

God In A Box

TEXT: Exodus 33:17-23

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 4, 2024

Since January, we've been talking about the many facets of making choices. For the next month or so we're going to focus on our intellectual choices—the things we choose to believe about the nature of God, human beings, the world we live in and on, what we label as moral or immoral and all the rest.

While I don't believe God is going to judge us based on what we think or give us a theology quiz at the pearly gates; our beliefs end up manifesting in how we behave on this earth, and God cares very much about that. So as long as we're still here in the flesh, God does care about what we think, who we believe God to be, and how we view ourselves and our human and non-human neighbors; because it affects our behavior.

The Bible actually charts that connection out pretty well in both Testaments. What we actually believe ends up coming out of our mouths, especially in unguarded moments, and once something is spoken into the world, action based on that belief is not far behind.

When those professing Christian faith do atrocious things, which has been happening regularly for millennia, sometimes those bad actors are just opportunists pretending to be Christian because it's politically convenient or whatever. But, I think more frequently, harmful actions by Christians spring from bad theology.

What a person believes about the nature of God, human beings, the broader world, and the relationships between them goes off the rails somewhere and results in behavior that the person truly believes is righteous, but that bears no resemblance to what Jesus taught or how he lived. I know that because I have been a very sincere Christian my entire life; and sometimes I have been very sincerely wrong.

This kind of a topic could go in many directions. But, since what I see as bad theology is already shaping laws and life in this country and is poised to gain even more power if we let it, I'm going to take the opportunity to do a series that I've wanted to do since seminary, and that is to take a look at the biggest theological disputes across Christian history.

I've always wanted to take a look at "Heretics I have known and loved," but we won't just look at ideas that got labeled as heresies by the church. We'll also look at theological ideas that have split the church, things that once got people burned at the stake that are now totally accepted, and debates about the fundamental nature of God and life that rage still today.

I don't intend to focus on debates about particular social issues, except to point out that many of the specific issues that divide us can't be solved on the surface, because the issue is really about something deeper. We have to go beneath the particulars to see what the broader beliefs are about God and the world that cause the specific issue to be so intractable. Going deeper doesn't mean we can eliminate the conflict; but it can redirect us to debate the real issues, which is the only way out of the mess in the end.

I'm also going to focus on the kinds of beliefs that affect our ability to live lives of love and justice. There are all kinds of beliefs about matters of faith and religion—and many of them are ideas worth considering. But we're not going to focus on whether it's okay to sing Christmas carols during Advent, whether pulpits should be in the center of the chancel or off to the side, or how frequently we perform the liturgy of Holy Communion.

We're going to look at the big stuff—are human beings, at our core, good or evil or some combination? Are we truly free to choose our actions or has it all been predetermined? Does everything happen for a reason? How much power does sin have in our lives? Can law and grace; justice and mercy co-exist? What is the nature of God?

The purpose is not to raise a big question and then give a definitive answer. Every time the church has done that throughout history, it has ended badly. The purpose is to recognize that there are not single answers to those questions, even within Christian faith. Many of them are the reason different Christian denominations exist. What unites Christians is a "who" not a "what." When one particular brand of theology gets a lot of public exposure, it's

easy in an increasingly unchurched society for people to assume that every Christian believes those things. That's simply not true—even within the same denomination; even within the same congregation; and likely even within the same household.

Further, just like every species needs genetic diversity to keep from sliding into birth defects, disease, and decline; I think theological diversity is actually a healthy and necessary thing for every religion. The trick is how to talk about our own bedrock beliefs about the nature of God, ourselves, and the world with curiosity, care, and respect for those who have built their own foundation on something different.

I don't mean to say that it's all relative, or that one belief is as helpful as another. As I said, bad theology leads to atrocity on a daily basis and frequently on a grand scale. We can't ignore that. The debates need to be engaged for us to pray with any kind of sincerity, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

We will never take even the tiniest step toward bringing the vision of God's justice and peace to this world if we don't step up to share our own bedrock beliefs with each other and explain WHY those beliefs are so important to us and HOW it helps to make the world a better place.

But none of that is possible if we never step back and realize that, since the beginning, there have been competing belief systems within Christianity itself, and learn to identify what we think about those things. While I was away, I was happy to hear Sal asking those who came that Sunday about their own core beliefs. That's the kind of work I'll be encouraging across the next month or so as we look at the origins of those ideas, the pushback they receive, and explore how believing a particular thing might affect our behavior.

To begin all that, I want to zoom out even further to look at how we can approach sharing very different ideas and beliefs about big, important things—beliefs that in many ways define us—without the divisiveness that has become the hallmark of our age.

So, come with me to a cabin in Kejimikujik National Park in Nova Scotia where I wrote the first draft of my first book, *Blowing the Lid off the God-Box*, in the summer of 2001.

When I sat down to write the first words, I was planning to make the argument that everyone makes—that you can't put God in a box. At 42 years old, I was coming to a point in my life when I was realizing how much damage I had done, both to others and to myself, through my insistence that God had only one path for people in the world, and only one way for Christians to direct people to it. As a teen and young adult, I had boxed God up and thought I had it all figured out. Do it this way and you live; this way and you die. End of story.

So, as I sat down to write the book that was largely my confession of those errors, I was equally confident that putting God in a box like I had done was wrong. "You can't put God in a box," I wrote.

And there's a lot of truth in that. The word "god," by definition is above and beyond our full knowing. Gods can do things no earthly beings can. To believe in a god—any god—is to express a belief that there is a power beyond us; a power that we can in some ways observe but not predict; a power whose effect we can describe but whose methods and purposes are largely obscured.

When the Bible tells us in Proverbs 9:10 that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," it is tapping into the truth that the sooner we realize that we humans are not the be-all and end-all of the universe, the more we will act with wisdom. I know this comes as a shock, but we do not know it all, nor can we. We can know a lot, but we really don't even know ourselves, let alone God. Before we even get to questions about God's nature, the knowledge that "God," as a concept, exists grants us the gift of humility. God is God and we are not. That, right there, is the beginning of wisdom because it is the beginning of humility.

After the initial blow to our ego of recognizing that there is a power greater than us—that there are things beyond our knowing—all kinds of wonderful things open up. We become free to be wrong without that being a threat to our self-esteem. And once we're free to be wrong, we're free to be curious about what else we don't know, since we're no longer afraid of coming to a "wrong" conclusion. Humility gives us permission to fail, which provides the freedom to fully live our lives and, counterintuitively, to succeed, to learn, and to grow.

But...back to the box. As I was in the cabin in Nova Scotia, writing out my explanation of how God is too vast and unknowable to go in a box, I hit a snag. While stuffing God in a box for all those years had made many of my relationships difficult and placed unnecessary limitations on me, my conservative upbringing had given me great gifts as well. For one thing, I knew the Bible. Well. In fact, it was knowing the Bible so well that ultimately led me out of the trap of taking it all literally, but that's another story and another book.

But, in addition to the gift of the Bible, having God in a tightly contained box allowed me to meet, know, and come to love God, especially God as revealed in Jesus. In that box I could meet God in manageable, and understandable bits. It was in preaching about my loving relationship with Jesus in my home church back when I was 14 that I felt my call to ministry. The box was a gift that had made all that possible.

Then my Bible kicked in, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us," John had written in the prologue to his Gospel. Wait...isn't God in the flesh another way of saying God in a box? Was my grand pronouncement that you couldn't put God in a box about to blow up the most effective way that most Christians have of learning enough about God to actually turn that knowledge to love?

What if God is so qualitatively different than human beings that we need God in a box to have anything even remotely like a relationship? Was I ready to adopt the Force in Star Wars as God—a power that existed and could in some ways be harnessed but was otherwise inaccessible? Wasn't the whole point of Jesus to make God known in a way that even the youngest child could understand? As I had?

I sat there in my cabin staring at the wall for quite some time. Not only would saying God can't be put in a box dramatically change the Christian concept of who Jesus was; it would eliminate what I think is the greatest contribution of many of the world's religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the idea that, while the intricacies of the nature and ways of God are beyond our knowing; that grand and glorious power beyond us is a loving presence that is eager to be known, understood, and loved in return to the degree that we are capable of it. And God, defined as a loving presence, is the impetus for justice and peace in the world.

My Bible again kicked in. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is knowable. That God walks with Adam and Eve in the Garden, is friends with Abraham, and in the passage from Exodus that Neil read today we see Moses comfortable enough with God to say, essentially, "Look, I've really stuck my neck out for you, time and time again for almost 40 years now. You know everything there is to know about me, how about sharing more of yourself. Will you actually let me see your full glory?"

God grants Moses' request only in part. "You cannot see my face" says God, "For no one shall see me and live." ²¹ And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; ²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

I think the message is that the human body can't endure the fullness of God's presence. To show Moses even a tiny piece of God's direct presence, God had to stick him in a hole in the rock and shield him from most of the experience. But that's only part of the message. While even Moses couldn't bear up in the unbounded and unrestrained presence of God, God *would* share a limited view. Because God *does* want to be known to the extent that is possible. And to do that requires God to be contained in some way—like, for example, in a box.

And there in Kejimikujik National Park, I realized that the thing that had really caused me problems in my early adulthood was not the box at all. The box had been absolutely necessary for the many positive aspects of my life to that point, including my call to ministry. The problem was not the box, but the lid.

The problem was that I had closed off my understanding of God and locked my humility in there with it. I had lost my freedom to grow and learn and change. Any wisdom I had gained while I was actively gathering knowledge of God in my box was now stagnating under a sealed lid. Once I realized that, other things came into better focus.

I was serving the church in Dover, NH at the time, and was constantly frustrated by people in the congregation always telling me what they didn't believe. "I don't believe in the Virgin Birth." "I don't believe in the Trinity." The lists were long and varied from "I don't believe anything should be put on the walls of the sanctuary" to "I don't believe the resurrection really happened."

My frustration puzzled me, since I had always loved a good theological debate. In every church I had served, including at St. John's, I actively solicited and enjoyed preaching from people's questions. Why was this different? Once I had the box/lid thing figured out, I understood.

I decided to do a series on the Apostle's Creed. And I started that off by naming my frustration with the "I don't believe" this or that proclamations and told them—as I say also to you—I actually don't care what you *don't* believe. That's not interesting to me, nor does it give me any way to help you as your pastor in any aspect of your life. What interests me very much is what you DO believe.

Each and every one of us can benefit from a box that has positive content in it. I don't care if it's orthodox Christian content, if it's a hodgepodge of ten religions, or if it doesn't even mention religion at all. Even if you don't believe in God—you can still come up with positive content for the box. If not God, then what?

Each religion has specific things they mean when they use the word "God," and Christianity is no exception. But "God" is a generic term that refers to something ultimate. What is ultimate for you? What is the purpose of life? What value or virtue is above all others for you? Why? What helps you get up in the morning? What stirs your soul?

Clearly the belief across a large swath of this country is that human beings and our wants and desires are ultimate. Many who profess faith act as though God exists to serve us. The planet exists to serve us. Human Supremacy is where it's at. And if that's what you believe, put it in your box and we'll talk about it.

If you're evaluating a particular aspect of Christianity, don't clutter your box with "I don't believe Mary was a virgin." Do you believe there was a person named Mary who gave birth to Jesus? If so, what are the things you believe about her? What are questions about her you'd like to explore? If you don't believe there was any such person, then just take all the questions related to Mary out of your box entirely. As long as you don't seal the lid shut, you'll have time to revisit it later, because it's likely to come up every Christmas.

It's not the box or even the particular content of your box that does harm. It's shutting the lid and telling everyone who has different content than yours that they are wrong and must conform, or else. But with the lids off and only the things we do actually believe in the box, we are in a position to share our beliefs, ideas, and practices with each other with more curiosity and less defensiveness.

As I looked back across my younger years, I noticed that I never had real debates with people about God or the Bible or religious matters. Arguments, yes; debates, no. I thought that was because my ideas were unassailable, but that wasn't it. It was because it's neither fun nor enlightening to debate with a person who doesn't believe there's any possibility that they might be wrong. The lid on my box was closed. The problem is not the box; it's the lid.

So, over this next month or so, as we visit with some of my favorite heretics and some of the thorniest questions about the nature of God and human beings, I invite you to come with an open box. Keep the lid on the pew next to you if you want. You can always slam it down if a cherished idea looks ready to escape or something scary tries to crawl in. You can look inside later when it feels safer.

As I already do each Sunday, I'll share with you what is in my box on any given issue. But that doesn't mean you have to make your box look like mine. It's in the give and take; in the diversity of ideas and experiences that wisdom is found. I hope to provide an invitation to dig inside your own box and see if you've got anything like it or if it's maybe something you never thought about before, and to share the contents of your box with others.

When *Blowing the Lid Off the God-Box* first came out, I did a lot of book signings and author talks. Those would go in different directions, depending on the comments and questions from the group in front of me, but I began all of them the same way—and that's the way I'll close out this sermon.

Nothing makes the point quite so well as this poetic rendering of an old Indian folktale about six blind men and an elephant by the nineteenth century American poet John Godfrey Saxe:

It was six men of Indostan, to learning much inclined,
who went to see the elephant (Though all of them were blind),
that each by observation, might satisfy his mind.

The first approached the elephant, and, happening to fall,
against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl:
"God bless me! but the elephant, is very like a wall!"

The second feeling of the tusk, cried: "Ho! what have we here,
so very round and smooth and sharp? To me tis mighty clear,
this wonder of an elephant, is very like a spear!"

The third approached the animal, and, happening to take,
the squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a snake!"

The fourth reached out his eager hand, and felt about the knee:
"What most this wondrous beast is like, is mighty plain," quoth he;
"Tis clear enough the elephant is very like a tree."

The fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, Said; "E'en the blindest man
can tell what this resembles most; Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an elephant, is very like a fan!"

The sixth no sooner had begun, about the beast to grope,
than, seizing on the swinging tail, that fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the elephant is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Indostan, disputed loud and long,
each in his own opinion, exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
tread on in utter ignorance, of what each other mean,
and prate about an elephant, not one of them has seen!

Amen.