

The Final Sacrifice
John 20:11 – 18
And other passages
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
February 7, 2016

The Ark of the Covenant - Exodus 37

37 Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half was its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. ² And he overlaid it with pure gold inside and outside, and made a molding of gold around it.

It is one of the ironies of the age in which we live that many, if not most, people's knowledge of the Biblical *Ark of the Covenant* is derived not from the Bible, but from Steven Spielberg's famous movie '*Raiders of the Lost Ark*.' It ranks #32 on the U.S # 62 on the world wide records of gross box office receipts. A lot of people saw this movie in the theaters and even more on home video and DVD. The premise is that the Ark somehow taps into an unseen spiritual power that will permit those who possess the Ark to wield that power for their own evil purposes. The bad guys in the movie want to lay hold of the Ark in order that they might grasp the power of God himself. That idea is as old as humanity itself. It is the human desire, expressed first by Adam and Eve, to be like God. It is the pagan premise: if I possess certain spiritually powerful items, perform specific spiritually meaningful acts or say specific spiritually potent words, then I can command and control the deity I call upon.

This may be the pagan premise, but it is not the Biblical teaching. The power of the Ark of the Covenant was never the ark itself, but rather the one to whom the ark pointed: the one who stood behind the ark and its symbolism. In the Biblical narrative there were a couple of occasions when the Israelite people themselves crossed the line, falling into the temptation of treating the Ark as a pagan charm. On each occasion God made the error of their actions and understanding clear to them in no uncertain terms.

I want us to think together regarding the Ark of the Covenant and what it has to say to us as we look to Ash Wednesday and the coming season of Lent.

A Description of the Ark of the Covenant

And he cast for it four rings of gold for its four feet, two rings on its one side and two rings on its other side. ⁴ And he made poles of acacia wood and overlaid them with gold ⁵ and put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark.

The movie '*Raiders of the Lost Ark*' did get one thing right: it accurately captured the look of the ark. The Ark of the Covenant was a box with a golden lid. There were rings on its sides, through which poles could be inserted, permitting the Ark to be carried on the shoulders of the priests. At either end of the golden lid

were representations of angelic beings, their wings sweeping up and over the golden top, creating the image of a throne like covering.

Inside the ark were three objects. There was a bowl, in which was preserved some of the miraculous manna that fed the people of Israel during their forty year wander in the wilderness of Sinai. There was a staff that had belonged to Aaron, which had miraculously flowered, as a sign that his clan had been chosen out of all the Israelite clans, to provide the perpetual lineage of the priesthood. They were the ones chosen to serve God in this way. And, there were the two tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses had received from the hand of God himself.

These three items symbolized in shorthand the message of God's relationship to his Chosen People. He had given them his law – The Ten Commandments. He would meet their physical needs and sustain them – The Manna. And he had established the proper manner and way in which his people were to worship him – the priesthood. In this manner, the Ark of the Covenant symbolized key elements of God's relationship to his people. But the imagery and meaning of the Ark of Covenant ran even deeper. The Ark itself declared a message to the people of Israel. It declared four important truths to the Israelites.

The Symbolism of the Ark

A symbol of God's Presence

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

The first thing: The Ark of the Covenant was a symbol of God's presence.

When we speak about God's presence we must do so in two ways. On one hand, God the creator is always present, everywhere. As the Psalmist says, there is no place we can go to flee or avoid God's presence. God has created this world and he continues to sustain it and he knows it, and us, intimately, completely, and utterly. In this sense, God is present everywhere.

But God's presence everywhere is what we call 'general' revelation. It is available to all and there is a uniformity to God's presence when we speak of it in this way. But there is also a sense in which we can speak of God's revelatory presence. This is not 'general' revelation, but 'special' revelation. This is the knowledge of God that is revealed to his people in a fuller, deeper and specific manner. This is the knowledge of God that comes from his specific self-disclosure.

Many people in the modern world understand that God is present everywhere. There is no place in the universe where God's presence will not be found. There are those who talk about how they *commune* with God in nature. The natural world around us can be very inspiring. Psalm 19:1 tells us

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.

But, nature and the heavens only take us so far. Nature and the heavens alone are not enough. Nature and the heavens declare God's glory, but God promises to *meet* us during the most important hour of our week, during worship. Worship is where God's nature and character is revealed to us.

In the days of the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant was an expression of the unique revelation of God's person, purpose and character to his people. Looking to the Ark we can meet God. We learn something of God's character that would not otherwise be revealed to us. The heavens declare the glory of God, but the Ark of the Covenant reflects his nature and person. The ark is special revelation. It is something unique; a special symbol of his presence.

This is the first thing declared by the Ark, God's presence. The second thing builds upon the first. It is a symbol of God's presence in the midst of his chosen people.

A symbol of God's presence in the midst of his chosen people - Numbers 2

2 The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, ²“The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.

What is it that made the Israelite people unique out of all the ancient peoples of the world? In many ways there is nothing unique or special regarding the ancient Israelites: other ancient peoples had kings, prophets, priests, laws, and sacrificial systems. God at one point in the Old Testament narrative reminds the people of Israel that, compared to the other peoples of their day, they were quite small, insignificant and ordinary. There was nothing distinctive in themselves. Rather, what was distinctive and made them special among the peoples of their day was the fact that God had revealed himself to them and had chosen, condescended, *to dwell in their midst* in a special way. What made them unique was the presence of God among them.

The Israelites began as a nomadic people, wandering the dessert tracks of the Sinai. When they would camp, they would pitch the portable temple, called the Tabernacle, in the center of the camp. The Tabernacle itself was in the middle of an enclosed courtyard and it was divided into two parts: the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holiest of Holies, for it was there that God's presence dwelt among his people most palpably. Other ancient people had their pagan gods. But only the Israelites had the presence of the one true God, creator of the Universe, dwelling in their midst in this special way.

The Ark was a symbol of God's presence. It was a symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people. Thirdly, it was a symbol of the spiritual distance between God's holiness and his people's sinfulness.

A symbol of the spiritual distance between God's holiness and his people's sinfulness

²and the LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat. ³But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. ⁴He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. ⁵And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram for a burnt offering.

If the president were to announce that he was to come to visit you in your home, you would embark upon a myriad of preparations for his visit. The more important the visitor, the more elaborate and involved the groundwork. The house would be cleaned thoroughly. The food would be above average. The schedule would be well thought out and everything planned for in advance. This is what we do when those of importance and rank come into our midst.

It was no different for the ancient Israelites. The presence of God in their midst imposed special duties, expectations and requirements upon them. Central among these things was the recognition and accommodation necessary as a result of God's pure holiness and his people's abiding sinfulness. Yes, God dwelt in the midst of his people, but, like the President of the United States in his residence at the White House, God dwelt behind a variety of walls and barriers. But, unlike the President of the United States in the White House, the walls and barriers were not present to protect God from the people, but rather to protect God's people from God.

The Tabernacle was placed at the center of the camp. Around the Tabernacle was a courtyard enclosed by a cloth fence. The campsites around the Tabernacle were occupied by the priests and their families. The common people pitched their tents farther out on the perimeter surrounding the Tabernacle. God was in their midst, but his presence was gated away. A common person might approach the entrance to the Tabernacle to confer with a priest and offer a sacrifice, but the Tabernacle compound was accessible only to priests themselves. The Tabernacle itself was not freely accessible, even to the priests. The Holy Place was entered daily by priests who were assigned the specific tasks of the day. The Holiest of Holies was rarely entered at all. It was entered only once per year, after elaborate ritual, and then only by the High Priest alone. The closer one came to the special presence of God, the more that was required in preparation, sacrifice and purity. These barriers performed an important function and communicated an

important spiritual truth: because of human sinfulness, the approach to God was limited, costly, and occasional.

The Ark symbolized God's presence. The Ark symbolized God's presence in the midst of his people. In addition, it symbolized that barrier that existed as a result of human sin. In order for God's people to come near to his presence, sin had to be dealt with in some manner. Fourthly, the Ark was a symbol of God's character.

A symbol of God's character

⁶And he made a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half was its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth.

This separation between God and his chosen people was not intended by God to be the final word, as can also be seen in the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was constructed in two parts; each part reflecting a key aspect of God's nature and character.

Law

Bezalel made the ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half was its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height.

On the one hand, the box segment of the Ark was a symbol of God's law, justice, righteousness and holiness. It contained the Ten Commandments, the foundation of God's requirements and expectations of his people. We have transgressed God's law. We have disobeyed it and have fallen under its judgment and punishment. We do not live in a manner that honors God's righteousness and holiness. It is for this reason that the barriers are erected between ourselves and God. The barriers are there for our protection. Were we to come into God's presence directly, while still in our sinful state, we would be consumed by his holiness.

But our separation from God due to sin is not the final word symbolically spoken by the Ark.

Mercy

⁶And he made a mercy seat of pure gold.

The top part of the Ark was called the 'mercy seat.' Its function was to remind God's people that the law was not the final word. A way of approach to God would be made available, not based upon their obedience to the law, but upon God's mercy and kindness. As I have described, there were many impediments and barriers between God and his people, but the way was not closed off entirely. There was still a passage. A way was still provided. A way based not upon our fulfillment of the requirements of the law, but one based upon God's graciousness: not by what we would do, but by what God would do.

Jesus' Last Words on the Cross – “It is finished!”

³⁰ When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The gospels record seven phrases that were spoken by Jesus while he was upon the cross. Each has great meaning and significance: but today as we approach Ash Wednesday and Lent, I want to ponder together the last words spoken by Jesus: “it is finished.” What was Jesus referring to in these words? Was he merely declaring that his life was over or is there more to his meaning than that alone?

First, note that Jesus' words tell us that with his death something has been accomplished. Note too, that what has been accomplished is complete and now ended. ‘It is finished’ means that Jesus Christ's task has been completed, accomplished. This is important, for it tells us that the Christian message is not to be understood as something that is cyclical, recurring, and repetitive. The Christians message of the resurrection is not to be understood as the annual renewal of nature that happens in springtime. The resurrection has nothing to do with the circle of life – birth, growth, death and rebirth. The retelling of the church calendar is the retelling of **The Story**. The resurrection is an event in history. It happened in time and space, like Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Pickett's charge at Gettysburg, or the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941. God is at work in history and God was at work in Christ's crucifixion.

Further, when Jesus declares ‘it is finished’ he is saying that all that has happened in his passion: the mockery, betrayal, cruelty and injustice, happened with a purpose. Nothing capricious, accidental or unexpected occurred. It was all according to plan. It all unfolded according to God's intention.

The meaning of Jesus' words ‘it is finished’ is perhaps best understood in the light of another detail we are told about the moment of his death: the veil was torn in the Jerusalem temple.

The Tearing of the Veil in the Temple – Matthew 27

⁵¹ And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

After the people of Israel settled in the Promised Land the temporary worship place was replaced by a permanent Temple, located in Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, this Temple had become very large and grand, but it still reflected the basic layout as God had instructed in the book of Exodus. A courtyard surrounded the Temple and the Temple itself was divided in two between the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies, where God's presence dwelt.

At the moment Jesus dies, the gospels tell us that the veil in the Temple is torn in two, from top to bottom. What is the meaning of this detail in the story? Remember the sequence: 1) Jesus declares 'it is finished;' 2) Jesus gives up his spirit (dies); 3) the veil in the Temple is torn in two. Something happened at the moment of Jesus' death that changes God's administration of the world. What has changed? Many things have changed.

Jesus' death brings to an end the Jewish sacrificial system. The sacrificial system had many layers of meaning, but in the end, its purpose was to enable the continuing presence of God in the midst of his people. With Jesus' death the final sacrifice has been offered. It is the complete sacrifice. It fulfills all that had been pointed to in the sacrificial system. Animal sacrifices are no longer needed. It is significant that wherever the Christian gospel has gone and taken root throughout the world, the practice of animal sacrifice has ended. The practice dies a natural death as people come to comprehend the greatness of what has been accomplished by Jesus Christ.

In the tearing of the veil we are told symbolically that the barriers that separated God from his people have been finally and fully breached. God is no longer far off. God is no longer inaccessible. The Holiest of Holies has been revealed. Now, instead of just one person, once per year, after elaborate preparation, being permitted to come into God's presence; God's people now have immediate access to him and can boldly come into his presence. He who had been hidden has been revealed.

In the tearing of the veil we are told that a new age has begun. The period of the Old Testament, the old covenant, was the age of promise. But now, through Christ's sacrifice, we have entered the period of the New Testament, the new covenant, the age of fulfillment.

Mary Magdalene at the Tomb

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. ¹²And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

There is one last thing that should be observed regarding the tearing of the veil in Temple at the moment that Jesus Christ died. By this point in Jewish history the Ark of the Covenant had been lost entirely. Jerusalem, as you know, had been sacked and conquered on several occasions. It is not clear when the Ark was taken and lost to the Jewish people. It did not matter, finally, for the ark was a symbol and the truth it communicated had long been assimilated into the heart, mind and religious practice of the Jewish people.

But the question in closing is this: if each facet of the Old Testament covenant finds its fulfillment and completion in some manner in the person and

work of Jesus Christ, then where is the fulfillment of the Ark of the Covenant?
What did it point to? Where is its counterpoint in the story of Christ?

The answer, I believe, is found in that moment when Mary Magdalene looks into the empty tomb of Jesus a second time. The tomb itself was a place of death. It spoke of the convicting power of the law of God. Human disobedience had brought sin and death into our world. Mary looks in and she sees there two angels. She sees two angels, one at the foot and the other at the head of a stone slab. These two angels are seated where they are at that moment to tell us that here, in the tomb of Jesus, is the fulfillment of the all that was intended and pointed to in the Ark of the Covenant. What Mary sees is the top of the Ark of the Covenant: the mercy seat, flanked on each end by an angel. The bottom half of the Ark contained the Law of God. Before the Law of God, we are condemned. We are dead. The top portion is the mercy seat, the place where we can find hope and acceptance. Here is the perfect melding of God's law and God's love. In the sacrifice and death of Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of the mercy seat. Remember that the box portion of the Ark of the Covenant contained three things: Aaron's staff, the Manna from the wilderness, and the Ten Commandments. In Jesus Christ we find the perfect High Priest. In Jesus Christ we find the bread of eternal life. In Jesus Christ we find the new Adam who fulfilled the Law. In Jesus Christ, God is revealed to us most fully; in Jesus Christ, God dwells in the midst of his people; in Jesus Christ, the gulf between mankind and God is bridged; and in Jesus Christ, we find God's character, both his righteousness and mercy, expressed perfectly. Everything symbolized by the ark, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. He is the true Ark of the Covenant.

Come to Christ in believing faith and be saved.

Say 'Amen' Somebody