

First Scripture Reading 1 Samuel 7

Second Scripture Reading Jeremiah 6.13-16

“Here I raise my Ebenezer”

Our text this morning, begins with the return of the ark. It had been captured by the Philistines at Ebenezer, because the people of Israel had brought it into battle from Shiloh, as a last ditch effort to save themselves from their enemies, but to no help. The ark, which for them was the presence of God in their midst was lost, and they were left alone in the midst of fear and trembling, with so much anxiety about the future. When Eli, remember Eli, heard about what happened he instantly fell down and died, so the ark and its minister were lost in the same day. The Philistines soon discovered that the ark was not a good luck charm, so they were eager to rid themselves of it, placing it on an oxcart and sending it back towards the Israelites. This is where we enter the story this morning, the ark has been returned to the people of Israel, and there was great rejoicing. This is great, the presence of God just wheeled in seemingly randomly on an oxcart, praise God! But now what to do with it? Before they had Eli, to stand before the presence of God and minister to the Lord, but that is no longer an option, and while the people rejoiced at its return they do not particularly want to stand before the ark, with all of their faults and all of their failing, they do not want to bring those before the presence of God. So what to do with this? Where can we place the presence of God in our communal life, where God’s presence will rest in our land, but we do not have to stand before God, trembling beneath the weight of our imperfections?

Well the answer that the Israelites came up with was giving it to that guy over there. The text does not record any deliberation on the part of the Israelites, given that we are told Abinadab

lived on top of the hill, it seems that they looked around and came up with taking it to the place that stuck out the most. He does not even seem to have been a Levite priest, they just gave it to some guy. They consecrated his son Eleazar, to have charge of the ark, and patted themselves on the back for a job well done. The ark was back, the presence of God was in their lives once more, but at a safe distance, God was near, but not too close. They could still hold themselves back from God.

The Israelites did what so many of us often do, they sought the presence of God in their lives, but at a far enough distance, where they did not have to deal with it directly, where God's presence was not part of all the aspects of their lives. Where God's presence was not in the dark part of their lives, the parts that we hide from all those around them, even from ourselves. So they gave it to some guy, Abinadab, just so they did not have to feel the weight of God's presence. They did what they had always done before, what had always worked, just let someone else deal with it, away from the rest of us. Let God, be with us, over there.

For the people of Israel, this should be a joyous moment, the ark is back, they can resume their normal lives, with just enough of God's presence. But life does not work that way. Life away from the total embrace of God, our Creator, is not enough, so Israel lamented after the Lord for twenty long years. For twenty years they turned to God, needing more. God created us, needing the presence of our Creator in our lives, needing the coming Christ in our lives, the God who breaks into every aspect of your life, the parts which are dark and vulnerable, and hidden. We cannot have just enough of this God, the God who we turn to only at high Church holidays, or at big moments, or low moments, God wants them all, God wants all of your moments. This is the God who is penetrating into every part of our lives, into our very flesh. It is this God, who

announced to Samuel that He was about to do something to make both ears tingle, the God who we will soon await in Advent. We need the fount of every blessing in our life.

So for twenty years, Israel has the presence of their God, back in their midst, after they had been beaten and broken, subjected by the Philistines. After this twenty years, where the hearts of the Israelites called out for more, Samuel came and spoke to them all, spoke to all of us who try to relegate God to just a fraction of our lives. He tells them that if they are going to return to the Lord, it must be with their whole heart, nothing can be held back, no part can be reserved just for yourself. You cannot have a just in case reserve, in case the God you know, is not fulfilling your life in the way you hoped for. I think that it is this, just in case mentality, which continues to anger God so much, the notion that we think we can hold this part back, just in case. Israel continues to do this, we continue to do this. We shout, yes I will follow God, I will look only to Him for my salvation, but just in case, these dreams don't work out, I have this little thing going off to the side. Samuel pronounces to us as well as the Israelites, you must put away the Ashtaroth, and the strange gods, you must put away those safety nets in your lives which you have just in case.

In families there are always these stories that you tell, that get remembered long after the person is gone. For my family, many of these stories are centered on my Grosspopop, my dad's grandfather. He was a German artilleryman in WWI, and after the war ended he decided to walk back home. On the way home thinking that the economy might not be great he decided to take up art theft, but was quickly robbed so he continued home empty handed. After living through the German depression, he found his way to this country. When he finally died, when I was still too young to remember, they went to clean out his house. They found money in the strangest places, in laundry detergent boxes, in jars, just random places making it hard to clean out his old

Philadelphia home. Having lived through a depression he kept it all, just in case this economy did not work out. The American dream sounded great and all, but just in case, he was going to hold something back to make sure he had something to survive off of. We all have these just in case laundry detergent boxes filled with cash, whether it's a hurt, a hurt which has been with you so long it has become part of your identity. You say to yourself, God doesn't need this part. Or maybe your just in case is a relationship which means everything to you. You say surely God doesn't need this part, this person is mine. So you hold that hurt or that person back.

To people used to holding a little bit back, to a people who have felt abandoned by their God, first through defeat then through twenty years of lamentation, Samuel continues to speak. They are people hurt, people in a relationship which has left them wanting. They feel as if they are the neglected partner, desperately seeking the love they need, even if it from another, even if it is from an idol which only has the personification we give it. These idols in the lives of Israel, and the idols we have in our lives, our just in case idols, which we use to give our lives meaning, to feel loved, are poor substitutes for an all-consuming relationship with our God. They let us hold something back, but our hearts continue to lament after the one who they were created to love, whose grace they were created to see. To serve only the God who created us to be His children, and no other. Not our insecurities, not our demons, not our hopes, not our dreams, not our hurts, not our relationships, but to serve only God. To let your relationship with God consume you, to let it break into every part of your life, to leave nothing back from God. The posture of faith is not one hand reaching out, offering it all to God, and the other clinging to your stash. Does this look like the posture of faith to you? No the posture of faith is two hands, openly giving, it all belongs to you O God.

The text tells us that the children of Israel did put away the strange gods, and served only the Lord. But it did not take long before this national gathering of Israel caught the attention of the Philistines. Like any nosy neighbor they know exactly when you have family over, and like those nosy neighbors they are never happy about it. The Philistines remember the plague that the ark brought down upon them twenty years earlier, and they have been hobbling along ever since, unable to dominate the Israelites in the same way. So now this large gathering of Israelites has made them afraid, they have no idea what the purpose is, but they believe it spells trouble for them. So the Philistines gathered against Israel, which filled the Israelites who were weak from fasting with fear. They are in no shape to repel their foes, they could easily pick back up these strange gods, to cling to their old stash, which they just released. But true to their return, they do not turn to any safety nets, they do not bring out any strange gods, but cry out to Samuel, do not cease to cry out to the Lord for us.

Israel was saved that day, and in commemoration of their victory in the place where God's presence was taken for them, in the place where they looked to God with two open hands, and said it is all yours, in Ebenezer, Samuel raised the Ebenezer stone. It is only in light of the God who wants to be in every dark place of your life that we find the Ebenezer. The stone which witnessed to the help the Lord has given us. The stone which witnessed to our complete trust, of a God who completely embraces our lives, a God who we turn to with both hands open, raising our Ebenezers, in the posture of faith. Let us all raise up for ourselves our Ebenezer, which witnesses to the God in our lives, the God we have a real relationship with, not the false idol but the God who fills our lives with His love. God is reaching out holding back nothing, not even His own Son, so let us reach back with both hands open.