

Let's start with a question.

Hypothetically, if we were going to move our worship from this place to, oh, let's say, the new chapel at the seminary nearby, what would we need to take with us to ensure that God would be there with us?

Oh, I know. We love this very large cross here behind me. But would we HAVE to take this cross, THIS cross, for God to be present with us there instead of here?

Is there anything else we would need to take to ensure God is there?

I've been thinking about this question as I have pondered King David and our first lesson for today. Just last week we remembered that David crowned King of Israel after the death of Israel's first king, Saul, and a bloody civil war, some 14 years after the 16-year-old David had defeated the mighty Philistine warrior Goliath with his slingshot. This week we hear the story of David retrieving the lost Ark of the Covenant from the Philistines.

Long before David had become King, when Eli had been priest, the Philistines had militarily defeated the Israelites—twice. And, to make matters worse, the Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant.

When Eli heard this news, he died of shock. His successor, Samuel, had been the one to anoint Saul King, and also to respond to God's direction to find David, Saul's successor, while Saul was still very much alive. Now David was King, Saul was dead, and the Ark was long gone.

If we didn't know what the Ark of the Covenant was, we might say, "So what? Why even remember this old relic of Israel's past?" Simply put, to the people, the Ark was where God was physically present to them.

At God's command, Moses had built the Ark at Mount Sinai and had put the stone tables of the Ten Commandments in it. The Ark was a wooden chest, about two-thirds the size our new altar will be in the Oratory at the seminary. The chest was covered in pure gold, though, as ours will NOT be, and had winged angels on top plus some rings through which gold-encased wooden poles were placed to carry



the Ark. A whole family of priests had the sacred duty of carrying the Ark. This was risky business, because those who misused the Ark, or sometimes simply touched it, died.

In the wilderness, the Ark led the people, pointed the way, in a way. Because the Ark was always enveloped in the cloud that God used to lead the people.

When the people camped, the Ark became the altar in a special tent used for worship so holy only the priests could participate. They ritually sacrificed animals in offering to God on the top of the Ark. And inside, over time, they placed holy objects: the rod that Aaron, the original High Priest had used to perform miracles, and a jar of manna, the food that God had sent in the wilderness to sustain them on their way to the Promised Land.

And, God spoke to them from between the angels on top of the Ark. According to the Jewish Virtual Library, when God spoke with Moses in the Tent of Meeting in the desert, he did so from between the two Cherubs (Num. 7:89). Once the Ark was moved into the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple, it was accessible only once a year, and then, only by one person. On Yom Kippur, the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies to ask forgiveness for himself and for all the nation of Israel (Lev. 16:2).

But, when David became King, the enemy Philistines had the Ark. Over time, though, the Philistines realized that every city in which they stashed the Ark was visited with a plague. The Philistines eventually placed the Ark in the temple of Dagon, their fish God, hoping no doubt that Dagon would overcome the power of the Ark. But each morning their fishy statue was found to be face down in front of the Ark or damaged by it. Eventually they sent the Ark back to the Israelites. Just. Get. Rid. Of. This. Thing.

So here came the Ark, a holy relic of times past, a reminder of God's physical presence with them, his abiding, saving presence.

Actually, David didn't so much retrieve the Ark, as accept it from the Philistines. The thing is, one of the Israelites reached out and touched the Ark to steady it while carrying it home and God struck HIM dead. Why? However well-intentioned the man had been by touching the Ark, he certainly hadn't been properly in awe of it.

As a result of this death, David came to respect the Ark in a new way. He was in awe of it, which is to say it scared him. So he parked the Ark at someone's house until word came to him some three months later that the household where the ark was had been showered in blessings.

We don't know exactly what blessings fell on that Ark household. Perhaps their crops were far larger than their thistles that year? Perhaps babies started appearing? Maybe the people there started listening at the Ark for God to speak and had been energized with new purpose? However it happened, the people with the Ark were blessed. And, when King David heard of their fortune, he went with a huge host and personally retrieved the Ark.

This is the puzzling part: David personally led the procession home. He didn't apparently consult with God. And he acted as if he were a priest, wearing liturgical garments and stopping "every six feet" our lesson says, to celebrate with worship.

"Every six feet?" We're taking here about Sabbath rests, Sundays' celebrations: dancing and singing and thanking God. All was well, until David's wife, the daughter of his predecessor Saul, saw David and despised him. She had been on his side before, had in fact saved David's life one of the times her father had tried to kill him.

Why did David's wife despise him? David WAS acting as her father had acted, extremely worshiping God through his emotions, when he had been at the height of his insanity. Maybe David's celebration reminded his wife of her father at his worst. Of course, the text suggests in the part our lectionary conveniently leaves out, that there were some servant girls in David's life, a harbinger of other extramarital troubles to come in David's life, a warning to get his house in order if he wanted the Ark to reside there.

So two people in this story lose: the man who carelessly touched the Ark and died, and David's wife, who turned her back on him that day. And two people win: The household who temporarily housed the Ark and were showered with God's blessings, and David, who doesn't seem to have consulted with God and has a falling out with his wife but never-the-less brought the Ark home to Jerusalem.

If we skip ahead in Second Samuel, the Lord chides David by reminding him he can't be confined to a place. We can take from this story the affirmation that God IS PRESENT with us. Where? God is God of the Ark, God of the Temple, God of Christ Jesus, God of US. No matter how we like to localize God, he isn't ONLY in a particular building or altar or cross, not only in a particular type of music when we sing glory to God, but IN US, in our willingness to follow where the Ark leads and take God with us wherever we travel in God's name.

When? Every six steps. But don't reach out unprepared for an encounter with the holy. Ultimately, today's lesson is about change. God with God, but don't forget the Ark that is Resurrection.