

reading the Bible with Luther



Session 15: 1 Samuel 4-12

by Virgil Thompson

In this episode of the story God makes good His threat against the household of Eli, Samuel grows old and dies, and Israel demands a king. With his dying breath Samuel warns the people that kings are not everything they are cracked up to be in theory, but the people persist in their desire to be, like other nations, ruled by a king. Eventually Samuel gives in to the demand. Israel gets a king. Whether it was a good thing or not, there is the rest of the story to tell.

Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

As the story is told, Israel's demand for a king may be understandable, but if so, only in the sense of the old maxim, "out of the frying pan and into the fire."

There is no escaping the reality that in the waning days of the Judges, aside from Samuel, leadership was in short supply among the people of God. For this reason, at least in part, the fortunes of Israel were in steady decline. In the episode before us from First Samuel, the Philistines have faced off against Israel, "*and when the battle was joined, Israel was defeated*" (1 Samuel.4:2).

The Bible's matter-of-fact report of Israel's defeat at the hands of the Philistines remains as disconcerting today as it was in the time of Samuel. *Philistine* has always been synonymous with indifference and opposition to God's promise for the goodness of life. Understandably, when news of Israel's military misfortune at the hands of the Philistines reached the elder statesmen of the nation, they were at a complete loss to explain how the battle could have gone against the people of God. They could only stand around with their mouths open, prayerfully asking, "*Why has the Lord put us to rout today?*" (v. 3).

It is unclear whether it was merely a rhetorical question for which they didn't really expect an answer or whether they actually were holding out for a heavenly reply. In any event, heaven was in that instance—as heaven so often is in the wake of our disasters—absolutely silent on the question.

To their credit, the elders of the people summoned the temple administration at Shiloh to send down the Ark of the Covenant. In the past, the Ark of the Covenant had seen them through to victory against their enemies. It had happened so often in the past that perhaps the people now believed it could be taken for granted. The Ark of the Covenant would guarantee God's saving presence against the "*power of our enemies*" (1 Samuel 4:3).

For a brief moment it appeared to the army of Israel that with the arrival of the Ark of the Covenant the tide of battle against the Philistines would turn dramatically in their favor. Confident of the promise, the people of God let loose with a great shout of victory-in-the-bag! The shout of believers' bravado was so mighty that it resounded over the whole earth (v. 5).

For that brief moment the people's confidence in God had the Philistines shaking in their boots. On the one hand, the evidence of the story betrays that the Philistines of that time, as the Philistines of today, did not put much stock in the reality of the gods. It was all the same to them: God was not a reality to be taken seriously. And yet, realities of the heart are not always what they appear to be on the surface. In this case, the Philistines do not appear to be completely above the fear of God: "*Should the gods turn against us, woe to us,*" they anxiously exclaim (v. 8).

However, you have to admire the courage of the Philistines, even if it is absolutely futile. They steel themselves against their fears, even against the fear of God: "*Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, in order not to become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight*" (v. 9).

As it turns out in the story of the Bible, the courage of the Philistines carries the day. Not only are the forces of God defeated, but the Ark of the Covenant itself, the very symbol of God's real presence with and for God's people, is taken captive by the Philistines!

The Philistines can't help gloating in their victory over Israel and the gods. They parade the Ark of the Covenant throughout the public thoroughfares as a superstitious box of empty promises, a relic of the religious past in a world now come of age. The battle cry echoes down the ages to the present day, "*Take courage, O Philistines, in order not to become slaves of God.*"

The defeated people of Israel who were not slaughtered on the field of battle escaped to the sanctuary of their homes. Home, however, is not the safe sanctuary we might imagine. When Father Eli, pastor to the people of God, got the devastating news of death and defeat—including the death of his own sons—he was so distraught that he keeled over backward and broke his neck.

I wish we could say that the death of Eli marked the end of the era of ineffective and corrupt leadership among the people of God. But if the complaint of the people to Samuel is any indication—"You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; they turn aside after gain, they take bribes and pervert justice; appoint a king to govern us like the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:3-4)—then we have to believe that the believing community was not yet out of the woods in the matter.

As the wife of Phinehas concluded, "*The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured*" (1 Samuel 4:19-24). When her son was born in that terrible time, that's what she named him: **Ichabod**. The name expresses the sentiment not only of his mother but of many within Israel at that time. I know many Lutherans today who feel exactly that way about the Lutheran tradition: "*The glory of the Lord has departed.*"

See what I mean—out of the frying pan and into the fire? It was understandable that Israel should demand a king, so that, as they explained to themselves, "*we may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go about before us and fight our battles*" (1 Samuel 8:20). It is not just ancient history. We still talk that way. We think if only we had, in our life together as the community of faith, a proper office of authority—whether located in the papacy, episcopacy, congregation, seminary or committee of the like-minded—it would be the answer! If only we had some authoritative dogma, some visible, tangible something to guarantee safety and certainty, to go before us and fight our battles. Yes, then we'd be like all the rest of the world.

But then we would no longer be the Christian community, the community of saints, the one holy catholic church on earth. The community of faith lives solely by the promise

of God, spoken to us in baptism and Supper, spoken to us where the Word of God is proclaimed in power and purity. Any community, including the community of faith, will always have some form of organization, some government. We are free to devise whatever seems to serve the common good. It deserves to be honored and respected in our life together, but not worshiped as the kingdom come. God's kingdom will come of its own accord, even without our prayers, as Luther points out in the *Small Catechism*. We pray that it may also come among us.

This was, and is, Luther's Reformation. It lies at the heart of our confession of faith (see *The Augsburg Confession*, Articles 4 and 5). The Christian community is a people who live solely by the promise of God, against everything to the contrary. We are justified to believe even in the midst of being routed by the Philistines that God keeps His promise. Neither God nor the goodness of life will be defeated. We are justified, everything to the contrary, to live in the promise of it.

In the Biblical story, from the perspective of the Lord God, it is clear what the desire "*to be like other nations*" is about in truth. As God explains to Samuel,

They have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you.

— 1 Samuel 8:8

It is the same old story, from Genesis to Revelation, the same story, which Luther never tired of telling. I pray that Lutherans will never tire of telling either. The story of the Bible is vividly told in these chapters before us from First Samuel. It is the story about sinful humanity who is bound not to want God to be God, and about God who is determined to liberate humanity from its bondage and restore us to the freedom of the children of God in the baptismal promise of God for us and not against us.

Out of the frying pan and into the fire!

... continued on next page

Virgil Thompson

teaches New Testament at Gonzaga University. A prolific author and former pastor, he currently serves as managing editor of The Lutheran Quarterly.



Meanwhile, the Victory Parade Runs Amok

Meanwhile, as the people of God are busy asserting their demand for a king, to be like other nations and have someone to fight their battles, the Philistine victory parade is not exactly going as planned.

The first stop on the Philistine victory parade was the temple of Dagon, where they deposited the captured Ark of the Covenant. It is not exactly clear what the point of that was supposed to be. Were they trying to show that the God of Israel was inferior to the god of Philistia? Was the point that one idol was as empty as the next idol, relics of bygone times? Whatever the point was supposed to be, it must have appeared somewhat ironic when they returned the next morning to the temple of Dagon to find the statue of Dagon on its face before the Ark of the Covenant. Perhaps the Philistines chalked up the incident to happenstance.

A second time, they set the Ark of the Covenant before Dagon, only again to find by the next morning that Dagon,

with arms and head severed from its body, again lies prostrate before the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 5:1-5).

The Philistines should perhaps have taken it as a hint. Perhaps the Lord God of Israel was not entirely as washed up as it might have seemed. But they didn't take the hint. They continue to parade the Ark of the Covenant from village to village. However, as it makes its way through the villages of the Philistines, the people are plagued with tumors. There is some discussion among students of the Bible as to the exact nature of these tumors. But in any event, it did not take the Philistine victors long to unceremoniously return the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place. On that note the story of God's promise for us and not against us marches on.

Looking Ahead: We Three Kings

In the next episode of reading the Bible with Luther we study the story of the foils, frolics, and foibles of these three kings—Saul, David and Solomon.

reading the Bible with Luther — Bible study



Session 15: 1 Samuel 4-12

by Virgil Thompson

Bible Study and Prayer

Each installment of our series offers suggestions for reflection and discussion.

1. In this portion of the story the Ark of the Covenant plays a central role in the events. In fact roughly one third of all Old Testament references to the Ark of the Covenant, also frequently referred to as the Ark of God, occurs in I and II Samuel. As best as you can make out from I and II Samuel, what is the Ark of the Covenant? You may also want to consult a Bible Dictionary or Encyclopedia.
2. After the people of Israel were defeated by the Philistines, they asked, "Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines?" (1 Samuel 4:3). According to the story, God does not answer the question explicitly. In other words, the purposes of God often remain hidden in the events of history. In the story what do the elders of the people do in the face of God's hidden purposes and the silence of heaven? What can the church learn from the story about the life of faith?

3. Has it ever seemed to you that the Philistine forces of the world run rampant over the promise of the goodness of life? How does this story help us to cope and answer the experience of life's defeats?
4. As you think about this portion of the story, consider these questions:
 - a. *What do I find most comforting, most disturbing about the story? Why?*
 - b. *What background knowledge would help me understand the story more clearly? How does my experience help to understand the story?*
 - c. *What does this story promise to faith? What does this book demand of faith?*

Download a free copy of this article and Bible study:
<http://www.solapublishing.org/pages/Adult-Education.html>

Select: **Reading the Bible with Luther - Session 15**