

God in a Box

Date: 14 May 2023, 5th Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Series: Seeking a King

Texts: (4:1b-7:2) 5:1-6:13, 19-20

Whose side is God on?

Open with a [clip](#) from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* - "an army that carries the ark before it is invincible"

That's a clip from the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with Harrison Ford starring as Indiana Jones. Today we're looking at one of the texts that the film draws inspiration from. Although I would say, remember the film is a piece of fiction. Not everything you see in it is true! Our text today is 1 Samuel 4-6 and the focus moves from Samuel to the Ark of the Covenant. The question these chapters ask is "whose side is God on?" Lots of people throughout history have claimed that God is on their side. We see this today where the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox church has called Putin a miracle of God and framed the war in Ukraine as a kind of holy war. In the lead up to the 2020 presidential election some Christians prophesied that Trump would be re-elected. We're right to have a healthy suspicion towards these sorts of claims. What better way to justify your actions than to say that God is on your side? But it's not just national policy, we can also make this claim when it comes to our personal behaviour. If we always find God agreeing with us, never challenging us but always justifying our attitudes and actions, then maybe we've put God in a box. Instead the question we should be asking ourselves is, "Am I on God's side?"

For those for whom English is not your first language, to put someone in a box is to have preconceived ideas about who they are and how they will behave, and to treat them according to your expectations, the box you've put them in. That's the situation we meet in these chapters. There are 3 acts to the story this morning. Act 1 - Israel puts God in a box. Act 2 - The Philistines put God in a box. And Act 3 - Israel puts God in a box again. As we follow the story of the ark over these chapters we'll see that you can't put God in a box. He is bigger than the expectations of God's people and he's bigger than the expectations of their neighbours. He's bigger than our expectations.

Act 1 - Israel puts God in a Box - chapter 4

Our reading today starts with the words,

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod.¹ As my friend who is an Old Testament lecturer at Ridley College in Melbourne says, everything about this sentence is wrong. The Philistines are the big bad guys in 1 Samuel, constantly threatening Israel. They lived in 5 coastal cities on what is today the Gaza strip. What about the Ark?

The Ark is the Ark of the Covenant. You can read about its construction in Exodus 25. It was a wooden box about a metre or so long and a bit over half a metre wide and high. This was overlaid in gold and

¹ 1 Samuel 5.1

on the lid were two golden cherubim, winged angels. Two poles were attached to it, one on either side, so that it could be carried by the priests as Israel travelled. It was kept in the centre of the Tabernacle, Israel's sacred tent, in the Holy of Holies. The ark was the symbol of God's presence, and the place where he touched the earth. The repeated phrase in Samuel is that Yahweh of hosts, to use God's personal name, is "enthroned between the cherubim."²

It's this Ark that the Philistines capture and take to Ashdod. This is an absolute disaster for Israel. How could this have happened? The story unfolds back in chapter 4. God had promised to fight for Israel, but as chapter 4 opens, Israel finds themselves being defeated by the Philistines. They ask, "Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that he may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies."³ So they get the ark. When the Philistines find out that the ark has come, they say, "A god has 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."⁴

So far the Israelite plan looks good. They're thinking what we heard from Indiana Jones - "an army who controls the ark will be invincible." Surely with the ark there, God will bring them victory. The Philistines too have heard about Israel's God and all he did to the Egyptians and they are afraid. But in the midst of this story there's an ominous note. The two priests who are there with the ark are, you guessed it, Eli's wicked sons, Hophni and Phineas, who have been violating the sacrifices and the women who've come to worship. Israel takes the ark into battle but it's a disaster. They are crushed. Hophni and Phineas die and the ark is captured.

What went wrong for Israel? How could this disaster happen? The key lies in what the ark contained. And what was that? The 2 stone tablets upon which God had written the 10 commandments. The ark was the ark of the covenant, that agreement between Yahweh and Israel that he would be their God and they would be his people. And the 10 commandments outlined the terms of the covenant, that for Israel to be God's people meant that they committed to worshipping him alone and following his laws, laws like "you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not covet." Laws that Hophni and Phineas treated with contempt. And if that's how they as the spiritual leaders of the nation were treating God, well how much more the nation? The problem for Israel was that they were treating the ark like a talisman, and God like a genie. If they brought the ark into battle, God had to fight for them. And all the while they were ignoring him and his laws. He was there simply for when they wanted him, to do what they wanted. They were putting God in a box.

Isn't this how we sometimes treat God? We turn to him when we've got a problem and need help, but the rest of the time we ignore him and live to please ourselves. Imagine if a friend or a family

² 1 Samuel 4.4, 2 Samuel 6.2; cf. 2 Kings 19.15, Psalm 80.1, Psalm 99.1

³ 1 Samuel 4.3

⁴ 1 Samuel 4.7-8

member treated you like that? You want a relationship, and instead you're being used. How much more for the God who loves us, and who made us to worship him?

The close of Chapter 4 underlines this national disaster with personal tragedy. The prophecy God spoke through the boy Samuel has come to pass. When the news is brought back to the aged Eli, he falls off his chair and breaks his neck. When Phineas' pregnant wife hears the news. She goes into premature labour and gives birth to a son. But she has lost too much blood and as she dies she names the boy Ichabod, which literally means "where is the glory?" The chapter closes with her words, "The glory has departed from Israel for the ark of God has been captured."⁵ That theme of glory runs through these chapters. And you might remember from a couple of weeks ago the Hebrew word for glory is *kavod*, and it can also mean heavy. For both Eli and Phineas' wife this is the greater disaster that God's presence, his glory has left Israel. And that brings us to Act 2.

Act 2 - The Philistines put God in a Box - chapters 5-6

Despite the fearsome reputation of Israel's god, the Philistines had routed Israel. In the Ancient Near East when nations went to war it was as though their respective gods were fighting each other. Victory meant that your god was victorious over the enemy's god. Clearly if Israel had lost, that must mean that Yahweh had lost, and the Philistine's god Dagon had won. And so they take the ark to their temple and place it beside the statue of Dagon. Maybe Yahweh is now on Dagon's side. Maybe he's there as a paying homage to Dagon as a defeated foe. Whatever the case, the Philistines have put Israel's God in a box.

If Act 1 was a tragedy, Act 2 is a comedy. Because the next morning the people of Ashdod wake up early to find Dagon fallen face down in front of the ark. Overnight it seems that Dagon has gotten into a fist fight with a box and been knocked out. Clearly he's a bit unsteady on his feet and needs a little help. So, chapter 5 verse 3, "They took Dagon and put him back in his place." But the next morning finds Dagon well and truly down and out. He's on the ground before the ark, this time with his head and hands broken off. Dagon is powerless, because he's just a statue, made by human hands. Yahweh, the LORD, the god of Israel, he is true and living God.⁶

If Dagon was round 1, in round 2 it's the Philistines versus Yahweh. And this time things descend to toilet humour. Read with me verse 6. "The LORD's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumours." Now scholars are in two minds over what the text means here. Because of the rats in the following chapter, and the fact that the touch of God often is a synonym for plague, some scholars think the tumours were buboes, the pus filled boils of the bubonic plague. However the traditional reading is haemorrhoids. Either way it's a disaster. The people of Ashdod say, "the ark can't stay here!" So they send it to Gath. But the

⁵ 1 Samuel 4.22

⁶ Cf. Psalm 115:2-8

same thing happens there, so they send the ark to Ekron. Each time the city panics, and says, “They have brought the ark of the god of Israel to kill us!”

As you read the chapter, you notice again and again the phrase, “The Lord’s hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod”, “his hand is heavy on us and on our god Dagon,” “God’s hand was very heavy on [the city]”.⁷ This is that word *kavod* again, glory or heavy. God’s presence, his glory, lies heavy on the Philistines. But it’s in judgement. And so they cry out for mercy, and they say, “Send the ark of the god of Israel away...”⁸

At last, after 7 months, the Philistine leaders hatch a plan to send the ark back. They realise they’ve made a terrible mistake. Their priests and diviners say, “don’t send it back without a gift, by all means send a guilt offering.” But what could lift God’s hand? They improvise a gift to make atonement - 5 gold tumours, one for each city. And 5 gold rats, one for each ruler. They’re treating Israel’s god like sympathetic magic, where in fact it’s only because of God’s mercy that he lifts his hand. The models only serve to mock the Philistines: By their own designation, their cities are haemorrhoids or pus filled buboes, and their rulers are rats!

The cart with the cows miraculously making its way back to Beth Shemesh makes it clear that yes, this has indeed all been the work of the God of Israel, the true and living God. He needs no human agents to fight for him or act on his behalf. He is able to look after himself and his people, if only they would trust him. The true and living God cannot be put in a box by his people or by the nations. He’s too big, too glorious. He’s not to be toyed with. That brings us to Act 3.

Act 3 - Israel puts God in a Box, again - 6.19-7.2

The return of the ark to Israel is a moment of rejoicing, but this story finishes on a note of fear. Because it seems not everyone in Israel has learned from their own defeat or the misery of the Philistines. The men of Beth Shemesh think that the ark is something of a curiosity, a magical item to be poked and prodded and gawked at. In verse 19 we read: “But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death because they looked into the ark of the LORD. The people mourned because of the heavy blow the LORD had dealt them.” We’re stopped in our tracks. We’ve been enjoying the comedy of chapters 5 and 6 thinking, “those stupid Philistines. What idiots!” And now this. The glory of God left Israel with the ark. God’s glory lay heavy on the Philistines. Now God’s glory has returned to Israel. Those remaining in Beth Shemesh ask the question that should have been on everyone’s mind through these chapters - “Who can stand in the presence of the LORD, this holy God?”⁹

Who can stand in the presence of this holy God? God’s glory is his holiness. His complete otherness. His moral perfection. His goodness. His glory is a heavy thing, a weighty thing. He is not to be

⁷ 1 Samuel 5.6,7,11

⁸ 1 Samuel 5.11

⁹ 1 Samuel 6.20

treated lightly, to be trifled with. He is light, in him there is no darkness. His eyes are too pure to look upon sin. Oh yes there are all sorts of ways that we put God in a box. We can think of him like a cosmic vending machine, where you put in the right prayers, the right moral performance and then think that he owes us. And what do you do when the vending machine doesn't work? You get angry and you kick it. So we get angry at God when he doesn't give us what we want. We take it out by running away from him or saying he doesn't exist. We put God in a box when we make him fit our moral agenda instead of obeying his word when it comes to caring for the needy or who we sleep with or what we do with our bodies.

But do you know what the biggest way we put God in a box is? We think that he isn't holy. That his goodness means that he's like a corrupt judge who turns a blind eye to injustice. That his love means he will say that offending him doesn't matter. No, his goodness means he is opposed to evil. His love means that how we treat him is deadly serious.

Who can stand in the presence of this holy God? What did Isaiah say when he had a vision of the thrice holy God? "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell amongst a people of unclean lips."¹⁰ What did Peter say when he first met Jesus? "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"¹¹ The people of Beth Shemesh asked exactly the right question. Who can stand in the presence of this holy God? Isaiah couldn't. Peter couldn't. I can't. You can't. At least not in ourselves if we're honest. We can only stand because there is one who stood in our place. God's unveiled holiness means death when it comes into contact with sin. And in the cross that is just what happens. Jesus, God himself come in the flesh, takes our sin upon himself. There on the cross the holiness of God brings death to sin, to him, so that the Lord's hand might be lifted from us, and we might live. He is the perfect and final guilt offering, not some ridiculous golden sculpture. And he does this out of his great love for you and for me. So with Jeremiah we can say, "because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail."¹²

In C.S Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Susan discovers that Aslan, the Christ figure of the story, is a lion she asks Mr Beaver, "Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "Safe?" said Mr Beaver. "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." God is holy. His glory is a heavy thing. He is not safe. But he is good. In Christ he's our King.

¹⁰ Isaiah 6.5

¹¹ Luke 5.8

¹² Lamentations 3.22