

“Trusting When God Seems Absent [Part One]. The Danger of Putting God in a Box”

Today we’re going to start a two-week series entitled *Trusting When God Seems Absent*. This is important for all of us because it’s been my experience, and the experience of Christians through the ages, that there are times when things are going great and you feel a closeness to God and it is awesome and amazing! But then...but then there are times when you wonder where God went. You see this in scripture, you see it in the writings of Christians throughout the ages. Everybody, particularly, new Christians, when they face times where God seems to have left the scene, can get very discouraged. Some people who are investigating Christianity can even be turned off completely. So I want us to look closely at this phenomenon and figure out what it is and what we can do about it.

Because you see, it’s going to happen. Times when God seems absent. Christian writers and theologians call it different names. Names like the dark night of the soul, or a spiritual winter. Times when God seems to have gone away or gone dormant. And this is difficult, especially when we read scriptures that tell us things like, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” How do square that with feelings of a dark night of the soul. We want to say, “Because if you’re here God, I want to know it. My faith needs to feel it. My experience needs to confirm that you are near, just like you said. Or maybe, God, you were never real in the first place.” These feelings happen and they can cause some deep struggles particularly if we’re going through turmoil. So I want us to see what’s up with these times when God seems absent, and what we’re to do, or not do, during those times.

Today and next Sunday we’ll be drawing from the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament. This is a fascinating story in the history of Israel where, for the very first time, they thought God had left them, or been taken from them and they weren’t sure what to do. So let’s take a look at this story and see what God might teach us today. Visualize this with me.

It starts in chapter 4 if you want to follow along. I want you to read this on your own this week so what I’m going to do is tell the story. Here’s what’s going on... The Israelites are fighting their archenemies, the Philistines. And to understand what’s going on--what’s at stake, what’s at risk--we have to understand something about who the Philistines were.

They had come to the Holy Land, to Israel, from across the sea. And they were so powerful that they quickly gained control of the coastal regions of Palestine along the Mediterranean Sea. Those were the most desirable areas. Those were their centers of power. And if you take a look at the screen, you’ll see a map coming up. **[PICTURE: MAP WITH CITIES HIGHLIGHTED IN THE ORDER THEY’RE SPOKEN]** These are the major cities of the Philistines. These were regarded by the Israelites as town centers of hopeless barbarianism and incivility and cruelty. So the cities: Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron, Branson (actually that’s Gath!).

The Israelites lived in mortal fear of the Philistines mainly because the Philistines had the ability to forge iron and they controlled that technology completely. They had iron swords and spears and other instruments of war. They were living with the new technology of the Iron Age; the Israelites were living with the technology of the stone age. The Israelites feared the Philistines because they were brutal and they had the best weapons possible.

But Israel goes to war against the Philistines and in the first battle they are badly beaten. After the battle with the Philistines they gather together to debrief. And they ask the question people always ask when something goes wrong, “Why? Why did this happen to us? Where was God? Why did the Lord bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Why?”

And then, somebody gets an idea and says, “Let’s have another battle. Only this time, we’ll use our secret weapon. This time, let’s bring the ark of the covenant into the battle.” The Ark of the Covenant, **[PICTURE: ARK OF THE COVENANT]** you’ll remember it from *Indian Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, is a box made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. To call it a box is a huge understatement. That’s like calling the Grand Canyon a drainage ditch, or the paintings in Sistine Chapel, some nice little sketches. This “box” held the tablets of the Ten Commandments that were given to Moses along with some manna and Aaron’s staff. And on it were formed two cherubim—two angels. It was beautiful and important in what it contained, but what was even more important is that at that time the Israelites believed that God was enthroned on the ark.

The idea of the ark was that where the ark was, God was. So somebody got this idea. “They’ve got iron. We’ve got the ark.” That’s like having the atomic bomb. It worked for Indiana Jones against the Nazis in

Raiders of the Lost Ark. And bringing the ark into the battle was a symbolic way of saying, “All right, God. Your glory is on the line now. You have to come through. Otherwise, people won’t just think about us as losers. People are going to think about you, Yahweh, as a loser. And we know you have way too much pride in your glory to let anybody think of you as a loser. So we bring the ark into battle. You’ve got to come through. We’ve got to win. Go and do our bidding.”

And what’s going on here is a kind of a shift from thinking about God as someone that they must serve, that they must obey, to thinking about God as somebody who could be kind of useful to them, who could get them what they wanted. And you could express it like this. They thought to themselves, “We have God in a box.”

Another way of putting this comes from the contemporary theologian Homer Simpson. Anybody ever hear of a show called “The Simpsons”? **[PICTURE: HOMER SIMPSON]** Well, in one episode of “The Simpsons”—so I’m told, anyway--Homer, who’s the dad, pledges money to a PBS Telethon, but it’s money he doesn’t have. He is just tired of having his television show interrupted, so he calls and pledges money, but he doesn’t have it. They find out and as punishment, he’s forced to serve as a missionary on a Pacific island. It’s not a real realistic plot, I realize, but he goes there to serve as a missionary. And the people that he’s serving build a new church. Now, Homer is not theologically real advanced, but he’s quite proud of their accomplishment. And he sums it up like this. Homer says, as he looks at this building, “Well, I don’t know much about God, but we sure have built him a nice, little cage.”

We’re cage builders. We build cages for creatures, because then we can control them. We can keep them where we want them. We contain them. We can have them on hand when we desire them. We can keep them from getting too wild or too free. We’re cage builders in a lot of areas of our lives. And the Israelites were more or less saying, “You know, if things don’t go our way, we’ve got the ark. We’ve got God in a box. And listen you Philistines, don’t make me open my God-box. Don’t make me open this can of...you know what.” I don’t know much about God, but we sure built him a nice, little cage. But before you and I judge them too quickly, I think it’s worth asking whether this kind of God-in-a-box thinking has died out altogether in our day. Because I think it goes on all the time. I really do.

Sometimes, we think, “If I just keep up my end of the spiritual bargain, if I go to church once in a while, read my Bible occasionally, be a good person, avoid scandals and a big sexual sin and keep my nose clean. If I serve the church or tow the line, then God better keep up his end of the bargain. He’d better give me what I want or my faith is going to start to get pretty shaky.”

We do that. But I’ve got to tell you, that’s not a good way to operate. Sometimes we can begin to think there is some kind of magic formula for prayer. “If I can just conjure up enough certainty or if I just pray with enough boldness, then God has to give me what I want. Or if I just have enough faith. Or if I just claim what it is that I want. As long as I find the right formula, I’m guaranteed to get what I want. I’ve got God in a box.” That’s not a good way to operate, but we do.

Sometimes, those of us involved in church ministry start to think we’ve got it all boxed up. “As long as I use the right techniques for preaching or teaching, if I’m clever enough or skillful enough or informed enough or smart enough or am able to manipulate emotions enough, I can make it happen. On my own, I can make it happen, ‘cause I’ve got God in box.”

When we think we’ve got God in box we can become so judgmental and so condescending, and arrogant. Do you know how noxious and obnoxious that becomes to a fallen, wondering, confused world around us? How noxious when there is a group of people walking around like they’ve got God in a box?

So what happens if it turns out that God doesn’t like to be put in a box? What if he’s not so tame, this God? What if his love should turn out to be so fierce and so pure and so holy that it can’t be manipulated, not even by real, clever prayers? What if this God that we serve turns out to be so deep and good and strong and wild and free that he can’t be put in a cage? What if God uses unexpected people and un-predicted events and unforeseen gifts and unlikely channels? And what if you don’t keep your eyes opened? And what if you don’t keep your heart real humble? And what if you don’t keep your spirit real sensitive and God shows up and you miss him?

So I wonder if there’s any area where you’ve been trying to put God in a box. I wonder, just between you and God, is there any place where you have been insisting that God bend to your agenda? Maybe it involves a relationship. Maybe it involves your finances. Maybe it involves what your ministry looks like. And what you need to say today is, “All right, God. I’ll quit insisting on my own way. I’ll quit trying to manipulate stuff

and control stuff. I will quit trying to use you, God, and I'll just serve you." Because I think the real question here is, is God enough for you—just God—even if you don't win the battle, even if you don't get what you want? I wonder, when is the last time you ever told God, "God, I love you no matter what"?

When is the last time you said to him, "God, these things are the desires of my heart, and I want you to know about them and I would like to have them. But more than that, God, I just want you to know that I love you no matter what—whether you give me what I ask for or you don't. Whether I ever understand or I don't, God, I just love you."

So the Israelites decide to go to battle against the Philistines again, but this time they say, "Let's take the ark into the battle." The ark is brought to the battlefield. It's their secret weapon. They go into battle a second time. They just know that they can't lose. Guess what happens? They lose. They lose big time.

Here's what takes place after the battle is over (in verse 12) it is so catastrophically lost that a messenger runs all the way from the battlefield, almost 20 miles to the nearest city, Shiloh, to give the news—the bad news. He's running back to Shiloh for one man, Eli, the old priest who sits by the city gate waiting for the news. Eli is an old, old man now. He can hardly bring himself to ask the question, "What happened?" The messenger responds by giving Eli four pieces of news. And each piece goes from bad to worse. He starts by saying, "Israel fled before the Philistines. We lost the battle. Worse than that," he says, "the army has suffered heavy losses. The casualty rate was devastating. The army was essentially wiped out—30,000 died."

Third piece of news: "Worse than that, Eli, your sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were both killed." This messenger has to pronounce that terrible news. But it gets even worse. The messenger says, "And the unthinkable has happened. The Ark of the Covenant has been captured. The ark is gone." That is the climax of the bad news and it gets said over and over again to emphasize the tragedy, "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." "The Ark of the Covenant has been captured." The news is so bad that Eli falls over and dies. He survived all the bad news, even hearing of his sons' deaths, but he could not take the fact that the ark of the covenant had been captured.

What's the big deal about the Ark of the Covenant being captured? We see the explanation in Eli's daughter-in-law, now a widow. She's very pregnant and when she gets the news of what's happened she goes into labor. And as she gives birth to her child the midwife who is helping her wants to encourage her and says, "Don't despair. You've given birth to a son. Even in the midst of all this death, there's still hope. You will have a child. You will have a son and life will go on." But the mother pays no attention. And in those dark moments she named the boy Ichabod. Because, she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured."

She names him Ichabod. Ichabod is the negative form of a word that is the most important word in this story. It's the word "*kabod*." The Hebrew word *kabod* meant glory. That's a great word. It was a word for everything that was majestic and awesome and worthy of honor. Where there was *kabod*, there was dignity and there was meaning. And in a dark, fallen, sorry, difficult, mostly-illiterate, mostly-impoorished world, there was transcendent purpose. And there was hope. *Kabod*.

In Hebrew when you put an "I" in front of this word it becomes the negative form of it. It's a little like in English, sometimes that happens with words when you put an "A" there. And atheist is the opposite of a person who's a theist—who believes in God. To be amoral is the opposite of being moral. The mother doesn't name the child *Kabod*, but Ichabod. God is gone. Hope is gone. The glory is gone.

Did you ever see what happens to a community, to a people when the glory is gone? John Ortberg gives the example of when Michael Jordan used to play for the Bulls? For Chicago, that was glory. I'm not big basketball fan. But Bulls fans say it was magical. You had to go an hour or two early just to get a parking space and make it inside on time. Every year, the Bulls would win the title. Every year, they would wear the crown. They had success, fame, money, the adoration of the fans, the envy of their opponents. Chicago was the center of the whole basketball universe! Chicago had *kabod*.

And then, one day, Michael Jordan went away. And when number 23 left town, the glory left with him. And there were no more titles and no more acclaim and no excitement and no crowds, just horrible, brutal, losing records, awful games, nightmarish scenarios year after year after year after year after year. They used to be the Bulls. Now, they are they are the Chicago Ichabods. The glory is gone.

It makes me think about the Blue Ridge Mall in Kansas City. Growing up we lived in Warrensburg--small town about an hour away from Kansas City. It was a huge, huge deal to pack up in the Plymouth Fury and go to Blue Ridge Mall. It was a magical place. It had all kinds of stores. It was buzzing with people. It

had restaurant that slowly spun around when you ate. It had toy stores, and book stores, and hobby stores. It had an Orange Julius stand and an ice cream shop where you could get bubble gum ice cream. It was like heaven on earth! Kabod! But then Independence Center opened down the road. It was bigger with new stores and a new look and Blue Ridge Mall went down hill. The people just left it. I had a meeting in that area a couple of years ago and I thought it would be nostalgic to stop in. It was heart-breaking. Very few stores in it any more. The only people there were walkers. The spinning restaurant was gone. Everything I knew was no longer there. Now it's the Ichabod Mall.

This mother is giving birth to her baby in the midst of all this tragedy and when he is born hangs this name on her child—Ichabod. Why would she do that? Why would you do that to a kid? Understand what the loss of the ark meant in the mind of the ancient Israelite. This is not just about losing a battle or two. This is not just losing some religious relic, not just an object of historical interest. To them, the ark is where God sits to reign over his people. And if the ark is gone, that means God is gone! If the ark is gone, that means either he did not care or could not hear or would not help. If the ark is gone, that means the whole story they had been basing their whole lives on, giving everything to, was all an illusion. The faith that they had been following and counting on was all nothing but wishful thinking. There never was a Yahweh. There never will be a day when the Lord will set pain and death and wrong all right. The ark is just a box. This woman giving birth is saying, "God is gone. There is no hope for life. It's all just a cruel illusion. And to mark this day I name my child Ichabod. The glory, God himself, is gone." No hope of something beyond the grave. You live and you die, and that's the end of it. There are a whole lot of people in our world today who live in a world called Ichabod.

At this point, everything inside of us wants to rush on to the rest of the story. We all want assurance that everything is going to turn out great, we want to hear some good news that everybody is going to be happy. But we have to pause here in the story, because this moment is a part of the story of the people of God, and yours and mine. What do you do when there's a big battle where everything is at stake and you've got to win, and you lose?

What do you do when it appears that God—this God that you have based everything in your life upon—is absent and it doesn't look like he's coming back? What do you do when you find out your name is Ichabod? You lost your job and you can't find another one, and you're not asking God for the moon. You're not asking to be a millionaire. You just want to be able to work. And you don't know if you can pay the bills. And you feel like such a failure. And the worst part is, where's God?

You carry with you a weight of stress or anxiety or depression. You don't want this. You want to live in trust and peace. But sometimes, your mind worries and your heart races so much you can't sleep. You can't eat. You're not sure you can get through the rest of your life like this. You're not sure you can get through another day like this. You're not sure you want to. And you wonder, "Where's God?"

A mom with young children still at home feels a lump one day. She goes to the doctor. She gets a phone call. It is malignant. She may not live to see her children grow up. She wonders, "What did I do wrong?" She wonders, when she hears other people talk about prayers being answered that seem so trivial to her now, "Why doesn't God just answer this one prayer of mine—just this one? He can do this."

Your deep longing was for a God-honoring, joy-filled marriage. But it hasn't happened. Maybe you have not married, and it looks like you never will. Maybe you have been betrayed by somebody. Maybe you are married, but it is a joyless, lifeless, heavy road and you keep pouring out your heart to God, but it doesn't seem to change.

Maybe your heart breaks over a child that you just love, but is a runaway or a rebel or just hostile. Maybe you have a dream for ministry that looks like it's never going to come true. Maybe there is some kind of brokenness inside you that you keep crying out to God, "God, change it," but it doesn't change.

What do you do when the glory is gone? Well, there is, in this story, no formula, no easy solution to recapture lost glory. And the reality is that we don't have God in a box. There is a time to talk about our part. "What am I supposed to do? How should I respond?" and we're going to talk about that some next week, but not right now. Not right now because what happens next in this story is not what the Israelites do at all. It's what they don't do. For the Israelites, when the ark had been captured, when the glory was gone, their job for a while was, "Hold on. Watch, wait, remember, don't despair." And for some of you, that's what you need to do. Watch, wait, remember, don't despair, don't give up, don't give in, don't quit.

Because now, the story is about what God does. And what God does next is staggering. Again, I want to ask you to see this from an ancient perspective—from their mindset, not ours. God allows the Philistines to drag his ark—the manifestation of his presence—from his people to the enemy, from Ebenezer to Ashdod. And the Philistines had a big parade showing off the ark and how they defeated not only the Israelites, but how their god defeated the God of the Israelites. And the whole way, the Philistines would mock and taunt this ark, this throne, this God of the Israelites who was being dragged along on a wagon who could not save his own people and he couldn't even save himself. They taunt him the whole way.

This God of Israel allows himself to be taken captive. This God of Israel, unlike any other God in that world, this God takes on himself the suffering and the loss and the pain and the embarrassment and the humiliation of his people. He carries their shame on his back. What kind of God would do such a thing? What kind of God would manifest himself in weakness and humility and shame on behalf of, in identification with his people? What kind of God would do such a thing?

You understand, this is telling us something about the kind of God that we serve. This is telling us something about the true nature of glory. This is a little foreshadowing of a day that would come, not in a year, not in a decade, but a day that did come, when God would be present on the earth, not in a box, not in an ark, but in a person. And John says, "And we beheld his glory, [his *kabod*]." "The word became flesh and dwelt among us. And we beheld his glory and it didn't look anything like what we thought it was going to look like." No power. No money. No title. No army. And at the end of a rather financially-poor life, he becomes a prisoner and his body, which was the manifestation of God in this earth—a kind of new Ark of the Covenant—his body is taken captive. And it is paraded in captivity to be mocked and spat upon and taunted on the Road to Golgotha. "You who would save others, you can't even save your own self."

And God on the cross becomes *Ichabod*. No glory. He takes on our shame, knows our aloneness, our desperate cry for a God who seems far away. "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me? Why has the glory left me? Why is my name *Ichabod*?" Our God says this from the cross.

And the weight of all of that sin and all of that shame and all of that God forsakenness is born by this One—by this life the likes of which this world had never seen. And he dies. He gives up his life. And his body, the manifestation of God on this earth, is placed in a tomb. And Pontius Pilate posts a guard to stand watch to make sure nothing would happen to this body, to make sure that the movement that this man Jesus started is thoroughly tamed, thoroughly domesticated. Pilate says to himself, "I don't know much about this Jesus, but we sure have built him a nice, little cage."

But what he didn't know, and what the human race continually is surprised by century after century after century after century, is we serve a God who just won't be caged. "And on the third day..." On the third day, something happened.

Next week we see how God gets himself free from the Philistines and what God does in the night when no one is watching. Next week, we find out how the *kabod* comes back home. And it's a phenomenal story.

The psalmist says, "Sorrow lasts for a night, but joy comes in the morning." And this week, this message, this was night. Next week is morning and we will behold the mighty power of God. Next week we will see how we once again are enfolded by the God that we sometimes feel has gone away. That anticipation of how that happens, well, for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Sr. Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources for this sermon.