

Last Sunday after one of the Masses, I recommended watching Raiders of the Lost Ark to prepare for this weekend's Masses. That was only so you might understand these references: we don't need a whip-wielding archeologist or the headpiece of the Staff of Ra or a map in the Well of Souls to find the Ark of the Covenant. It was never lost. The Bible tells us exactly where it is. The true story of the Ark of the Covenant is far more exciting than anything Hollywood can dream up—no matter how awesome Indiana Jones is.

In good George Lucas/Steven Spielberg fashion we are going to start at the middle of the story with King David bringing the ark to Jerusalem; that was the first reading for the vigil mass for the Assumption which we will hear next year. After the Temple was finished during the reign of David's son Solomon, the ark was placed in the Holy of Holies and the glory cloud which symbolized the presence of God descended upon it. That is where the ark remained until the time of the Babylonian exile. The Second Book of Maccabees tells us that before Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Babylonians, the prophet Jeremiah took the ark and hid it in Mount Nebo—the mountain east of the Jordan River which Moses climbed to look at the Promised Land. Jeremiah sealed the cave where he hid the ark and said that the location would remain secret until God came to gather his people back together and show them his mercy.

So the ark must still be buried in Mount Nebo, right? I can't speak to the physical gold and wood vessel built by Moses which if the lid comes off melts the faces of anyone who looks at it; that ark served its purpose and passed out of history. The combination of readings for the Assumption Mass tell us exactly where a much more important ark can be found. The first reading from the Vigil Mass showed us the procession as musicians accompanied the ark into Jerusalem. Although it isn't mentioned in that reading, 2 Samuel tells us that David danced before the ark as it was carried into the city. David was rejoicing in the presence of God which is what the Ark symbolized.

David's dancing foreshadows what we heard in the gospel: when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant—John the Baptist—leaped in her womb. John recognized the true presence of God in Mary's womb: Jesus. The ark of the covenant symbolized God's presence. Mary's womb contained the true physical presence of God.. Where is the ark of the covenant? It isn't a thing; it is a person: Mary is the new ark of the covenant.

Why were these readings given for the Assumption? Some might answer, "Well we need something and the Assumption of Mary isn't described in the Bible." Except that it kind of is. Many Catholic theologians believe that in the

reading from Revelation, John saw the ark of the covenant in the heavenly temple and then described what it looked like: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Some theologians believe that John was shown Mary—the new ark of the covenant—after her assumption into heaven. The Book of Revelation is hard to interpret so that is just one understanding of the sign of the woman. The King David reading and today's gospel set up Mary's identity as the new ark and the Revelation reading might confirm it.

What about Jeremiah's prophecy that the ark would reappear when God came to gather his people and show them his mercy? Isn't that what Jesus did? He symbolically reassembled the twelve tribes of Israel by choosing the twelve apostles. But all people belong to God so he didn't stop there; he gathered in sheep from all other flocks and incorporated all people into the kingdom of Heaven. And he didn't just show us God's mercy, he is the instrument of God's mercy—all people who are saved are saved through Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection, none of which could have happened if Mary had not said yes to God and become a living tabernacle. Jeremiah's prophecy about the return of the ark was fulfilled in Jesus through Mary.

Having found the ark of the covenant, so what? Two quick things. Pope Benedict XVI said that Mary has been assumed body and soul into heaven where she is with God. Because she is now outside the limitations of time and space she is available to all of her children—us—at any time and place whenever we need to turn to her for help. Jesus is a good son who always listens to his mom, so ask Mary for her help and protection. Her place in heaven alongside Jesus assures us that our prayers will be heard.

The second thing. Mary became the new ark of the covenant after she said yes to God at the Annunciation. She then carried his presence into the hill country of Judah where Elizabeth and John rejoiced in Jesus' presence inside his mother's womb. What happens to us when we receive Jesus' Eucharistic Body during holy Communion? Doesn't that make us living tabernacles of His presence? What does that imply about what we should do when we leave here after Mass? Aren't we called to imitate Mary by going in haste and carrying Jesus to all those who so desperately need him?