

The True King (1 Samuel 6:1-7:2)

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Have you ever been sitting at your desk, maybe at home or at work, and just stared at a blank page? You're finger holding the pen. Or your fingers resting on the keyboard. The cursor is blinking. And you don't know what to do. You don't know where to start. You're not sure what to say. You're not even sure what your next move should be.

I notice this especially when I have something difficult or heavy to respond to. Maybe it's an email, and I'm not sure how to respond to a criticism. Or maybe I realize I've communicated poorly with someone, and now I'm trying to figure out what to say. Or maybe it's a phone call with someone whom I've frustrated, and I don't know what I can say to move the conversation forward. Or maybe you're in a tense situation, and you're trying to decide: Do I step back? Do I jump into action? Do I say something? Do I wait?

I'm sure we can all put ourselves in a moment like that. Where we're wondering, "What do I do?" And sometimes, that's not because we don't care. It's because we genuinely don't know what to do first. You're just there, trying to figure out what to do next.

And when we're in situations like this, we generally start with what we know. We do what we've done before. And that means our actions aren't always as clean as we'd like. Our anger, frustration, and bitterness can spill out into our words and actions. Our shyness can delay us from responding. Or our Type A personality can bulldoze its way into the situation.

But even beyond our actions, we bring our assumptions and perspectives into our actions and responses. "This person is probably mad at me, so I should respond this way." Or, "I'm expected to do this, so I'll try to make it happen."

And beyond our human interactions, we're tempted to do the same thing with God. Believing that we need to understand God more, before coming to Him in our situation. Believing we've messed up too badly for God to heal and restore. Believing God doesn't care about us because we're not seeking Him as we should. Believing we have to get ourselves together before God can work in our lives.

And when we're tempted to approach God that way, it ends up shaping what we do. Shaping how we view God. Shaping how we respond to God. Shaping how we pursue God. Because when we don't know what to do, we're tempted to fall back on what we already know. And often what we know doesn't line up cleanly with God's way.

But one way we encounter good news in God's Word, in 1 Samuel 6:1–7:2, is that we don't have to know how to perfectly act toward God, to begin to encounter God's presence. Because God meets us where we are, and works to transform us from there.

That's what we encounter in 1 Samuel 6:1–7:2. The Philistines had captured the ark of the covenant—the place within the Tabernacle where God made His presence known to His covenant people, the Israelites. But as Mitch helped us encounter last week, having the ark of the covenant didn't turn out very well for the Philistines. (And I encourage you to go back and listen, if you were absent). The Philistines placed the ark in the temple of their god, Dagon, only to find Dagon fallen over before the ark the next day. And then tumor-like sores began afflicting the people in whatever Philistine town the ark was kept. So they moved it from one city to another, until five Philistine cities had been impacted. And now, after all of this, the Philistines decide they need to return the ark to Israel. They don't know what to do. They're trying to figure out how to get this thing—and the God behind it—out of their lives. And that's where 1 Samuel 6 continues the story. God gets the ark back into Israel. Because God takes initiative. And He does so before we ever move toward Him. And He works with us to move with Him from there. Because God already knows what to do when we don't—when we're frozen and stuck in our assumptions and muddled beliefs.

And that's what the Philistines and Israelites encounter in 1 Samuel 6:1–7:2. The Philistines do their best to return the ark to Israel as respectfully and reverently as they know how. And even though their understanding is imperfect, God still meets them and works through the situation. The Philistines encountered that even when they didn't know what to do, God already did. And as the ark returned to Israel, the Israelites encountered that when they didn't know how to get the ark back, God did. God took the initiative. God made His presence known.

And that's the good news we encounter in this passage: God's invisible hand... is present and active. God is sovereign and over the whole situation—even amidst the Philistines' superstitious beliefs, and even amidst Israel's weakness after the Philistines captured the ark. God took initiative. God made His presence known. God's invisible hand knew what to do and acted. God knew where to start... and did something.

And what we encounter in this God is an invitation to surrender to His presence. To surrender to His rule over this world. To surrender to His ability to act in this world—in our lives, even when we can't see it. Even when we don't know how to invite God into our situation. Even when we don't have ourselves all put together to approach God rightly. We're invited to surrender because God already made the first move. And we see that most clearly in His coming to be with us in Jesus. God's presence in flesh and blood. **God meets us where we are to transform us into what He knows we can become in Him.** So when we're not sure what to do, when we don't know how to turn to God perfectly, God is still

there. God already knew what needed to happen. God knew He needed to take the initiative.

And that's the good news we're invited to believe: **When I don't know what to do, God already does.**

Have you ever avoided a place because it became associated with a relationship that turned sour? Maybe you stopped going there because you wanted to get away from the feelings and memories attached to it. In a sense, you gave up the place because you hoped that by removing yourself from it, you could remove what had become associated with it. In 1 Samuel 6, the Philistines are doing something similar—only their thinking is much more superstitious.

In chapter 6, verse 2 and following, the Philistines inquire of their priests and diviners about how to get rid of the afflicting sores impacting their people. And their answer is a superstitious solution. It's not all that different from carrying a good-luck charm—to try to ward off misfortune. The priests and diviners believe a guilt offering will ease their affliction. And according to their understanding, that means making molds of the tumor-like sores and the rats.

You might be thinking, “Rats?!” According to notes on the Greek translation of this story, the sores were associated with a rodent problem, which helps explain why the rats are mentioned here. So they believe that if they make models of the tumors and rodents that caused them, make them out of gold, make one for each city that was impacted, and place them on a new cart with unused animals carrying it, then this will be an acceptable guilt offering. They hope it'll be enough to get the God of Israel off their backs, so to speak.

And while this is certainly superstitious, there's also a sense that they recognize they're dealing with a God who deserves their respect. The gold indicates that the God of Israel is kingly and worthy of such tribute. And the models of the tumors and rats—acknowledge the source of what they've experienced. Their understanding is wrong in many ways, but even in their superstition, they're recognizing that what has happened to them is connected to the God of Israel. And the amazing thing about all of this is that even though their actions toward God are rooted in superstition and false belief, it's still where God meets them. And as we see further into the story, it's where God makes His presence known. It's not correct. It's not ideal. But it's where God starts working. ***When the Philistines didn't know what to do correctly, God already did.*** And God worked from there.

With any superhero story, one of the things that makes those stories captivating is that the superhero jumps into a story that isn't originally their story. Batman jumps into crime he didn't cause. Spider-Man does what the police are tasked to do. Superman gets involved in

an injustice that has nothing to do with him. Superheroes take on a story that isn't their story and make it their own. And that's what we also encounter God doing in 1 Samuel 6.

As part of the Philistines' reaction to returning the ark to Israel, we see that they know what the God of Israel has done—How He delivered them out of slavery in Egypt. And they acknowledge that they don't want to go against the God of Israel like the Pharaoh of Egypt did, as we encounter in the book of Exodus.

And while God was primary to Israel being delivered from Egypt, it was Israel who was delivered. But here in 1 Samuel 6, we encounter God stepping further into Israel's story. God identifies His presence with Israel, even while the ark is in captivity. And we see God reliving the deliverance story of Israel—only now, in a sense, He is delivering His presence out of captivity from the Philistines. God didn't have to. But He chose to enter into Israel's story. He chose to identify with them. He met them where they were and worked with them from there. **When Israel didn't know what to do, God already did.** And He entered into their story to make His presence known to them again.

One of the most famous cartoons illustrating trickery is Wile E. Coyote's attempts to trick and catch the Road Runner. The Coyote sets up what seems like a normal situation, with some kind of trick to hopefully catch the Road Runner off guard. And that's similar to what the Philistines do to God in 1 Samuel 6.

The cart they're using to send the ark into Israel is set up to be pulled by two mother cows who've recently had calves and have never been connected to a cart. At first, we might not think much about this. But when we look at it from the perspective of the animals, there's a trick—or really, a test—built into this method of delivering the ark back to Israel. In chapter 6, verse 9 and following, the Philistines describe two possible scenarios. One is that if the mother cows carry the ark straight into Israel, then the afflictions were from the God of Israel. But the second scenario is that if the mother cows turn back toward their calves—which they would naturally do when separated from them—then the afflictions weren't from God. The Philistines are giving the appearance of reverence with their gold offering, new car, and fresh animals, but they're also trying to see if the God of Israel really is as sovereign as He's appeared to be so far. And God shows Himself to be true. The cows go against what the Philistines would expect and carry the ark straight into Israel. The Philistines weren't sure what to do to know whether God was truly God. But God already knew what to do. God met them where they were and showed Himself to be the sovereign God and Lord that He is. **God may not be visible, but His action is.**

Next to the entrance out here, there's a rock. That rock stands as a witness to the commitment this church body made many years ago—to do whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to see a sustainable church among the Alley people of a Muslim background

from East Africa. And that rock is out there because God raised up at least two families connected to this congregation to become missionaries to this people group. The rock is there because God's invisible work was made visible through His action in this congregation. **God made visible something He was already doing that we couldn't see on our own.** And that rock out there is a way of continuing to make visible what the invisible, sovereign hand of God continues to do among us as He extends His Kingdom into the lives of the Alley people through us. And at the end of 1 Samuel 6, we see something similar when the ark returns to Israel.

First Samuel 6, verse 13 and following, describes the ark coming into Israel and being first noticed by a man named Joshua and the people of Beth-shemesh. To paint the picture of this scene, think about the Stanley Cup being sent on a sled, during the winter, down a hill in Pennsylvania that happens to border the nearest town in the Southern Tier of New York. Most people wouldn't expect the Stanley Cup to show up in a little-known, obscure town in rural New York. And the people of Beth-shemesh wouldn't have expected the ark to show up in their part of Israel, either. This was an obscure part of Israel. Not exactly a place of reputation. And yet, this is where God's sovereign, invisible hand directs His presence to be accessible to His people again. It's here that these unknown, faithful Israelites take apart the new cart, sacrifice the cows, and worship God for making Himself known to Israel again. **Israel didn't know how to be in God's presence. But God already did.** And He took the initiative to be with them where they were, and call them to further faithfulness to His good ways from there.

Toward the end of 1 Samuel 6, we also encounter some people who look into the ark when they weren't supposed to. And they end up dying. There's a lot we could digest here, but at the very least, we see that God's presence isn't something we can control. The Israelites discovered that, just like the Philistines already had. And God still makes Himself known to us today—through Jesus, God has made Himself known most clearly—in flesh and blood—in Jesus. When I don't know how to encounter God, God already does—He comes toward me. **When I don't know what to do, God already does.**

While we could look at the Philistines and think how silly their superstitious beliefs were, the reality is, we're just as tempted to approach God with similar beliefs. Believing that a relationship with God is an exchange system: "I worship, I give, I serve, and God shows up." Or believing that we've gone so far away from God that God is nowhere near our lives right now. Or believing that we need to turn toward God perfectly—Say the right things. Behave correctly. Have ourselves all together—before He'll show up.

But nothing could be further from the truth. As we encounter in 1 Samuel 6:1–7:2, God makes the first move. The God we know most clearly in Jesus is the God who takes initiative—to be with us, to restore and heal us, and to bring us into a life of fullness with

Him. He's already pursuing us. So **Are you ready to surrender to His presence?** Even if we're not sure what the exact next step should be, are we willing to turn toward Him as we know how, and trust that He'll guide us according to His truth from there?

Surrender to the sovereign God, through Jesus.

If you've never surrendered to the sovereign God—the Lord over all—I invite you to turn to Him right where you are imperfections and all—and allow Him to transform you from where you are. If you'd like to take that step, like we'll witness here in a moment, please find me, or another trusted follower of Jesus, and we'd be glad to help you express your faith in baptism—allowing your life to be guided by the hand of God from this point forward.

How is God calling you to further surrender to Him today?

And if you've already surrendered to God through faith in Jesus and baptism, how is God calling you to surrender further to Him today? What area of your life? What part of your life? What attitude? What behavior? What belief? What perspective of others—is He calling you to surrender and allow Him to shape according to His truth? We don't always know what the exact next step is. But God already does. And He's already moved toward you, so you can move toward Him. **When I don't know what to do, God already does.**