

The ~~Kabod~~'s Cupboard's Empty: 1 Samuel 4-6

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PP1

Introduction

Stories – do you like a good story? I do. Films, novels, biographies, histories – when written, acted, or narrated well they are riveting and rewarding.

Let me tell you a story. You might recognise it.

In 1936, a world famous archaeologist is teaching at Marshall College in the US, where he is interviewed by two Army intelligence agents. They inform him that the Nazis, who are obsessed with the occult, are searching for the location of the Ark of the Covenant; the Nazis believe that if they acquire the Ark their armies will become invincible. The Staff of Ra is the key to finding the Well of Souls, a secret chamber in which the Ark is buried.

The agents authorize the archaeologist to recover the Ark before the Nazis. He travels to Nepal and then Cairo, where he and his ex-girlfriend Marion meet up with Sallah, a skilled excavator. Sallah informs them that the Nazis are digging for the Well of Souls with a replica of the headpiece. They quickly realize the Nazi headpiece is incomplete and that the Nazis are digging in the wrong place. The Nazis kidnap Marion and it appears to the archaeologist that she is killed in an explosion. The archaeologist and Sallah infiltrate the Nazi dig site and use their staff to correctly locate the Ark. The archaeologist, Sallah, and a small group of diggers unearth the Well of Souls and he is forced to face his fear of snakes to acquire the Ark. The Nazis arrive, seize the Ark from him, and throw Marion into the Well of Souls with him before sealing it back up. He and Marion escape to a local airstrip, where he has a brutal fistfight with a Nazi mechanic before blowing up a plane. The panicked Nazis remove the Ark in a truck and set off for Berlin, but the archaeologist catches them and retakes it. He makes arrangements to take the Ark to London.

The next day the Nazis arrive and intercept the boat. The Nazis seize the Ark and Marion but cannot locate the archaeologist, who stows away aboard the Nazi U-boat and travels with them to an island in the Aegean Sea. Once there, the Nazis plan to test the power of the Ark before presenting it to Hitler. The archaeologist reveals himself and threatens to destroy the Ark with a bazooka, but they call his bluff and he surrenders rather than destroy such an important historical artifact. The Nazis take him and Marion to an area where the Ark will be opened and tie them to a post to observe. As they open the Ark, suddenly, angelic beings emerge and float around. The archaeologist cautions Marion to keep her eyes tightly closed and not to observe what happens next. The Nazis look on in astonishment as the apparitions suddenly transform into demonic creatures. A vortex of flame forms above the opened Ark and energy surges out into gathered Nazis, killing them all, save for the archaeologist and Marion. The Ark's lid is blasted high into the air before dropping back down onto the Ark and sealing it. The archaeologist and Marion find their ropes burned off and embrace.

In Washington, D.C., the Army intelligence agents inform him that the Ark is someplace safe and will be studied by top men. The Ark is shown being permanently stored in a giant government warehouse among countless similar crates.

OK – that's a hit movie right there! And it was. It is of course the plot to *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the 1981 American fantasy adventure film directed by Steven Spielberg.

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Action, adventure, fantasy, and myth. You have it all right there.

The ideas, while fictionalized and sensationalized, though, are found in Scripture around this narrative of the Ark of the covenant. 1 Samuel 4-6, and beyond, speaks about this intriguing, bizarre, and quite frankly weird story of the Ark's capture and return.

1 Samuel 4-6 is a story centring on a three-day narrative.

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In summary, the Israelites go to fight against their neighbours the **Philistines**. They are routed and lose **4,000 men**. They have the ingenious idea to attack them again, this time with the Ark of the Covenant of God at the front – assuring them of success. They lose, this time **30,000 men**. More than that, **the Ark is captured** and taken as booty by the Philistines! While in Philistia, the Ark wreaks havoc on the people to such an extent that it is sent back to Jerusalem on a cart pulled by cows. In the process the **Priest Eli** and his **two sons** die, his daughter-in-law gives birth before she dies, and the false god **Dagon** also dies.

This is a narrative that centres on **three days of action** which correspond to three scenes and three chapters:

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- **Day 1, scene 1, chapter 4** is all about *defeat*, capture, and humiliation: The idea of an endlessly triumphant God who fights for us is demolished in scene 1.
- **Day 2, scene 2, chapter 5**: is all about *hidden combat and decapitation*: The idea of an endlessly defeated God is demolished in scene 2.
- **Day 3, scene 3, chapter 6**: is all about *new beginnings*: The idea that we can carry on after tragedy as if nothing has happened is demolished in scene 3.

This is an ancient tale,

and yet, we may just find that in this **3 day, 3 scene, 3 chapter story**, we find meaning for our own lives and light for the way.

At least that is how a number of scholars have seen this text, not least of which is **Walter Bruggemann**, someone I want to acknowledge I have drawn from in this sermon.¹

Like all good stories, this one asks a lot of the reader, it expects a familiarity with the author's body of work, style, and key themes. It is a story placed into the canon of Scripture very carefully, here, not a chapter earlier or later, not a book prior or subsequent to this, but right here. **Its placement gives us a clue to its meaning.** And this story, like all Bible stories, is meant to be read in light of the whole story. This is no 'Who Dunit' where we wait with baited breath to find the culprit and make sense of the story. We know the end, the central plot, and so we know when we read this story, that we are meant to read it with an eye on the whole story, reading that story into this and this one out of that.

And that is what I want to attempt to do today, read this story as part of the larger one of Scripture, in the prayer that God would speak to us today as he has spoken so powerfully in the past.

¹ Inspired by and based on Walter Bruggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Scene 1. Friday Night in Ebenezer: Chapter 4

[1. Descent into loss]

PP5

Our narrative starts in chapter 4 one Friday night in Ebenezer.

The narrative invites readers into **deep loss**, one which is already underway in **1 Sam 2**.

Eli the priest is a failure, as are his wicked sons Hophni and Phineas. The priestly house of Eli must come to an end.

The **indictment** against the sons is that “they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people” (2.12-13).

Their sin was an exploitative self-indulgence concerning meat brought for sacrifices to the Lord, and sexual misconduct.

Money and sex – how often those two things go together! For this Eli censures the sons, but they don’t listen (12-17, 22-25).

And so there follows the **sentence** against them, sweeping and uncompromising. The family of Eli will be cut-off from its priestly heritage (2.31-32, 34). **The two sons shall die!**

The most remarkable feature of this sentence of termination is that it is played against the former **unconditional promise** that YHWH had made to the house of Eli that it will go before the Lord forever (2.30).

“The conduct of the sons is so outrageous, however, that even this unconditional promise previously voiced by YHWH to Eli must now be voided. The voiding of an unconditional promise of YHWH of course is an extremity.”²

Chapter 3 reiterates the sentence in a different way, this time through the dream-oracle of the boy Samuel. And that sets the story up for chapter 4.

Chapter 4 has the implementation of the judgment. Israel is at war with the Philistines. Israel loses about **4000 men**, 2 of them are Eli’s sons, just as foretold.

Now, the story seems to have ended, but in fact, it has only reached its beginning.

Not accepting their defeat, the Israelites bring the **Ark of the Covenant** into the battle camp, the Ark upon which the invisible deity in whom they have absolute confidence sits. They have brought YHWH into the battle – personally (4.3b-4a).

The Ark is present to ‘**save**’ them from their enemies, we are told.

The Israelites are **buoyant**, exuberant, and confident as they shout out.

the Philistines, hearing this and seeing the Ark arrive, shout out in **fear** (4.7-9).

Like the Nazis in the Indiana Jones movie, the Philistines know of the **Exodus**, of the power of Israel’s God. They know that defeat at his hands is total, **that YHWH takes no prisoners**. The Philistines are the paradigmatic ‘**other**’, those that live outside the covenant, away from God, in rebellion. The narrative sets us up to think that Israel will win against these ‘**others**’.

² Breuggemann, *Ichabod Toward Home*, 3.

It's like the Israelites have a formula:

- A. God is powerful
- B. The ark is God's resting place
- C. The Ark is powerful.

PP6

Apply that to battle:

- A. God can beat the Philistines.
- B. God lives in the Ark.
- C. Bring the Ark into battle and God will beat the Philistines.

But the narrative takes a curious turn (4.10-11). The battle is joined, **Israel is defeated**. Israel flees, **30,000 die!**

Good stories make us look at ourselves and our world differently. The Bible is especially good at doing this.

What are your formulas? How does God function as your good luck charm or guarantee of success?

PP7

- A. God is good.
- B. Cancer is evil.
- C. God won't let me get cancer.

PP8

- A. God is loving.
- B. I'm a good person.
- C. God won't judge me.

This story is challenging Israel's assumptions - our assumptions.

But that is not all – **the Ark of God was captured!** (4.11, 17). When he hears the news, the old and apparently **fat** Eli falls over and breaks his neck and dies. Not because of his sons' death, but in shock at the loss of the ark, a fate beyond his imagination.

Listen to how the narrator tells this part of the story in 4.17-22:

PP9, 10, 11, 12

¹¹And **the ark of God was captured**, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. ¹⁷He who brought the news answered and said, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great defeat among the people. Your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and **the ark of God has been captured.**" ¹⁸As soon as he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken and he died, for the man was old and heavy (*kabod*). He had judged Israel forty years. ¹⁹Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. And when she heard the news that **the ark of God was captured**, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth, for her pains came upon her. ²⁰And about the time of her death the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son." But she did not answer or pay attention. ²¹And she named the child *Ichabod*, saying, "The glory (*kabod*) has departed from Israel!" because **the ark of God had been captured** and because of her father-in-law and her husband. ²²And she said, "The glory (*kabod*) has departed from Israel, for **the ark of God has been captured.**"

I highlighted the recurring phrases so you would notice:

5 times here we read that **‘the ark of God was captured’** (4.11, 17, 19, 21, 22).

When Eli hears of it he falls over and dies.

When his pregnant daughter-in-law hears of it she gives birth.

“Both were pushed to extremity, one to death, one to birth, both pushed out of the ordinary by news for which they had no categories of reception or understanding.”³

YHWH, represented in the form of the Ark, has been captured! Why? How? Was YHWH not strong enough? Not wise enough?

As the woman gives birth to a son she names him, in her last gasp, **Ichabod** – literally ‘Where is the glory?’

A question,

a statement,

a plea.

The answer is given,
nowhere!

Ichabod - The glory is gone! (4.21-22). The Kabod’s Empty.

God has left the building.

This woman, a simple, unnamed daughter-in-law of a famous figure, turns out to be the best theologian of her generation. She and she alone understands that with the seizure of the ark:

God’s glory has gone.

God has been humiliated.

YHWH the powerful - stolen, held captive, tamed.

This is perhaps the most powerful text in the entire OT which speaks of loss, sorrow, and shame, precisely because it is not Israel’s loss, sorry, and shame that is on show – but God’s.

PP13, 14

The Church Father, **Origen**, when writing a commentary on Scripture, tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher. He writes:

“The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many **locked rooms in our house**. By each room is placed a **key**, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.”⁴

This ark narrative invites, if not demands, it to be associated with a bunch of other texts in order to make sense of it. Let’s make mention of some of these.

PP15

1. Exodus

The first passage to come to mind is the Exodus, where God smashes the Egyptians.

The ark narrative **deconstructs the Exodus narrative**, in a way.

This is a turn-around, a paradox, an enigma.

YHWH is not and will not be thought of simply as **brute force**, to be carried out to battle in the form of a box guaranteeing victory to Israel! God is more nuanced, vulnerable than the Exodus narrative on its own allows.

³ Ibid., 7.

⁴ Origen, ‘Preface,’ in *Commentary on the Psalms 1-25* in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70-71.

- **Is your view of God an Exodus one?** Must God run to your beck-and-call when you need a car park, when you need healing, when your family is in pain? *Must* God defeat evil at your bidding in order for him to remain God?

“The Ark of God has been taken!”

2. Babylonian Exile

The second event to come to mind is the Babylonian exile.

Exile is the moment when the glory is gone, when Israel must learn to live without God in the world.

- **Have you experienced your own Babylonian captivity?** When God has let disaster strike, has not withheld the forces of evil, of cancer, of pain from inflicting you and those you love?

“The Ark of God has been taken!”

3. Ezekiel’s vision

A third allusion from this text is to the vision of Ezekiel of the glory of God departing the temple and from the city of Jerusalem (10.4-5).

YHWH will not stay where his glory is cheapened and his presence **mocked**. Israel makes YHWH into an exile, drives him away from them and in this way Ezekiel plays on the theme of the Ark narrative.

- **Look around at society today.** It certainly looks like God has been exiled from our culture, from our society, from our public spaces. From Bible in Schools to public prayers, God is being exiled from New Zealand and seems publicly absent much of the time.

“The Ark of God has been taken!”

4. Lamentations

Links can also be made between the Ark narrative and the poetry of Lamentations.

The people’s **guilt** leads to **grief** leads to **repentance**.

- **And us?** Do we ever acknowledge our guilt before God and then lament, deeply lament, the loss of God from the world? Or are we still playing the prosperity and triumphalist games of the immature Israelites?

“The Ark of God has been taken!”

5. Psalms: Lament to Complaint

Finally, we are to think of the larger canvass hewn across the OT of the emotional movement of **lament to complaint**. We have no time to read the Psalms but,

“These many prayers that live at the edge of the church’s horizon are acknowledgments that the glory has departed. Israel knows unmistakably about departed glory as does every attentive, candid [believer].”⁵

Ichabod!

PP16

Their Loss – And Ours

Can we imagine, for that is what stories ask us to do, moving from their world to ours, from their loss to our loss.

1. Easter

For those in the know, that is, those of you who have been reading Holy Scripture for a long time, you will already be ahead of me, and right you are. For beyond the scope of the Ark narrative lies the ultimate loss

⁵ Ibid., 17.

of God's glory – **Easter Friday**, the **death of Christ**, the departure of glory and Christ's exile and absence. Christians too, know of God's absence, his departure, his exile.

2. Holocaust

Contemporary theologians often say that thinking about God after the **Jewish holocaust** has changed everything. The attempted extermination of the Jews defies rationality and is a period marked by absence, the silence of God. In light of Dachau and Auschwitz and echoed in a thousand other brutalities, **the world is, on occasion, without God.**

3. Sandy Hook

December 14, 2012, we were living in New Jersey. We watched the evening news to hear and see the tragedy of the **Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings**, in Newton, Connecticut. Adam Lanza fatally shot **20 children and 6 staff**. Our daughter was attending our local elementary school and we immediately thought of her, of her class mates, of her teachers. The next day we struggled to watch our daughter go off to school on the yellow bus. Would what happened there happen here? Could it? God could help – but he didn't there. Who's to say he would protect Sydney, or Odele, or Liam, or me?

The glory of God had departed from Sandy Hook, from Newton, from Connecticut, from America, and from every other place of mindless violence, abuse, and atrocity.

4. Al Noor Mosque Shooting, 2019

And what about more recently:

Date: 15 March 2019

Place: Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre, Christchurch, New Zealand

A gunman carried out coordinated attacks on the Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre during Friday prayers, killing 51 people and injuring many others. The perpetrator live-streamed part of the attack and had published a manifesto expressing white supremacist and extremist views. He was captured the same day and later pleaded guilty to murder, attempted murder, and committing a terrorist act, receiving life imprisonment without parole — the first such sentence in New Zealand.

Ukraine-Russia conflict, **Israel-Palestine** conflict. And on it goes.

Ichabod.

The exile of God and his glory that we all have to face head on, at some point, like it or not.

“The ark of God has been captured” ... five times... “the glory has departed.”

[2. Scene 2: Ashdod in the Morning: Chapter 5]

[Ascent to joy]

PP17

The abject loss of 1 Samuel 4 gives way to scene 2 in chapter 5 and Ashdod in the morning.

The Philistines, victorious in battle, take the Ark on a processional from the city of **Ebenezer** to **Ashdod**, the home of the god **Dagon**.

YHWH is a **prisoner** of war on exhibit.

The processional ends in the church of **Dagon** as the Ark,
and YHWH by implication, is placed in **subservience** to this false god.

“The second day is over as the parade ends and the service concludes. The military leadership returns to the officers’ club for a banquet. The priests check the doors and windows of the shrine; they turn out the lights and go home...”⁶

All is quiet, eerie even.

Hours and hours of darkness and quiet.

And then it is morning.

And what a morning it was.

As the shrine is opened ...**shock...stunned...amazed...bewildered**.

Everything has changed.

Everything was inverted.

Dagon had been left the night before as celebrated and preeminent and YHWH subservient.

Now – Dagon has **fallen on his face**.

Where he fell he lay.

It was not an accident, it was an act of homage;
Dagon bowed deeply “before the Ark of YHWH”.

How, we are not sure, but Dagon had that night learnt that YHWH was the God before whom every knee shall bow.

They set Dagon up and the **third morning** it is the same result (5.4).

But now, Dagon’s head and hands are cut off –

Dagon had been disarmed, made weak, helpless, and impotent.

The Philistines no longer prop Dagon up, or seek to restore him.

Dagon is done,
discredited.

Never again can Dagon lead anybody anywhere in power.

Still the Ark of YHWH was silent and did not move. At the end of 1 Sam 5.4 the narrative ends.

PP18, 19

³And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day. ⁶The hand of the LORD was heavy (*kabod*) against the people of Ashdod.

What happened each night?

What did YHWH do and how did he do it?

We don’t know.

⁶ Ibid., 27.

It is night-time work, all we know is the before and after.

And yet, while sparse, the narrative is not entirely lacking in detail. The narrator here suggests that we must pay attention to **the dog that does not bark**, we must notice the **thickness between the lines**, must pay attention to **what is being left unsaid**.

If this is missed, the narrative becomes a thin miracle to be dismissed as childish fantasy.

Israelite religion has a lot to say about idols.

Attentiveness to that teaching helps make sense of the Dagon story.

PP20

Jeremiah 10 tells us that the gods of the nations, idols, are false, they

- Do *not* speak
- Do *not* hear
- Do *not* smell
- Do *not* walk
- Do *not* do evil
- Do *not* do good
- Do *not* save
- Do *not* matter.

Idols are no help, they are a burden to be carried, they have to be set in place, have their feet nailed to the ground, they are pitiful, empty, useless.

In contrast, Jeremiah tells us YHWH speaks, hears, smells, walks, works, saves, and matters (10.12-13).

Or Isaiah 46.3-4:

“Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
All the remnant of the house of Israel,
Who have been borne by me from your birth,
Carried from the womb;
Even to your old age I am he,
Even when you turn grey I will carry you.
**I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and I will save.”**

This is the God who carries, makes, bears, saves!

Dagon is a ploy in the narrative.

He is simply there as a point of contrast,
so that YHWH’s capacity to devour the powers of death is fully on exhibit.
Now the **Philistines** know what **Israel** knows.

Without Dagon’s protection the Philistines were done, defenceless against the God of Israel. YHWH’s hand was **‘heavy’** on the Philistines (5.6) as he acts against those who sought to humiliate him.

The term **‘heavy’** in 5.6 is ***kabod***, the same word for **glory** used in chapter 4.

In chapter 4 YHWH’s glory or ‘weightiness’ had departed,
now his ‘heavy hand’ is back in play.

Dagon robbed YHWH of ***kabod***, ... but only for 3 days.

YHWH has now recovered his proper weightiness.

The Philistines are made to be grudging, anxious witnesses to the power of YHWH.

The narrative has put the term ***kabod*** at the beginning as the ark begins to move (5.6), and has answered with ***kabod*** at the end in verse 11.

The drama is bracketed by *kabod*.

In chapter 4 his Glory is apparently gone.

In chapter 5, it is unmistakably back.

PP21

All flesh shall see.

All nations shall notice.

All eyes will attend to the *kabod* of YHWH now underway.

Israel is being trained to know and develop the conviction that the powers of the night that have stilled and silenced YHWH cannot last into the dawn.

For the coming of the light of day turns out to be the coming of the glory of YHWH.

Dagon, Baal, Bel, Beelzebub, Allah, Vishnu, **money, sex, power, greed** – are all unable to resist YHWH. The very one they had sought to humiliate and domesticate as a trophy has become too problematic and must now be released.

The clear theme of this narrative is the strong power of YHWH, able to overwhelm Dagon.

The capacity of YHWH to break every captivity and end every exile.

- Early into the **third millennium** we too are witnessing the playing out of chapter 6.
 God's glory is being diminished at every turn,
 his name sullied,
 his people discredited,
 his Word ignored.

And he appears **silent**.

As silent as the Ark resting in Dagon's temple.

But we know the truth.

We are not overcome by despair.

God will move, God is moving, ...

if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear what his Spirit is saying and where his Spirit is working in the world today.

The despair of chapter 4 gives way to the bridled hope Chapter 5.

[Scene 3. When God Comes to Town. Chapter 6]

PP22

[God's glory returns]

Scene 1 in chapter 4 was one of loss and despair.

Scene 2 in chapter 5 was one of silent working and quiet hope.

Scene 3 in chapter 6 brings the story to its resolution. But not as one might predict. Here we find out what happens when God comes to town.

Chapter 6 opens with a council to work out how to return this cursed Ark.

The priests are called to provide an exit strategy, which they do.

They provide a **guilt offering** in the form of gold, and the command to “give glory to the God of Israel” with a change that in such a gesture YHWH will “**lighten**” his hand against the Philistines (6.5).

The juxtaposition of *kabod* ('glory, 'heavy') and 'lighten' is surely intentional.

The *kabod* or glory of God had been heavy against the Philistines,

if, however, they willingly give *kabod* – glory - to YHWH,

he may not need to claim *kabod* so violently.

Thus gold is given willingly.

Cows are readied,

a test is made,

and the Ark is on its way to Israel and out of Philistia to the Israelite town of Beth-shemesh.

They make an offering, and worship YHWH.

“In this moment of receiving back the self-propelled God again unfettered, the Israelites had an immediate sense that **all things were new.**”⁷

But Beth-shemesh is not the intended home of the Ark – **Jerusalem** is. As Psalm 24.7-10 expresses:

PP23

“Lift up your heads, O gates!

And be lifted up, O ancient doors!

That the **King of glory** may come in.

Who is the **King of glory**?

The Lord, strong and mighty,

The Lord, mighty in battle.

Lift up your heads, O gates!

And be lifted up, O ancient doors!

That the **King of glory** may come in.

Who is this **King of glory**?

The Lord of hosts.

He is the **King of glory.**”

5 times we hear the refrain “**King of glory,**”

five times *melek kabod*,

five times “glory” ... ***kabod, kabod, kabod, kabod, kabod...***

five times king,

five times weighty,

five times decisive,

for ‘thine is the kingdom the power and the glory.’”

God in his glory is homebound, to kings, to temple, and ultimately to Jesus the Messiah.

Recall the words of John the Baptist from **Isa 40.3-5**:

PP24

⁷ Ibid., 58.

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
 Make straight in the desert a highway for our God...
 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...”

But now we must make explicit what has been implicit all along, we must name that which has been on the tips of our tongues from the start.

- The loss of glory
 - The journey to Jerusalem
 - The humiliation of defeat
 - The shame of absence
 - The silent overpowering of evil
- The return of glory

We may look beyond the Ark narrative to its greater fulfilment in the Incarnation.

PP25

Philippians 2.5-11 narrates the **same story**, yet this time in its ultimate fulfilment:

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a slave, being born in the human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Day 1:

He became obedient unto death, even death on a cross...
 Not unlike the deathly scene before Dagon at Ashdod.

Day 2:

He emptied himself...
 Not unlike the day of stillness when the outcome is not yet visible, when YHWH is gathering the energies of *kabod* for a final assertion.

Day 3:

Therefore exalted,
 Therefore seen in glory,
 Not unlike the welcome by the peasants at Beth-shemesh,
 Therefore on the way rejoicing.

Faithful as this hymn of Paul's is to the life of Christ, it is also a deep and massive rereading of old texts in which the church is embedded. **This is what it means to read the Bible as one story.**

In the superabundant self-giving of God, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are distinct days as the three days already are dramatically and theologically distinct in Ashdod.

PP26

The Ark narrative we have pondered this morning is:

- About Ashdod and *many other* places
- About Dagon and *many other* gods
- About the Philistines and *many other* peoples
- About the rout of the ark and *many other* defeats
- About the surprise of the third day and *many other* surprises
- About the still night and *many other* Saturdays
- About Eli, Samuel, Ichabod, the Israelites, and *many other* peoples – like Sandy Hook, like Malaysia Airlines flight 370, like Windsor Park, like me and you.

Each of which is like all the others and each of which is unique to itself alone.

In each of our life situations,

in our deepest losses and painful hurts,
our Saturday's of absence and loss,
we are asked here,
in this text,

to look honestly and with full acknowledgement of '**Ichabod**'
and to the deep joy of ***kabod*** en route home in joy.

This text, this story, is not merely meant to be read and interpreted, **it reads and interprets us** and scripts our lives according to the pattern of holy Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

The difference three days can make!