

The Covenant Call to Community

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

Pentecost 8

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2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

The iconic film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* with Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones came out in 1981. It was so captivating and fun that, as the subsequent Indiana Jones films rolled out over the years, my husband, Ed, and I showed up for *The Temple of Doom*, *The Last Crusade*, *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. And I was happy to read that the fifth in the series is due to be released in 2021, forty years after the first film. Some of you may be Indiana Jones fans, too.

The ark in the story is the Ark of the Covenant. In the first film, archeologist Indiana Jones tries to beat a band of Nazis to the unique religious relic, which was central to their plans for world domination.

Dr. Indiana Jones is brilliant, is terrified of snakes, has a vengeful accomplice, and is in constant peril. The ark is believed to carry an incredibly powerful energy that must not fall into Nazi hands. Marcus Brody says in the film that an army that carries the ark before it is invincible.

The Ark is both precious and dangerous.

The Ark is the center of our story from 2 Samuel. So what is the Ark, and what did it mean to move it?

The Ark of the Covenant is described in the book of Exodus as a gold covered wooden chest; it was about 4' long and 2 1/2' wide and high. On the lid there were 2 cherubs facing downward with their wings extended upward. There were 4 rings near the feet of the chest. Poles were placed through the rings as the ark was carried. It was built close to 1440 B.C. and was kept in a tabernacle, a moveable tent of worship, and was always screened off. Only the High Priest entered this space on the Day of Atonement. The Ark traveled with the people, though it was never touched.

The contents of the Ark, according to the Bible, were the 2 stone tablets of the Ten Commandment given by God to Moses on Sinai. The Ark symbolized the PRESENCE of God and God's Covenant with the people of Israel.

It is about 500 years old at the time of today's story about King David.

Even though it was declared missing in the year 63 A.D., 43 million Orthodox Christian Ethiopians are certain that the Ark of the Covenant rests in the small church of St. Mary of Zion in the sacred city of Aksum, where monks humbly guard the relic. Every

Orthodox Church in Ethiopia has a replica of the ark. The replicas are used for gathering the faithful in frequent processions. Thousands still participate.

The old chapel of St. Mary is falling apart, and a new temple is being built. The ark will be moved into the new space with secrecy. [1]

The Ark may be respectfully revered in a resting place in Ethiopia, but before this it moved a lot. Back in 1 Samuel 4, we read that the Philistines captured the Ark. But it brought them only trouble, which freaked them out, so they voluntarily returned it to the house of Abinadab where it sat on a shelf and gathered dust for twenty years before our story.

David's decision to retrieve the Ark and move it to Jerusalem was ambitious and ambiguous. It was pious and political, respectful and manipulative. Now, the conservative old guard who remember the tribal covenant will *have* to come to Jerusalem to visit the PRESENCE of God! In order to stay connected to the ancient symbol of the covenant, they will have to open up and accept the new regime. They will have to accept David as King!

This is clever and calculated. But it is more than this. It is ambiguous. The Ark in Jerusalem is also a sign of a new beginning for Israel.

The LORD who gave them the covenant at Sinai, who guided them through the wilderness, was with them and for them. Not only could the people look back to the promises of the past, but also they could look forward into the new venture with hope. [2]

This old story of ambiguous action invites us to look both ways.

Our lesson leaves out important and hard to understand pieces. In the move to Jerusalem, one of the men tried to steady the Ark as it was tipping. As he reached to touch it, he was struck dead. Scholars have been stewing over this for centuries. Uzzah's death scared David, so he parked the Ark for three months before he regained courage to keep going.

And at the end of our lesson, David's wife, Michal (Saul's daughter), is disgusted with David's carrying on. She looks like the villain in these verses. But the whole story tells us that she loved David. However, David, it seemed, preferred the adoration of the crowd and the affection of other women.

The story tells us that Michal had no children. Did David punish her for her critique?

Even though, in many ways, David is the "Golden Boy," if we read carefully we can see that the Bible tells us that David's motives are not always pure. And yet the presence of God is with him.

Self-serving David is also blessed! [3]

The old story invites us to consider the ambiguity in our own hearts, lives, and world; to look for and expect the presence of God.

The old story also reveals that it is risky to hang our hearts and hope in one place, one nation, one city, and with one person ...

Ambiguity challenges us. It is good to look both ways. We like to come to conclusions about people and life even while the picture is still developing. We focus on a snapshot; we make conclusions.

Research shows that there are times we tend to see patterns where none exist and embrace certainty when none is justified.

Like: "You never listen!" "You don't care!" "You're always against me!"

And it isn't surprising that when we are stressed, tired, distracted, and in discomfort, it heightens our appetites for order and absoluteness.

Living with uncertainty is part of life. [4]

It helps to remember that inside the Ark of the Covenant, guarded by gazing angels, were the Ten Commandments—the Gift of On-going Faith Formation for the people of Israel.

There were two tablets. On one side were the first three commandments concerned with our relationship with God: Love the Lord your God, have no other gods, use God's name with respect, and remember the Lord, and rest!

On the other tablet were seven more on how to relate to and love the neighbor: Honor your parents, do not murder, be faithful, do not steal, speak the truth about each other, do not crave your neighbor's possession. These are not outdated! Love God and love each other ... keeping these is what connects the people to God and each other.

The Covenant is not lost somewhere forever or locked away in a leaky chapel in Ethiopia.

The covenant—the promises of God—is with us. Written on our hearts. This is the center that holds us in times of uncertainty and ambiguity.

To be human means that we are mortal, fallible, and faulty. Often, it seems, we get in our own way. Like David.

It helps us to understand that not everything that happens to us is about us.

It is normal to personalize our experiences. After all, our experiences and our memory of them shape our identity. But it is also an *adaptive illusion*. Often the words and actions of others have little to do with us directly. Something in their life generates their words or behavior. What others say and do is often more about who they are and what they are feeling than about us.

It can be really hard not to take comments personally, not to feel wounded or angry. Nowadays there seem to be so many friendships and family systems that are strained by differing points of view related to the divisions in government, policies and leadership styles.

Our relationships are at risk!

When we are too focused on ourselves and our feelings, we misread others, and it undermines empathy and tolerance. It traps us in a bubble. We can waste energy recovering from insults that were never really meant for us in the first place! [5]

Life and our relationships is a developing picture. There is disappointment, confusion, conflict, and disagreement. But there is more than this, especially when we remember relationships matter!

Years ago, I complained/worried out loud to my mother about a decision of my older teenage son. (Now, years later, it doesn't seem like a big deal!) My mother responded with memorable advice: "He's not doing this to irritate you or to rile you in any way." In other words, "He's a kid. It's not malicious."

I remember feeling stunned. My mother, the queen of proper behavior, was advising me to chill!

"Gee, Mom, I think you're right! And ... how come you weren't so understanding when I was his age?"

"Well," she answered plainly, "I didn't have anyone to help me."

We live in ambiguous days and times, at home and in the world. This past week millions of people from around the world watched and prayed as professional divers from many countries rescued boys trapped in a Thailand cave. What courage, commitment, and self-sacrifice! What impressive strategizing and determination! Look what we can do when we have the same priorities and when we work together! One rescuing participant said, "I don't know if this is a miracle or science!"

Millions of people around the world watched and prayed for hundreds of other children separated not in caves but in holding places, far from parents.

Deadlines passed. Is this too hard? Where are the courage, commitment, and bravery here? We can't give up. And we have to do more than pray, get mad, or waste our breath arguing.

So, we look inside the chest of what we have, into our commitment to the well-being of others.

And, (as I mentioned in the pastoral greeting) as a congregation we have shared \$5,000 from the Capital Campaign tithe with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, a service agency that has helped develop the picture of lives for almost eighty years. You can read more about this in the Courier, the next Vineyard, or online. Thank you for your generosity that makes this needed gift possible.

The Ark of the Covenant carried the Ten Commandments. It was revered and sacred, a symbol of God's presence. But the presence and promises of God, and the love that connects us to God and to each other, does not and cannot live in a closed chest guarded by angels or monks!

The presence of God lives with us and in us as we live out ancient expectations and into future hopes of what it means to live together in community. We look both ways, to the past and to the future—before we cross the street.

We consider the covenant call to live and work together for the common good:

What if every man and woman—every victim of abuse, every abandoned child, every lonely senior, every intellectually and physically disabled person, every single parent, every gay and transgender person, every prisoner, every homeless person and every billionaire—everyone we love, and everyone we fear, were actually the image of God in our midst, equal in humanity, in dignity, and in worth? How then should we live?

No one can be fully seized by this truth all the time. Some of us have trouble any of the time. But this is the challenge of faith. It is not a form of nostalgia. It is essentially disruptive; an eternal revolution in human affairs.

— Michael Gerson, *The Washington Post* [6]

We can be complicated like David, pious and political, respectful and rude, charming and compassionate, dependable and deceitful, forgetful and faithful. But we are connected to each other for better and for worse. We are not Raiders of the Lost Ark but Keepers of the Lasting Covenant.

Amen.

REFLECTION:

- *Where, and to whom, do you go to feel connected to dependable love, comfort, and hope for the future?*
- *Where do you go to belong?*

Resources:

[1] "Is the Ark of the Covenant in Ethiopia?," May 22, 2016, aleteia.org

[2] Brueggemann, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*

[3] Nysse, R. W., "Commentary on 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19," workingpreacher.org, July 12, 2009

[4] Drevitch, Gary, "The Perils of Ambiguity," *Psychology Today*, November 3, 2015

[5] Pincott, Jena A., "Lessons You Won't Learn in School," *Psychology Today*, May 1, 2018

[6] Gerson, Michael, "Evangelicals are having their own #MeToo moment," *The Washington Post*, May 7, 2018

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