

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Ark of the Covenant*

SERIES: *1 Samuel*

SCRIPTURES: *1 Samuel*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to Eugene Peterson Commentary; Bible Project (Tim Mackie); Brazos Commentary; Tim Keller;*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is good to worship with you today. Everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning in on the live stream.

Hey we're studying the book of **1 Samuel (graphic)** in your Bible. And this transition that takes place in Israel's history as they move from being led by Judges to anointing their first King. We began two weeks ago with Hannah's story. Talked about the deep personal pain she experienced, and how she walked through that pain. And we said she becomes an example to us about how to deal with some of the pain we also experience in life. Last week we met Hannah's son, Samuel. And he's a key figure in the book, becomes kind of the lead priest in Israel. And through his story we talked a little bit about learning to hear and discern God's voice.

If you have your Bible today turn to 1 Samuel 4.

Today, the story isn't so much about a person as it is an object. A significant object that shows up in the story of God's people in good ways and bad ways. In fact, the story and intrigue surrounding this particular object has fascinated people for hundreds, even thousands of years. There are **(PIC OF INDIANA JONES)** books, movies, conspiracy theories about this object!

Do you have any idea, what object we are talking about?

I. The Ark of the Covenant.

So, before we get into our passage, let's start with this...

A. What exactly was the Ark of the Covenant?

The Ark of the covenant was basically a **sacred box (PIC)**, about 4 feet long and about 2 feet wide and 2 feet tall. It was made of wood and then overlaid with gold. It's lid was made of solid gold and was called the Mercy Seat. Two cherubim or angel like creatures sat at either end. Moses said that the Kabod or glory of God, sat on the Mercy Seat (Exodus 25:10-22). And God's voice would come from the kabod.

And the ark contained three items (Hebrews 9): the stone tablets with the 10 commandments written on them, that God had given to Moses on Mount Sinai. A jar of manna, the special heavenly food that God had given the people as they trekked across the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land and Aaron's staff. Aaron's staff was put in the ark, because when God was choosing one of the "tribes" to serve him as priests, Aaron's rod sprouted blossoms and almonds to symbolize God's choice of Aaron and his tribe for this sacred responsibility...you can read about this in Numbers 17. Each of the objects were intended to remind the Israelites of God's presence with them.

The Ark was kept in the Tabernacle in the Holy of Holies. There was nothing else in this most Holy Place. Just the Ark. No one could go back there...except the high priest...and only once a year.

The box was so sacred, nobody was allowed to touch the Ark. There were very specific instructions about how the ark was to be handled and even who was allowed

to handle it. There's a story in 2 Samuel where someone touches the ark and is struck dead.

So there is all of this mystery and superstition tied up in the ark and the stories of the ark. And we're gonna look at one of those stories here in just a minute. Much of the mystery comes from the fact that in some way, though God is everywhere, in some way his presence was more fully located at the ark. (Similar to the burning bush experience that Moses had.)

And while the Ark itself was never intended to be a magic box, with its own special powers, it very quickly came to represent **God's power and presence.**

Today, where is the Ark kept? Where is this sacred box? Well that's the billion-dollar question, isn't it? Nobody knows. I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago that there was this crucial event in the history of the Israelite people called **the Exile.** And two foreign nations come in and conquer the Israelites. And exile the people and they destroy, burn, ransack the Temple. A few hundred years later, Romans do the same thing. And somewhere in there, the Ark has been lost to history. Nobody knows what happened to it. Was it destroyed? Was it kept and is now hidden in some lost underground city? And so these legendary stories and expeditions about finding the "lost ark" have transpired down through history. And, and it's fascinating to think about...what if we were to discover/locate this sacred box? Is God's presence still with it? If somebody touched it today, would they drop over dead? Is the manna still good? What would happen if you would eat it? You see?

So, let's take a look at

B. The story of the lost ark

Not the one from the movies, but the one here in 1 Samuel...and then we'll talk about a few lessons we learn from the story of the ark. Ok?

1 Samuel 4 - Now the Israelites went out to fight against the Philistines.

So the nation of Israel went through a time period of being led by judges. And during this time things were not going well. They experienced all kinds of internal and external struggles. One of the primary external struggles was a group of people known as the Philistines. You're probably most familiar with one particular Philistine named Goliath. Anyway, the Philistines keep coming into the Promised Land territory and trying to run out the Israelites.

The Israelites camped at Ebenezer, and the Philistines at Aphek. ² The Philistines deployed their forces to meet Israel, and as the battle spread, Israel was defeated by the Philistines, who killed about four thousand of them on the battlefield. ³ When the soldiers returned to camp, the elders of Israel asked, "Why did the LORD bring defeat on us today before the Philistines?"

Remember, the big picture context here is Israel trying to make sense of God, when their enemies keep defeating them. Why would God allow this to happen? So Israel is in this battle with the Philistines and they're getting whooped. And so somebody get's this idea. How can we get God's help to defeat our enemies?

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."

⁴ So...they brought back the ark of the covenant of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim.

They remember the ark. And they think back on their history, how they took the ark with them into Jericho and walls came down. And how when they needed to cross the Jordan river into the Promised Land, the ark stopped the water. And they walked through on dry ground. And so they got this idea, let's get the ark, God's very

presence and take him into battle with us. Surely then we won't lose. Everybody cheers and is going ballistic, they have this secret weapon now.

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.

So the Israelites get whooped again and look at verse 11...

11 The ark of God was captured...

The Philistines capture the ark and they take it to the temple of their own god, **Dagon.**

We're now into chapter 5, and kind of a humorous episode in the story of the ark.

After the Philistines had captured the ark of God, they took it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. 2 Then they carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon.

We'll come back to this in just a moment, but Dagon was the Philistine god of "crop fertility and grain." In simple terms, he was the corn god. He made the crops grow.

³ When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place.

⁴ But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained.

In a sense here, the God of Israel, is showing his superiority to the Philistine god. It's kind of like Dagon is bowing down in worship to Yahweh. And what happens is that a plague starts to spread in the city among the Philistine people and people are dying. And they think this is the God of Israel doing this. So they send the Ark to a different Philistine city, Gath. And then a plague spreads in Gath. So they send to it to Ekron, but as the ark is coming to they city of Ekron, a crowd meets it at the gate of the city. And the people have heard about what is happening in these other cities and they say they're bringing in this god to kill us and a riot breaks out. And then the plague breaks out in that city. And the Philistines eventually say enough with this. Send this god back to it's people. And they actually send the ark back to the Israelites.

Really fascinating story, isn't it...but so what? Can we learn anything from this mysterious story of the ark? Let's take a look at four...

C. Lessons from the story of the ark.

First, one of the things this ancient writer was trying to communicate is that

1. Worship belongs to Yahweh only.

Ok, so this is a really interesting conversation. And important teachable moment here for all of us. Dagon was the corn god of the Philistines.

In the ancient world, and you'll pick up on this as you read through the stories of the Old Testament, there were **many gods**. This is called **polytheism**. Ancient peoples deified almost everything.

Corn, beauty, athletics, wine, partying, the sun, the moon, the ocean, the Nile river...as a result you could choose what god you were going to worship or follow. One of Yahweh's main concerns the whole way through the Hebrew Scriptures is that his people don't fall into the trap of worshipping other gods.

Interestingly enough, we actually see examples of polytheism, in many of the original Israelite stories. Sometimes people just assume that the original Israelites were **monotheists**...belief that **there is only one God**. But the original Israelites were more like "**monolatrists**" not monotheists. They believed many god's existed but that **they should only worship**, give their allegiance to **One god**...Yahweh.

For example the story of Israel escaping Egypt is a dramatic faceoff between Israel's God, Yahweh, in this corner, god over slaves and underdogs, newcomer on the world stage, making grandiose claims yet largely untested, and represented by his servant Moses. And in other corner the reigning and undisputed perennial world champions, the tag team of Egyptian gods represented by the priests and above all their Pharaoh. And each of the 10 plagues are not random displays of Yahweh's power, but rather a faceoff between Yahweh and the Egyptian gods.

This is why, for example, the 10 Commandments, if you read them closely you'll see this. What is the first commandment? **You shall have no other gods before me.**

Notice it doesn't say... "Remember there are no other gods out there..." rather the belief, at that time was...there may be other gods out there, but you should worship only me.

I've always thought, it would make for a great theology paper, interesting study...at what point did the people of Israel leave behind completely the notions of polytheism and become full monotheists.

The writer of 1 Samuel is not arguing whether Dagon exists or not, but he is arguing that Yahweh alone is to be worshiped.

Knowing this background information is helpful to understanding many of the stories in the Old Testament. But on a practical level, there's more to this conversation.

We often, I think, look back at some of the ancient folks and say how could they have made a god out of "that". How could they have deified the Nile river or wine or the moon or corn of all things?!

We think that ancient folks were simple and childish...but interestingly enough, deifying our world or aspects of our world, still exists in many of our lives today. It might look different for us, but we find this in our own lives. Today, for example we call them "swifties" (haha...no I'm just kidding). We too have a habit of deifying, to the point of worship, many things that are not to be worshipped.

For a long time, I've known this about **athletics** in my own life. I love sports. All kinds of sports. I don't believe that athletic equipment or soccer fields or competitions contain divine spirits. But if you look at my life closely enough, you'd probably begin to point out specific instances where it appears as if I am a worshipper of sports. I have this large, fairly flat, rectangular shaped object that sits on a stand in our living room that I sit stare at on many evenings and weekends, for extended periods of time. We call it a television. But it allows to indulge in sports. I

make all kinds of sacrifices for sports in my world. I'll sacrifice comfort. The other Saturday morning Keagan had a soccer game. It was about 50 degrees out and raining and all of these families, parents, grandparents lined the sideline to out in the miserable weather to watch their kids compete in sports. I'll sacrifice money. I'll sacrifice relationships.

And again, I do want to be careful in how I say this. Sports, athletics, competition, these are all very good things. I think God created us to participate in them and enjoy them and I can speak from personal experience when I say that we can learn much about life by competing in sports. Just like there's nothing inherently wrong or evil about the Nile river, or the moon or corn.

But there's this line, it's not clear line, between enjoying, participating, in athletics and athletics becoming this overly obsessive and primary driving force of my life, almost like a god. Somewhere in there, a line get's crossed. And it takes discernment and intimate conversation with God and with trusted friends to figure out where that line is and it may even look different for different individuals and families.

We too can fall into the trap of worshipping these things in our world that are not God. We worship our hobbies, we worship money, we worship our occupations. And so yes, in a literal sense we are not polytheistic, but I do wonder if in many of our behavior's polytheism lives on in our lives.

The reason Dagon was on the ground before Yahweh, was a reminder **that God alone should hold that most significant place of worship in our lives.**

Second, the ark also shows us that while God alone is to be worshipped...

2. God meets us in ordinary ways.

While the ark was certainly a sacred box...it's important to remember that it was still just that...a box. In fact did you know this? The ark was made of acacia wood. Do you know why they used acacia wood. Sometimes we can make it sound all sacred and spiritual. There must be something sacred about acacia wood. Nope. It happened to be the most common wood that was available at the time. God said, make my box out of the common wood.

It wasn't the box that was sacred, it wasn't the box that had special powers...it was God. And God met Israel through the box. This is so important to remember. We human beings are finite, limited and God by nature is eternal and infinite. And always we wonder, how can our worlds connect? How can we meet with the eternal God?

And what Scripture shows us is that time and again, God accommodates himself to our humanity. He meets us in our time and in our place and in our cultures and in our language in such ordinary ways. Our key theme for the year is humility. And you see the reason we value humility is because that's how God meets us.

One of our key passages is from **Philippians 2**, it says **“the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself**

And he allowed his presence to be made known in an ordinary, acacia wood box. God met Moses in a burning bush. He met Jonah at the bottom of the sea, in the belly of a large fish. He met Peter on fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. And he'll meet you too, in your world and in your circumstances and in your ordinary, everyday life.

He'll meet you washing dishes for your family. He'll meet you at your place of work as you go about performing your daily tasks. He'll meet you on your vacation as you walk down the beach. He'll meet you in the grocery store and on the sidelines of your kids soccer game. Sometimes, it's not so much about whether the place or event are sacred enough for God to show up...**it's whether we notice His presence even in the mundane and ordinary moments of life.**

And that as we become truly aware of His presence, here and now, wherever we are...every moment of everyday, every location we find ourselves, becomes a sacred meeting place with God.

See there are a lot of people, if we would find the ark of the covenant in some archeological discovery, who would soon start to believe that the box is magical, that the box carries some kind of super power and it wouldn't be long before people would be fighting over who the box belongs to and worshipping the box itself. As if God's presence can only be found there. But I wonder if the bigger concept behind the ark of the covenant, isn't so much that that particular box is sacred...but that God makes his sacred presence known, even in little boxes.

Third, there is an important warning here for all of us about

3. Weaponizing our faith.

For as long as humans have existed and believed in higher powers, there has been this tendency to use those higher powers for personal benefit and gain and often at the expense of those people we don't like.

In the story, the Israelites weaponize the ark. They were being defeated by their enemies and they needed help, motivation, justification and so they brought in their ark...seeking God's blessing and presence on their efforts to destroy their enemies.

This was common in the ancient world. Take your faith, your religion and use it as a means for destroying, conquering and killing other people. This is why violence has had a long history in the great religions of the world. Our religion is better than your religion and if you don't agree we'll fight it out and see which god comes out on top.

And when other religious groups weaponize their belief systems it doesn't necessarily surprise me. What surprises me is when followers of Jesus do this. Because weaponizing our faith in order to justify destroying and conquering and claiming a sense of superiority over other peoples goes against the way of Jesus and the Kingdom that he was establishing. You with me? **Weaponizing our faith goes against the way of Jesus.**

There's this amazing scene in the Gospels, when Jesus is in the garden, to be arrested before his crucifixion...

Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.

⁵² "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. ⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"

Jesus was saying, there is way, in which his Kingdom behaves, acts and comes to fruition. It's not about our faith prevailing over other faiths. It's that there is a way we go about acting out our faith, even if it leads to being hung on a Roman cross. The way of our faith, is the way of Jesus...it's that the first are last and the last first. It's about washing feet. It's about laying down our rights for the benefits of others, its about being servants. It's about winning by being humble and giving up our lives.

A warning here about weaponizing our faith. Ok, then final lesson...we must also be careful trying to

4. Fit God in a box.

Israel traded in the infinite God, creator of the universe for a “god-in-a-box.” Squeezed down to size, that they could control and manipulate Him for their own purposes and gain.

The living God cannot be used, manipulated, or managed. Spiritual power is not a matter of getting our hands on the right method or technology. The personal God cannot be reduced to an impersonal power. (Peterson 66)

It's a great warning about replacing God with inanimate objects. I want to be careful how I say this. But I sometimes wonder if we modern day Christians treat **the Bible** like the ancient Hebrews treated the Ark.

The Bible is so important, it is God's Word. It is sacred. It's not just any other book. To use the words of the BIC statements of faith, the Bible is authoritative and reliable. There is a sense in which it contains God's presence. At the same time, so was the Ark important. It was the symbol of their covenant with God. It wasn't just any old box. But neither was it God himself.

The point was never the Ark. If we were to discover the ark today, it would significant, important, fascinating...but we should be very careful thinking that somehow we will have “discovered God” because we found his box.

The point is never the Bible in and of itself. The Ark was intended to point people to God's presence. Just as the Bible points us to God's presence. But it is not fully God's presence. We don't seek to have a relationship with the Bible. We use the Bible to have a relationship with Jesus. The Bible doesn't save us from our sins. Only Jesus does that.

And maybe it sounds like I'm splitting hairs here, but I do think this is important for us to wrestle through. The emphasis of our faith makes a big difference. Sometimes we'll say things like, "We follow the Bible. We obey the Bible." When a better emphasis might be. "We follow Jesus. We obey Jesus."

Stuart Murry – **Most Anabaptists combined a tremendous love for Scripture with a refusal to place it above or even alongside of Christ as the Word of God.**

Palmer Becker (Anabaptist Essentials) – **Anabaptists have a high regard for the Scriptures and an even higher regard for Jesus. Jesus even more than the Bible is our final authority.**

And the reason, we have this emphasis is because Jesus taught us this.

Consider Jesus great commission in [Matthew 28](#) – Jesus says to his disciples, **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.**

Jesus is claiming ultimate authority.

What this means is that we read the Bible, study the Bible, memorize and meditate on the Bible, we love the Bible. And yet we don't think in terms of following the Bible – we follow Jesus.

Jesus invitation time and again in Scripture was “Come, follow me.”

At times, the ancient Israelites fell into the trap of fitting God into their little box and in the process missed out on a relationship with the living God.