for worship, only to find Dagon, their local deity, bowing before the footstool of God. Their God, who had supposedly defeated the armies of Israel, is incapacitated. Is your God really that all-powerful if he needs Life Alert? "I've fallen and I can't get up."

The priests don't get the hint and so they prop him back up. The next morning, they find something even worse. Dagon again is bowing down before the ark, but this time his head and hands are cut off. He's not just incapacitated, but decapitated.

Without the use of hands, God removes the hands and head of Dagon. Removing the hands and head of a conquered foe was the ultimate demonstration of your power over them, like when David slays Goliath and takes off his head.

God was declaring victory over the God's of the Philistines. He shows himself to be a conquering king, cutting off the head and hands of his enemy.

This God Dagon who had presumably delivered Israel into the hands of the Philistines and allowed them to capture the ark cannot even protect his own statue from destruction, and is powerless against the God of Israel. God demonstrates the impotence of their idols.

The Hand of God:

While the people of Ashdod realize something amazing has happened, they don't get the hint, and so God begins to show his power against the Philistines themselves. Here we see a reoccurring phrase in the text, "The hand of the LORD," — **"The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod," (5:6).** Your translation probably has the word "tumors" there for the afflictions. These tumors were more than likely either swollen lymph nodes, like you see in the Bubonic plague, or they were hemorrhoids.

The language here echoes the language of Exodus. Just as God's hand was heavy on the people of Egypt, God shows his power and his anger against the Philistines. As the plague worsens, the Philistine cities begin to play a game of Hot Potato with the Ark. It goes from Ashdod to Gath, and then to Ekron. But no matter where it ends up, the Philistines continue to be plagued by God.

The Philistines determine that they'd rather not end up like Egypt, and so devise a plan to get the Ark out of their land. Their priests advise them to **"make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land," (6:5)** This is not an altogether foolish endeavor. The Philistines show that they know what God did to the Egyptians in bringing out his people, the plagues, etc. To the credit of the Philistine rulers, they acknowledge God's power and seek to appease him before anything worse befalls them and their cities.

Their actions aren't the result of true repentance or regard for God, but merely an act of self-preservation. The Philistines simply wanted to get God out of their hair. But there is still a tinge of doubt. Was it really God who had caused all these afflictions, or was it merely fate? The Philistines devise a test to prove it.

They get two milk cows, take away their nursing calves, and have them pull the ark as far away as possible. If they go straight back to Israel, this was the hand of the Lord. Otherwise, it was all a simple twist of fate.

The Ark Returns:

I hope we don't miss the humor in this story. God wants to put the Philistines and their Gods to shame. The Philistines, who at the beginning of the story have beaten Israel to submission become laughingstocks. The last image we have of them is them timidly following the ark at a distance, seeing what direction it would go.

The cart goes straight back to Israel, not turning right or left, and stops in the first town across the border. God has delivered the ark back to his people. It seems like a happy ending. You've got to wonder what the people of Israel thought when they opened up the cart and saw golden mice and golden tumors.

The story, however, ends on a bitter note. The return of the Ark of God ought to have been a joyous occasion for the people of Israel. And it definitely starts that way. The Levites prepare an offering for the Lord, and the people gather to sacrifice and celebrate the re-entry of God's presence among his people. However, the rejoicing soon turns to terror and despair, as God strikes down 70 men for looking into the ark.

If your familiar with this story, or the story of Nadab and Abihu at all, when God sends fire from heaven after they offer up unapproved incense, you've probably wondered at God's reaction. It's so shocking and sudden. It seems almost offensive to us to think of God doing such a thing.

But God's answer to the people after the sin of Nadab and Abihu is this: **"Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified," (Lev 10:3).** God's ultimate concern for his holiness is crucial to understand. The people of Beth-Shemesh like Nadab and Abihu, did not have an appropriate fear of God or of his holy presence. Filled with idle curiosity and vain speculation, they are quickly and tragically reminded of God's holiness.

Here in our text this morning, we are presented with two sinful ways of approaching God. The first is to see God merely as a means to our own ends, using God as a trophy or talisman whose job is merely to grant our desires. The second is to see him as an angry deity who needs to be appeased. We either seek to appropriate God or we seek to appease him.

In either case we make little of our sin. Just as Israel did, they thought that they could have God in their presence despite their open sin and rebellion against him. And as the Philistines thought, God's anger could be easily be satisfied by returning the ark and offering a present.

What is the remedy for such faulty views of God?: God's holiness. God displays his holiness to the people of Israel, and shows that he is not a God merely to be used or satisfied, but a holy God to whom we must give an account.

The remedy, however, seems worse than the disease. Upon seeing this display of God's holy wrath, the Israelites ask the question "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up from us?" When we come face to face with God's holiness, we are immediately struck with the awareness of our own unholiness.

When Isaiah appears before the presence of God in Isaiah 6, and he beholds him who the Seraphim describe as "Holy, Holy, Holy," Isaiah's only response is to declare, **"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Is 6:5).** Seeing God's holiness reveals to us our inability to approach him because of our sin. And this question becomes a reoccurring theme in the Old Testament: "Who can stand before the Lord, this holy God?"

And So, the people send the ark away to Kiriath-Jearim. The story ends with God's people lamenting after the Lord. There is a lingering tension. God is in their midst, but they grieve because of their sin which keeps them at a distance.

The future of the Ark:

So, what happens to the Ark? Well, the Ark will stay in Kiriath-Jearim for nearly 100 years. We don't hear of it again really until David seeks to bring the ark into Jerusalem. The next time we see the ark, virtually the same thing happens. In 2 Samuel

6, David wants to bring the ark into Jerusalem. And just like in our story, it's a time of celebration and praise.

But the ox stumbles, and a priest named Uzzah reaches to try and steady the ark. And God strikes him dead. And David asks a similar question. **And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" 2 Sam 6:9.** Even David, chosen by the Lord, the King of Israel realizes that the holiness of God is no small matter. And again, the ark sits for a while.

Eventually the ark makes it to Jerusalem, and is finally put back into the temple. But after the establishment of the temple, we really don't hear much about the Ark. The Prophet Jeremiah tells us of a new day, when God's presence would be expanded beyond the ark: **"... in those days, declares the LORD, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem," (Jer 3:15-17).**

God's presence will not just be limited to the temple or to the ark, but the entire city of Jerusalem will be God's throne. But this only amplifies the problem. If God's presence is going to be extended to all of Jerusalem, if God is going to truly and fully dwell with his people, how will he make us able to dwell with him? That doesn't deal with the sin problem. So the Old testament ends with God's people looking for God to come and dwell with them.

The True Ark:

And, as we know, God did come to dwell with his people. Christ, God incarnate, came into the world. Immanuel, "God with us." As John says, **"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth," (John 1:14).** But Jesus did not come merely as another Ark of the Covenant. Christ came to deal with the problem of sin that kept us from access to God and which pronounced God's holy judgment on us.

And so God's hand is sent forth against his own son. As Isaiah says,
**Surely, he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.**

**But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Is 53:4-5)**

That word we see in verse 4, "Smitten by God" is the same word that we saw in 1st Samuel. Christ was "smitten" or "struck" by God. God's holy wrath against sin is poured out not on us, but on Christ.

In what appeared to be a defeat, Christ would allow himself to be overpowered by the hands of sinners. The glory of God, so it seemed, had departed. But just as we see God's sovereign hand at work against the Philistines, so we see God's sovereign control over the schemes of sinful man and of Satan. Through his death on the cross, God makes a mockery of the powers of this world. God deals the fatal blow to the enemy of God's people, and conquers death itself.

The question that we hear again and again throughout the Old testament, “who can stand before a Holy God” has been answered for us in Christ. Through his sacrifice, Christ secured our salvation. As the Apostle Paul says, **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,” (2 Cor 5:21).**

And Jesus stands as our mediator, enabling us access to God through his blood. The holiness which we lack and which we desperately need to stand before God has been granted to us in Christ. And Christ invites us to approach. Here through the work of Christ, both of these attitudes we see in our text this morning towards God are demolished. We don’t come brazenly; demanding God act on our behalf. We don’t come in our own strength or by our own merit, seeking to pacify an angry God. We approach the throne of grace as sinners. It’s called the mercy seat because it is for those in need of mercy. We come reverently, to the very throne of God. But we do indeed come with boldness. And we come as poor and needy sinners.

Hebrews says it this way: **“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,” (Heb 4:15-16).** The author of Hebrews is inviting us to do something that would have been unthinkable under the Old Covenant. To invite a sinner to “approach the mercy seat” was a death sentence in the Old Testament. But just as the high priest would approach the ark once a year, and sprinkle it with the blood of the sacrifice, we approach the true throne of God, sprinkled clean by the blood of Christ.

John paints a picture of the New Creation in Revelation 21. In his description, the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple are conspicuously absent. He says, **“I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple,” (Rev 21:22).** Christ is the true ark, the place of God’s presence among his people. Christ is the true mercy seat, the place of atonement for God’s people and satisfaction for the sins of God’s people. Through the perfect work of Christ on our behalf, we come boldly before the very throne of God.