

“Ichabod: Glory in the Dark”

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Second in a series on the story of God’s Ark in 1st Samuel 4-6

1st Samuel 5

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

1st Samuel 5.1-2
New International Version

It was long into the dark night when folks finally retired to bed, exhausted and elated. Soldiers wove to their barracks, intoxicated on fruits of their victory. Priests blew out the candles, and shut the doors tight.¹

Inside the temple, Dagon stood over his latest trophy.

For the ancients, wars were more than clashes between nations and armies. When people fought on earth, their gods were fighting in the heavens. So a victory meant glory for both your fighting men and your triumphant gods.²

Dagon was the Philistine’s chief god, and he was triumphant in his temple in the city of Ashdod. He had crushed Israel and its lord. The victory parade had brought the “Ark of the Covenant” of Israel’s god from the battlefield to where it now sat at Dagon’s feet. It was a trophy from another successful hunt.

Folks said that Israel’s god cannot be seen, has no images, no figures of carved stone, wood or metal. “What strange sort of god is this?” everyone wondered. Not much, it turned out. Just a gold-covered box. Dagon’s priests had searched inside. Just old junk.³ No god. Israel’s god had proved to be . . . empty.

That night, beyond Dagon’s noticing or concern, Israel wept for its dead, quaked at its defeat, and ached silently for God, who had been beaten.

II

We are in week two of this story. Last week, we heard the army of Israel being crushed. The Ark of the Covenant, this pulse of God’s presence and glory, was supposed to guarantee victory. Instead, the Philistines trotted it off as a spoil of war.

¹ Walter Bruggemann, Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of God’s Glory (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 25.

² V. Philips Long, “1 Samuel” in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 291.

³ The Ark contained the two stone tablets on which were inscribed the Ten Commandments, the staff belonging to Aaron, Israel’s first priest, and a jar containing some manna by which God sustained them in the wilderness. To Israel these were precious. One imagines that, to others, they were worthless.

We realized that the Bible has an astonishing willingness to face this sort of devastation head on. This honesty can free us to cry out in our own losses.

This is a Good Friday story. Like Jesus' crucifixion, here we see the crushing of God—God's shocking humiliation, and shame, and death. After Friday comes Saturday. The stone seals the tomb. Inside decays in darkness what is left of our belief. Outside, we are numb with grief.

Here's a song that says it.⁴

*Jesus, Jesus help me
I'm alone in this world
And a [messed] up world it is too
Tell me, tell me the story
The one about eternity
And the way it's all gonna be*

*Wake up, wake up dead man
Wake up, wake up dead man*

*Jesus, I'm waiting here boss
I know you're looking out for us
But maybe your hands aren't free
Your father, He made the world in seven
He's in charge of heaven
Will you put in a word in for me*

*Wake up, wake up dead man
Wake up, wake up dead man*

*Listen to your words they'll tell you what to do
Listen over the rhythm that's confusing you
Listen to the reed in the saxophone
Listen over the hum of the radio
Listen over sounds of blades in rotation
Listen through the traffic and circulation
Listen as hope and peace try to rhyme
Listen over marching bands playing out their time*

*Wake up, wake up dead man
Wake up, wake up dead man*

⁴ "Wake of Dead Man," from U2's 1997 album *Pop*. Phil Irish sung this in our worship service at Elora United Church. We changed the 3rd line, to make it acceptable for a Sunday morning church crowd. Nonetheless, I think the original wording, in its rawness, is more truthful. Here's a clip of U2 performing it in concern: www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6vNQf_tne0.

*Jesus, were you just around the corner
Did You think to try and warn her
Or are you working on something new
If there's an order in all of this disorder
Is it like a tape recorder
Can we rewind it just once more*

*Wake up, wake up dead man
Wake up, wake up dead man
Wake up, wake up dead man*

James Harvey describes it like this:

In the dead time . . . we encounter the terror of our own impotence. There is no magic, no word, no clever formula to bring him back; to restore the dream and secure the hope.⁵

On that Saturday, Jesus' friends and followers had no expectations. The dead stay dead. And history is littered with dead gods, discarded on the ruins of forgotten peoples. Why should the God of Israel, the God of Jesus, be any different?

III

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.

1st Samuel 5.3

Things do go “bump” in the night. Still . . . you wonder how long Dagon had stood there, proudly undisturbed. And why he fell this night, the same night the Ark of Israel's defeated God was installed beside Dagon.

As panicking priests struggled to put their god back in his place, one noticed that the way Dagon fell looked a bit like he was bowing, face to the ground, before the Ark of Israel's god. He laughed nervously. The others pretended they hadn't seen.

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.

1st Samuel 5.4

⁵ James Harvey SJ, “Holy Saturday: Waiting to Cross Over” on the website *Thinking Faith* (March 29, 2013). www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130329_1.htm

There were no witnesses. Just the Ark of God. Just a box.

The Philistines were quickly preoccupied with more personal matters.

The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors. When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, "The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god."

1st Samuel 5.6-7

The Philistine security cabinet convened. "Might this have something to do with that Ark of Israel?" someone wondered. The others laughed nervously, pretending they had not thought the same thing. To end such nonsense, the city of Gath stepped forward. "We'll take it!"

Gath's bravery crumbled quickly, however, when, upon the Ark's arrival within its walls, the same symptoms soon spread. This time, there was no meeting. They just moved it to the city of Ekron, up the road, dropping it off at the city gates like an unwanted child.

All the while, the Ark of God never moved a muscle. Never spoke a word. Just a box.

IV

After Good Friday comes Holy Saturday. Not much happens on Saturday. The tomb is shut tight and silent.

There is an ancient Christian tradition, the Harrowing of Hell. "Harrow" is an Old English word that means to harass or plunder. It's a raid. The word "Hell" here is actually an unhelpful translation of the Jewish idea of "Sheol."⁶ Sheol is the place of the dead, both the righteous and the wicked. It is a place of darkness and shadows. The New Testament calls it Hades, which is not the same as Hell. (And that's a whole other sermon!)

The idea here is that, in his death, Jesus went to the very place where Death reigned supreme. And there, he defeated Death's power. He broke Death's hold and shattered its chains.

Listen to part of an Eastern Orthodox liturgy for Holy Saturday:

*Today Hades cries out groaning:
"I should not have accepted the Man born of Mary.
He came and destroyed my power.
He shattered the gates of brass.
As God, He raised the souls I had held captive."⁷*

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowing_of_Hell

⁷ From the Vespers Liturgy of Holy Saturday. www.schmemmann.org/byhim/holysaturday.html

Honestly, I don't know what to make of this "Harrowing of Hell" idea.⁸ But I do like what it affirms. Jesus's salvation reaches into the darkest places. And even when the tomb seems sealed forever, and all is silent . . . and even when exiled in captivity to Dagon's temple, seemingly just sitting there, doing nothing . . . God is working.

V

God works in the dark.

The first part of this story (last week) frees us from denial. As God's people, we can honestly face what is wrong — what is wrong within us, what is wrong around us, what is wrong in our world. We don't need to paste on happy faces, or buy into official optimism. When the Ark is captured, we can cry out and wonder where God's glory has gone.

But then what? When are broken free from denial, then what? Despair? When we see how things really are, hope can easily collapse into the darkness.⁹

That's why we need this next part of the story. God works in the dark.

Even when we give up on God. Even when the Ark sits there, silent, captive to forces that have declared God defeated and dead. They might celebrate the Divine's demise with glee. Some might say — even some among God's people might say — that we need to evolve into this new, Godless reality. Many of us will simply go on. We'll pay homage to God. Then, the rest of the time, we will act as if God were shut away. Many will despair. Because, if we are truly left on our own . . . our human track record leaves little room for hope.¹⁰

In the mean time, as we argue about all of this, and while we go on, trying to make the best of today because tomorrow is truly frightening. . . . Meanwhile, in a darkened temple, shut up for the night . . . and in a damp tomb, sealed for eternity . . . God is doing a raid on death. God is stirring up life. Needing no help from us . . . God is throwing down Dagon and breaking the bars of Hades. Praise be to God! Amen.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harrowing_of_Hell#Rejection_of_the_doctrine

⁹ "When one breaks *denial* and admits that the ark has been captured, the prospect of *despair* looms, for one now sees how it really is." Brueggemann, 51.

¹⁰ "This YHWH has been eliminated from the screen of historical possibility, eliminated by collusion between imperial insistence and Israel's despair." Brueggemann, 41.