

Raiders of the Lost Ark 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1

By Rev. Russell B. Smith

Covenant-First Presbyterian Church
717 Elm Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202

It was 1981 — the blockbuster team of Spielberg and Lucas released their next great movie. It was designed to be a tribute to the great serial adventures of the past: an action packed adventure with cliffhanger scenes and dastardly villains.

The story went like this: In 1936, the Nazis discover the hiding place for the long lost ark of the covenant, the chest that holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The American government enlists the aid of archaeologist Indiana Jones to recover the ark before it falls into Nazi hands. Thus begins an hour and a half of action that riveted almost every young boy of my generation.

What I didn't realize at the time was how accurately the film depicted both the ark and the human motivation to possess the ark, and by extension human motivations toward God. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and our three chapters today demonstrate many of the same themes, particularly the human lust for power and the recognition of God's absolute power.

The human lust for power is clearly evident in the film. As Indiana Jones and his friend Marcus Brody explain why Hitler would want the ark, they talk about the power of the ark: it could level mountains, lay waste to entire regions. They say, "An army which carries the ark before it is invincible."

Later, Indiana confronts the villainous French Archaeologist Bellocq, who is working for the Nazis. Bellocq tries to impress upon Indiana his own personal reasons for seeking the ark: "It's a transmitter — a radio for speaking to God — and it's within my reach."

What we see is a preoccupation with seizing the prize that puts power and control in our hands. That's the same motivation we see in the story at the start of 1 Samuel 4: the Israelites go out to battle and are defeated, then they send for the ark. The ark had become a kind of talisman for them. With the ark, the river Jordan stopped flowing so Israel could cross (Josh. 3). With the ark, the Israelites brought down the walls of Jericho (Josh. 6). So, the Israelites came to think of the ark as a secret weapon, a guarantee of success.

They forgot that the ark wasn't about power; it was about presence. It was about the presence of God. The ark was the visible reminder of God's special relationship with his people. God never intended it to be a magical object of power; he intended it to be a reminder of his presence. Numbers 10:33-36 presents a fine picture of this:

So they set out from the mountain of the Lord and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. The cloud of the Lord was over them by day when they set out from camp. Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Rise up o Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." Whenever it came to rest, he said, "Return, O Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel."

The relationship with our God has from the very beginning been understood as a just that: a relationship. What is most important is not the power or the knowledge, but the person whom we know. The ancient Israelites had forgotten about knowing God; they were interested in magic, in power.

The essence of magic is power — power over the supernatural world. J.G. Frazier did a 12-volume study of magic and religion, which he titled *The Golden Bough*. His basic understanding of magic and most pagan ritual is that it constitutes what he calls "sympathetic magic." If you want control over something, you enact a ritual or piece of magic that is similar to it. If you want to injure your enemy, make a voodoo doll and stick pins in it. If you want to bribe and control your god, make an image and treat it like royalty. In the case of the Philistines here, if you are being overrun with tumors and rats, make golden images of tumors and rats, and offer them to the God you believe inflicted them upon you. If you make a representation, it gives you power over the supernatural.

And we say, "How ridiculous!" But in reality, none of us is far from this same error. It is so easy for us to slip into the mindset of magic. If I just say enough prayers, or if I just work all the sin out of my life, then God will have to give me what I want. If I just follow this formula or this plan, then God will grant my every desire. Oh, we'd never say it that way; we'd say nice religious things. But deep down, we're really wanting God to give us what we want. Some of the most religious and most knowledgeable people fall into this trap. They speak an incredibly good game, but as you interact with them, you discover they're really about control. If you're concerned about other people's sin, but you can't remember the last time you gave thought to your own, you may fall into that category.

And of course, we've all encountered *the question*. Something goes wrong for us, and then some well meaning Christian asks, "What did you do?" meaning, "What sin did you commit that made God punish you this way?" There are any number of Christians out there who see God as formulaic — just pray this way or do certain routines or follow this plan, and God is certain to change your life. I

know in my enthusiasm, I've fallen into that language before. And I look at some really popular material that's out there: *The Prayer of Jabez*, *The Purpose-Driven Life*. God may use any of those to change hearts and lives, but without the personal involvement by the Holy Spirit, nothing will happen. Our faith is not about having power and control, but releasing it. Our faith is about having a relationship with the only one who has power and control, and trusting him.

Indeed, this passage shows us an important point about power and control: not only are formulas not effective without God's personal presence, but God may deliberately plunge us into pain in order to strip away our formulas and lust for power. Look what happens: in this terrible defeat where it seems that God's name is being dishonored by losing to the Philistines, good occurs. God makes good his word to punish the evil leaders Hophni and Phineas. He blesses Israel by removing evil and abusive leaders. And as we see in the latter part of the passage, he demonstrates his true superiority and sovereignty by humbling the pagan gods and returning his ark to Israel all by himself.

Has God ever stripped away the thing you love the most in order to remind you to depend on him rather than on that thing? One of my seminary professors, Steve Brown, told us on the first day of class that he prayed we'd fail and fail big. This was so we'd stop taking such pride in our religiosity and in being the center of attention, and be forced to trust in Christ's goodness. C.S. Lewis calls this God's severe mercy. To protect you from creating a false idol, God may strip it away from you. It hurts; it's painful; it's agonizing. But it's necessary for healing and for a full relationship with him.

And that leads us to the second major item in this passage: recognition of God's absolute power. Look how God humbles the foreign god Dagon. This is the ancient equivalent of slipping on a banana peel. To have your god fall down before another god is humiliating. Israelites would have read this and broken into belly laughs. It's like Dagon got the pie in the face. Or perhaps you know the old musical *Singin' in the Rain*. Donald O'Conner gives one of the most masterful comic performances in "make 'em laugh" where he slapsticks himself into unconsciousness — slipping, tripping, and ultimately crashing through a set piece. Audiences regularly fall apart in laughter during this number -- that's the kind of reaction Israelites would have had reading about the Philistines. One town gets so worn out, they pass the ark along like a hot potato. Then the next town says, "Oh no, we're not taking it, you take it!" Wherever God's ark goes, the Philistines just seem to fall apart.

Finally, they cook up this bizarre magic solution to return the ark to Israel. And they creep along behind the cart, staying just out of reach of any stray thunderbolts that might shoot out of the thing. They learn quickly of the power of God: it's awesome and frightening and dangerous.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, there is a scene when the ark is opened -- the villains look inside and find only sand, and the Nazis all laugh at Bellocq. But

then a thick cloud arises from the ark. Remember the cloud that followed Israel in the desert? The cloud that was a sign of God's presence? This is what Spielberg is trying to convey. The cloud surrounds all the Nazis and then Bellocq bursts into flame, and the flame shoots out from him and consumes all the Nazis. The astute Bible reader will remember the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, who offered "unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command" (Lev. 10:1). And they were consumed with fire. The point being: when you trifle with the things of God, God doesn't take kindly to it.

The men of Beth Shemesh discover this when they trifle with the ark and 70 of them are struck down. It may seem a bit severe to us, but bear in mind that these are all people who should know better. The city of Beth Shemesh was a priestly city, given over to the Levites. They all should have known exactly what they were getting into when the ark came their way, and they should have known the proper kind of respect to pay. Their actions amounted to a cavalier dismissal of God, instead of the awestruck wonder they ought to have had.

Here's the point in God's display of power in Philistia and Beth Shemesh: God didn't use any Israelites to return his ark. He did it all by himself. He orchestrated the events. The truth is that God doesn't need us. Not only can we not manipulate God through magic, but we can't manipulate God by withholding our cooperation. We can try to manipulate others with non-cooperation, by holding back and being childish until we get our way. We can tell other people that if we don't get our way we'll take our toys and go home. But we can't do that with God because he owns all the toys anyway, and the home as well. We have nothing that we can threaten God with and nothing that we can withhold from him. Other ancient gods needed their worshippers because they needed the sacrifices. Our God doesn't need any of that. He is self-sufficient.

And yet he delights to use his people. He didn't need Israel, and yet he returned to them. And that's the amazing thing about Grace. God doesn't need us, but he wants us. He keeps returning to remind us of his presence. Every time we feel so distant from God, he eventually brings us back again, close in his embrace. He doesn't need us but he wants us.

At the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the ark is boxed up in a nondescript box that says, "U.S. Army Intelligence. Do Not Open." The box is stashed away in a huge warehouse of identical boxes. And Indiana Jones is furious because he wants to study the ark. He hasn't learned the lesson that the ark is not the source of power; it simply represents the person of God.

Indeed, in Jeremiah 3:14-17, God says this:

"Return, faithless people, declares the Lord, for I am your husband. I will choose you — one from a town and two from a clan — and bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding. In

those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land,” declares the Lord, “men will no longer say ‘The ark of the covenant of the Lord.’ It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed nor another one be made. At that time they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the Lord, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord. No longer will they follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts.”

There will come a day when Israel doesn't need the ark because God will dwell with them personally. That's exactly what Jesus Christ does for us. He is the fulfillment of everything the ark was meant to be. And through faith in him, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts. You don't need a totem or a magic item. You don't put your trust in a formula, because when you have faith in Christ you have the Holy Spirit — you have the direct radio to God. And he makes God's word come alive for you, and he leads you throughout the day. You want the lost ark? Forget about the prize, forget about the artifact. Put your faith in Christ and receive the prize within. That's what the story is about. Put your faith in the covenant God who provides. You think about that. Amen.