

GOD IN THE BOX
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Matthew 17: 1-7 (NEB)

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain where they were alone; and in their presence he was transfigured; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as the light. And they saw Moses and Elijah appear, conversing with him. Then Peter spoke: “Lord,” he said, “how good it is that we are here! If you wish it, I will make three shelters here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud suddenly overshadowed them, and a voice called from the cloud: “This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests; listen to him.” At the sound of the voice the disciples fell on their faces in terror. Jesus then came up to them, touched them, and said, “Stand up; do not be afraid.” And when they raised their eyes they saw no one, but only Jesus.

One of my favorite places to be is on a mountain. I remember hiking along the Appalachian Trail at a place called Charlie’s bunion. A wall of mountain was on our right side, made of grey granite rock. A deep cliff was on our left side. The trail was not wider than five feet in some places. It was fearful and awesome in the same breath. I remember sitting on a bluff in the Rocky Mountains all alone except for a distant jetliner so far above me I could not hear its engines. I love the pointed and fragile volcanic mountains of Hawaii, green and misty in the mornings. Mimi and I have hiked parts of the White Mountains in New Hampshire not unlike the Smokey Mountains of North Carolina. Every mountain experience for me has been a holy one.

In the world of the Bible, mountains were places where human beings met God. Mountains were the context of sacred encounters. The story I read from Matthew evokes the memory of Moses meeting God on Mt. Sinai and bringing the Ten Commandments to the people who were encamped at the base of the mountain. The prophet Elijah retreated to Mt. Carmel after he slew the priests of Baal. From

there he went to Mt. Horeb where he discovered that God was not in the strong winds, the earthquake, or consuming fire. Rather, God was found in a gentle and quiet voice.

Mountains are places where God and people meet, where truth is discerned, and new visions are evoked. Even if we are not talking about physical heights or bluffs or buttes we will talk about a “peak experience,” or “a mountain top moment.” Something memorable happens to us. Perhaps it was something that gives us a broader view of our horizons or brings comfort to our souls. And it is always tempting for us to say, “Oh, how happy I was then and there.” Or, “I wish I could go back to that time and place.” Of course you can go back but it will never be the same experience you remember because you are not the same person and the place has changed if you are really paying close attention.

This is the kind of experience that Peter, James, and John had with Jesus. Some think it happened on Mt. Tabor. Something extraordinary happened there. The disciples witnessed a metamorphosis in Jesus that made his face shine like the sun and his garments white like light. The images of Moses and Elijah appeared to them. A bright cloud then appeared and a voice proclaimed that Jesus was the Son of God. Clouds and God’s voice within them are familiar themes of the Bible. But it was more than the disciples could look at. They fell on their faces in utter fear.

Clearly the disciples were caught up in some kind of mystical experience. I do not fully understand it, nor can I explain it. It was their experience, not mine. They caught a glimpse of Jesus they never imagined before. There was something about the Carpenter that was greater than Joseph’s son, the storyteller, and healer. They gained an insight about the Messiah that blew away all of their religious assumptions.

Like any kind of wonder-filled experience we want to capture it. We want it to last forever. That is exactly what the disciples wanted to do. They wanted to erect tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. I love Peter's enthusiasm. He says, in effect, "Boy, Jesus, it's a good thing we're here. Let us build a tabernacle right here on the mountain." He means, of course, that let's capture the moment and stay put.

It reminds me of vacationers who spend their whole time taking pictures. I was once visiting the USS Arizona in Pearl Harbor. People were constantly snapping photos. You could not hear the waves gently slapping the memorial because of the clicking and whirring of cameras. There was no space for silent tribute. People seemed to think that they needed a picture or video to prove to their families and friends that they were there. If it is on film or screen it must be real. I wonder how can our hearts be touched and real memory embedded in our minds if we do not savor and absorb the place and the people? I once nestled into the craggy rocks of Devil's Den at Little Round Top on the battlefield at Gettysburg. I wanted to absorb the ghosts of history that had shaped America and my self-understanding as a Southerner.

Like my touring photographers Peter, James, and John wanted to stake a claim on their pilgrimage. They wanted to nail it down, contain it, and claim it as their own. That is ever the temptation of religion. Let us build a box for God and stuff the Creator into four tin walls. I think we are like the kindergartener drawing a picture in Sunday School. The teacher asked, "What are you drawing, Hannah?" "It's a picture of God," Hannah replied. The teacher remonstrated, "But no one has ever seen God or knows what God looks like."

“Well,” said Hannah, “they will when I get through.”

One of the great contributions of Judaism was moving God off of Mount Sinai, breaking the mindset that God was only a local god, confined to village or region or nation. But God has this habit of traveling around in clouds, or smoke, or mists, or surrounded by so many angels, cherubim and seraphim that one cannot make out who is God. Some thought that was a problem and maybe that was not such a good idea after all. Some thought it best to build a temple and house God in Jerusalem. The Persians and Romans took care of that idea and the Jews were dispersed throughout the world and were relieved to find out that God went with them. Or maybe God went ahead of them.

People keep on insisting that we can put God in a box. Sometimes the box is a building, be it a small clapboard Baptist church in north Georgia or a great cathedral in New York City. Sometimes the box is a set of creeds that are created to solve the problems of heresy and conflicted theology. Those may work, for maybe a hundred years, before someone gets a new idea and a different brand of heretics rises to the occasion. At other times the box is Scripture or some interpretation of Scripture and people of faith have all kinds of arguments about which Scripture is the true revelation of God’s word. It could be the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible, or the American Standard Bible.

I like the old story about the man who was walking across a bridge one day, and saw another man standing on the edge, about to jump off. He immediately ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" asked the suicide.

The good fellow said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Well ... are you religious or atheist?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which the would-be Samaritan shouted, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed the man off the bridge.

We create all kinds of boxes for God. God in the box is about as ineffective as the Jack in the box. The Jack in the box works for a little while, especially for the young and innocent. They startle young ones the first time Jack pops up. They giggle

through several more turns. But the game quickly loses their imagination. The amusement fades when they realize that Jack really has nothing to say and cannot really do anything other than wobble around after he is sprung.

The same holds true for God in the box. The temptation is to think that we can capture God in a box. We crank the handle listening to a silly little tune, say some holy words, wave some holy smoke over it, and out pops God. But this God is also the knave and jester. He has a big smile on his face and dressed in bright clothes. But all he can really do is stand in place and bobble back and forth. This God does not inspire, and offers no real words of wisdom that heal and reconcile people. God in box feeds no one, gives no water to the thirsty, does not visit the imprisoned, nor cares for the wounded and dying.

The real fool is not the puppet in the tin box. The real fool is the one who cranks the handle thinking he or she has God contained. These are laymen and women, priests, rabbis, imams, and preachers. Some have large followings, some make a lot of money, some have television shows, and most are revered by their various congregations.

Now I understand why it is that people want to keep God contained, controlled, or well managed. We want a well-behaved God who beckons to our call or need. We do not want a God who will embarrass us in polite society, and we especially do not want a God who will demand too much from us. We do not like change and we prefer not to take risks. We want a God who will confirm our beliefs and affirm our lifestyles. Thus much of Christianity likes to keep the God in the box on the shelf in the nursery.

There is a common phrase in C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* books. In reference to Aslan, the mighty lion king, it is often said, "He is not a tame Lion." Yes, the lion can be loving and kind. His words encourage souls who are lost or frightened. But Aslan is powerful and dangerous. He will face danger in the defense of his people. Aslan is a force that will resist evil, and bring every ounce of his resources to protect his community, however small or inconsequential. He will even sacrifice himself for their welfare. That is amazing power, the kind of power that transforms a world. As the protagonist, Aslan is a dynamic power and you can never be sure what to expect from him. In fact, you can never be sure when or where Aslan is going to show up, if at all.

Ours is not a tame God. Just read the Psalms, where you will discover that God is understood to be the avenger, the protector, the shepherd, the judge, the redeemer, the creator, and a broody hen. What face did God show in Matthew's story, a proud poppa, proclaiming, "This is my beloved Son?" Was God the power and light company of Mt. Tabor, Inc.? Or was God the transformer, turning Jesus from mortal flesh to spiritual light? The mistake would be to put any one of these experiences of God in a clown's costume, wire it to a spring, and compress it into a box.

Peter wanted to keep God on the mountain. But before he could drive the first tent stake God had moved on and Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. I am guessing that there are people in this room who could relate a religious experience. I could relate my own. I think back on them from time to time. Sometimes I share them with others. They continue to inspire me and encourage me. But I know at a much deeper level that I will not find God there any more. God has moved on. While the experience is instructive God would lead me forward. God calls me down from the

mountain and into the valley. God calls me from glory into service. God calls me from memory to sacrifice.

And here is another little thing to understand. If we will come down off the mountain and risk the road to Jerusalem, if we will follow the cross and dare to touch the wounded in the world we just might find out that God is there too. Robert Lewis Stevenson once visited a leper's hospital at Molokai, Hawaii. At first he was repulsed by the ravages of the disease on the bodies of suffering patients. But he also learned to see the gentle nature of the community. He saw the compassion of those who cared for these people. In the guest book he wrote these words:

To see the infinite pity of this place,
The mangled limb, the devastated face,
The innocent sufferer smiling at the rod—
A fool were tempted to deny his God.
He sees, he shrinks. But if he gaze again,
Lo, beauty springing from the breast of pain!
He marks the sisters on the mournful shores;
And even a fool is silent and adores.

And if we could be in Sendai, Japan this morning we might be tempted to despair over the loss of life and property. Indeed the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant disaster are causes for grief. Nearly 8,000 dead and 11,000 are missing. But I wonder if we might not also see the 50 power company workers who risk their lives to contain the radiation. Would you also notice the helicopter pilots who attempted to drop water on the leaking containment buildings, facing probable death? And what of the people who shared their food and comforted the grieving? Think also of the Americans who have contributed over \$75 million to the Red Cross for Japanese relief. If

you are looking for God this morning, that's where I would go.

Just don't try to nail God down there. There are other mountains to climb, gorges to descend into, tears to dry, jokes to tell, children to bury, coffee to grind, and gardens to plant.

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