**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**July 11th, 2021**

**Tangible Signs of an Intangible God**

1. Perusing the Lectionary

This morning, if you take a look at all the readings from our lectionary, we have, to say the

least, some interesting choices. This past week, there was much chatter online from other Presbyterian pastors and one of my friends put it well when he wrote this: “ Wow. So the choices for preaching the lectionary this week are rough. 1. Guy trips and tries to catch himself and touches the Ark. “nope shouldn’t have done that death for you!” 2. Paul at his most basic. 3. Herod’s daughter dancing for Herod and his guests and getting him to promise her anything and she at the request of her mother asks for the Head of John the Baptist.” I chose the first option, but I think you’d find preachers around the nation saying, “Oh no.”

 Approaching a text like the one we have this morning is a feat in itself – we all might choose to avoid it. It has names and places that our modern mouths don’t know how to pronounce, it has cultural implications like burnt-offerings that we don’t practice today, and there’s a confusing picture of death and dancing and food. To top it all off, we are far removed from this Ark of God – we don’t often talk about what it is, what it might mean, why it is important. It is easy for any one of us, myself included, to close the Bible here and move to more comfortable texts – maybe something lovely like Micah where we are called to walk humbly with our God or maybe move to the New Testament with a relatable Jesus at a Wedding in Cana. The temptation is strong, my friends, but there is value in staying here, even just for this morning, and seeing what the text can tell us today.

1. The Ark of the Covenant

First, you need to know the main player in this text – the Ark of the Covenant or the Ark of

the Lord. It has a long history and could take up an entire class on its movement in our Old Testament text. The very short version is that it is a chest, gilded in gold, and it has rings on each side so that it can be carried on two poles by the ark bearers. On top of the chest are two cherubim, or angels, and inside holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the rod of Aaron, and a pot of manna. This Ark traveled from place to place and endured conquests and captures.

 Where is the Ark now? It would be really nice if it were in a nice museum that we could all visit and point to and show our friends, but the reality is…no one knows. Some say it is hidden in Ethiopia, other’s say Southern Africa, others have gone as far as claiming that it was moved to France or even Ireland. Archaeological studies have been going on for a long time trying to find the Ark and, according to the scholarship even in the past year, it doesn’t sound like we are any closer to finding the Ark.

1. Tangible Signs

One of the questions that has arisen as I’ve studied the text is this obsession of sorts with the

Ark. Why did our ancestors carry it from place to place, why did it mean so much to so many people, why would one die from touching it and why would someone dance at this object? Most of all why are we still looking for it today? The conclusion that I’ve arrived at is a very human one – we want a tangible sign of an intangible God.

 If we were able to open up the Ark and show folks the Tablets, this life of faith would be easier. A tangible sign, a sign of proof that what happened on the Mount is real and then could all live our faith without question and be confident and bask in that tangible and absolute sign.

 I think we long for tangible signs. And you could say that we have tangible signs – but they are just in a far-off nation of Israel, and really inaccessible to many of us. But, what about a sign – what about a sign in Sykesville, what about a sign in this place, here, right now, that we could point to, we could stake our claim on, and be firm about the fact that there is no question whether God exists or what God has done in this world. In a black and white way, it would be amazing to point to a tangible sign of God…but here’s the problem…the world isn’t black and white. So what do today without that tangible sign?

1. An Intangible God

We want absolute tangible objects, but our God is intangible. God has been found in the

burning of the bush in Exodus, in mighty winds, in acts of nature unexplainable, but God has promised us that we shall never see the face of God. Maybe we need to start seeking out God in places less tangible, but still inexpressible.

 I think we need to slow down to find those signs of God. It might sound corny, but it’s true – there are signs that God is with us. In each sunrise and sunset, in an unexpected double rainbow, in ebb and flow of the ocean tide. We find signs in children who say something unexpected and somehow holy, or the majesty of the animals like deer or foxes that leap through our yards that it almost looks like they are flying with unexplainable grace. There are signs that we find in one another – when we share a conversation and somehow the words that we need to hear are the ones that are being spoken.

 I wish we had the Ark – it would make my life of faith easier with some permanent example of proof, but that’s not the life of faith we are called to today. We are called to use our energy, imagination, intelligence, and love – just like those vows many of us take as Elders or Deacons – and we are called to use what God has given us to creatively engage in our faith and invite others to do the same. The tangible signs of God aren’t as easy to find as an Ark, but if we look, if we slow down, if we ask God to help us find those signs – in faith, we will find them and in faith, we will grow into the people we are called to be.

1. Sidebar

Before I close out the sermon, I know that I usually focus on just one access point of the

Scripture lesson, but there’s a few other pieces here and questions that came to mind as I dwelled in the text that I wanted to share with you.

1. This guy, Uzzah, is struck down by God right in front of the Ark for touching it. In

our reading, it seems like he is just trying to steady the Ark because an Oxen shook – so why would God kill him right there? I don’t know – but the only answer that comes to mind is that there are things we are not called to touch with our hands, something as sacred as this ark, just like we are not to see the face of God and live.

1. It also seems very fair that David, after that event, is afraid of God. David doesn’t

want to be struck down, and it takes some pause, some time to learn how to trust that he will be safe, in order for David to take the Ark to the next place. Sometimes we are thrown off, for good cause by God’s actions, and alike David, we need to take some time to rest, to consider, and to learn how to trust again.

1. And then, the dancing. Oh, the dancing. In the roots of the Jewish faith, dancing is a

sacred way to connect with God and with one another – plus, it’s this joyful and beautiful act. I can’t imagine Presbyterians dancing, but maybe there is an encouragement to move when the Spirit says move, to dance when the Spirit says dance, and to let ourselves delight in God as we move the bodies that God has given us.

1. Back to the Forefront

Aside from those notes, what I want to leave with you today is that though we don’t have this

Ark to use as a means of faith, I encourage you to look for the signs that God is putting before you to grow your faith. The life of faith is hard, but in the challenge, there is also imperceptible beauty and growth that we find if we just believe and seek God’s work in the world. So may you slow down, may you listen closely, may you look at the world around you, and the world inside of you and see God’s hand at work here today and always. Amen.