



“The God Box”

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2 Sam. 7:1–14a (NRSV)

Today’s sermon title was inspired by a lecture given by a seminary professor of mine, Dr. William Holladay, and it is the nickname for a famous building in New York City. I’ll exegete the architectural reference first, and then get to the scripture reference, followed by an application of the text for our lives and time.

There is, “way Uptown,” at the edge of Harlem, across the street from Columbia University, and next door to Riverside Church in New York City, a most imposing 19-story office complex which is now known as “The Interchurch Center.” Its exact address is 475 Riverside Drive.

This impressive structure is one fruit of the modern ecumenical movement. In the early twentieth century, worldwide fervor for Christian unity emerged in reaction to the horrors of two world wars and in response to new studies and findings related to ancient artifacts of the Christian Church.

The devastation resulting from WWI and WWII served for many Christians as a clarion call to examine the origins of human division, and to create occasions for dialogue, if not alignment, on matters that had previously divided people, including people of faith around the world. These conversations, commonly called “ecumenical dialogue,” were fueled by new scholarship based on biblical and early church archeology and anthropology, and they in turn inspired world-wide curiosity—particularly among Mainline Protestants—in our common ancestry and cultural heritage.

The design and construction of The Interchurch Center, in NYC, was one result of this ecumenical fervor and a pivotal symbol of commitment to and context for ecumenical dialogue. The cornerstone for the Interchurch Center was laid on October 12, 1958, with a crowd of more than 30,000 people present, representing thirty-seven Protestant and Eastern Orthodox churches. President Dwight D. Eisenhower laid the cornerstone on the northwest exterior corner of the Center, which included in it a stone from the Agora

in Corinth where “many heard Paul and believed”. The Agora cornerstone was a gift of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America.¹

In his address at the celebration, President Eisenhower described the cornerstone as symbolizing a “prime support of our faith, the Truth that sets men free”. A sealed copper box within the cornerstone included the most significant denominational and ecumenical documents reflective of participating traditions.

When dedicated on May 29, 1960, the completed edifice marked an unprecedented advance in the movement for greater unity among churches in the United States.

I have been told by every mentor of mine who was present at the laying of the cornerstone and the dedication of the Interchurch Center, that the press corps covering these occasions dubbed 475 Riverside Drive as “The God Box.” Though you’ll never find that name posted in or on that literal ivory tower, the nickname for the Interchurch Center stuck immediately and has had staying power ever since. It’s doubtful, for example, that even one graduate could be found from an accredited Protestant seminary or university divinity school in North America in the last fifty years who had not heard of “The God Box.”

The reporters’ nickname for the tower in part reflects the utilitarian style shoe-box-on-end design of a high-rise office tower built on a church budget. It also reflects the idealistic intentions of the builders and their admirers, and maybe even the skeptics in the press corps. In the minds of the reporters, and in the minds of ecumenical Protestants, this edifice was the closest thing in North America that one could get to, to the corporate headquarters for God, at least the God of Mainline Protestants.

Given how much emphasis that participating denominations—not just reporters—have put on the importance of proximity for Mainline Protestant leaders to be doing the work of God, perhaps you can understand why there was great weeping and gnashing of teeth when most of the national bodies who were housed at the Interchurch Center found that the cost of rents and employee compensation was so great that the ecumenical family had to part company, save for a symbolic presence in NYC, in the 1980s. The American Baptists ended up in Valley Forge. The Presbyterians moved to Louisville. And the UCC relocated to Cleveland.

Many thought that ecumenical dialogue, if not the world, would come to an end with the unfortunate economic need to scatter church leaders; I believe that God may have had other plans in store with scattering the latter-day apostles—or at the very least, God was still willing and able to work with the church scattered.

Looking back a generation later, I am quite sure that the promised economic benefits of relocation were realized, and that it has not been an entirely negative experience for the churches to scatter. Furthermore, it is intentionality and not proximity that determine the quality of our human relationships. Thankfully too, the advances of modern technology

¹ <http://www.interchurch-center.org/history.html>

have created new and less expensive ways for church people to live out our commitments to each other. For example, today we may just as likely communicate on a conference call as gather around a water cooler, and we may just as likely stay in touch through Facebook as through face-to-face conversations. So even with the church scattered, God is glorified, and the mission of the church continues to advance.

So there you have it—my first exegesis of God Box. Now, onto the Old Testament, and God Box number two.

II

God Box number two is what you might call “The Original God Box” in the Judeo-Christian faith. It was an idea advanced by King David, as we learn in today’s Hebrew Bible reading.

Today’s reading describes a proposed construction project—the construction of what Bill Holladay described as “David’s God Box.” David’s initial plan was to build a Temple—a God Box—that God would come and reside in, like a rare caged bird, and be a comfort to David and a servant in David’s court. See the problem?

God knows that David thinks that God can be put in a box, and become an agent of the King. But, *news flash*: David was wrong. One of the lessons from the Davidic drama is that Yahweh would not and could not be put in a box, nor would or could God be bound to a single place, or conscripted into royal service.

If the Davidic story were an opera, the opera log version of today’s account would read something like this: today we overhear King David working with the prophet Nathan on the king’s feasibility study for the Jerusalem Temple. In the end, David elects to mothball his master plan, leaving it for his successor, King Solomon, to pursue. David’s reasons for proposing the building project are several and his intentions were mixed.

He envisioned the project initially with Nathan as a way to address an apparent inequity in his life. He lived in a fine cedar palace, while the Ark of the Covenant sat perpetually in a modest tent.

The Ark of the Covenant was the most important physical symbol in Ancient Jewish faith. It was a decorated box with long-handled poles containing the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) and other artifacts symbolizing the covenant between God and the Israelites. Its contents dated from the wilderness experience of the Hebrew people who had been led out of slavery by Moses, and were the penultimate kind of stuff that David would have put in the cornerstone of his God box—had the project not been mothballed.

Now, to continue with the opera log, note that in 2 Samuel, chapter 7, verse 1, David floated the idea of a building project to Nathan hoping for the prophet’s blessing. On first blush, Nathan supported the project. But upon further reflection, he rescinded support on account of receiving an oracle from God commanding him to challenge David’s plan.

In the oracle, God said to Nathan, ask David these questions: "Would *you* build me a house to dwell in? Do I look like I need a Temple? Did I ever ask for a Temple?" (2 Samuel 7:4-7.)

The implied answer to these questions was a resounding, "No!"

God's questions challenged David's intentions, which as we learn later in the drama, were what you'd call selfless or spiritually inspired.

You see, in the Ancient Near East, kings often built temples to the gods as a way of claiming divine authority for their earthly rule. David was familiar with this practice, and seems to have been drawn to the building project for the same self-serving reasons as his peers.

Perhaps the most interesting—and definitely the most important part of this story and about David as a ruler—is that he, unlike the rest of Israel's kings, actually heeded God's guidance and called off the building project.

This ancient construction saga might have ended right then and there with David, but it did not. There's more. God said in the oracle to Nathan, "Tell David that I've got a new architect and a new set of plans for you. *You* are not building the house. *I'm* building the house, and the house that I'm building isn't going to be a **house of worship**, it's going to be a **human household**—a Davidic lineage.

In 2 Sam. 7:12b–13, God said to Nathan:

[Go and tell David,] I will raise up [your] offspring after you . . . , and I will establish [your] kingdom. [You] shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of [your] kingdom forever. I will be [your parent] and [you] shall be my son. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

III

For the engineers and trades people in our congregation, it may be helpful to note that David received three "change orders" from God on his Master Plan, before he could even imagine a ground-breaking ceremony. One change order had to do with the **timing**. God explained through Nathan that the project would be delayed a generation.

Another change order had to do with who was the **General Contractor**. God explained through Nathan that God would be the "GC," not David.

The third change order had to do with **the building materials**. In God's revised plans the house to be built would be made of people, not bricks and mortar.

As people who work in construction know, change orders are an inevitable part of significant jobs. Three change orders are a modest number for a project the scale of the Jerusalem Temple. So what's remarkable about today's construction project is not the number of change orders, but the scope of them. Perhaps most remarkable of all is that these change orders were all embraced and implemented by David, and they were fulfilled by God.

Fast-forward to the next generation, when David's son, Solomon, is king, and we see Nathan's prophecy fulfilled as the Jerusalem Temple was constructed by David's progeny.

Then fast-forward another 500 years, and we see that the messianic promises associated with the Davidic monarchy were fulfilled (in the view of Christians) through the life and ministry of Jesus. (You may remember that in the Christmas story, there is always a mention that when Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the census, they registered as members of the House of David.)

Today's reading was pivotal in the **history and theology** of Ancient Israel for three reasons: 1) It explained why David didn't build the Temple he first envisioned, 2) it offers legitimacy to the Davidic dynasty, and 3) it describes a shift in God's relationship with Israel. No longer would God's faithfulness be dependent upon the faithfulness of Israel. Instead, it would be dependent upon God's unconditional love and commitment to stay in relationship with David and his progeny, and ultimately, as we learn through Christ's mission, with the whole people of God.

IV

In addition to the historical and theological significance of 2 Samuel 7, today's Hebrew Bible passage challenges us on a **spiritual level**, the way that God originally challenged David. This passage challenges us to explore the ways that we, like David, may try—even with the best of intentions—to put God in a box. What might some of those ways be?

I suspect that there may be as many ways that we could try to put God in a box as there are boxes. **One way might be to limit the names and images that we use for God**, therefore restricting our imagination and creating a talisman, a fixed image for God, one that suits our tastes best.

One of the great theological movements in my lifetime which has challenged Christians to think more expansively about the nature of God has been the inclusive language movement. This movement has promoted the use of names and images of God—including biblical names and images—instead of or in addition to patriarchal and royal, names and images for God which have prevailed throughout much of Christian history.

People who have lived with more than one hymnal are well aware that our *New Century Hymnal* pushes beyond all others on the Christian book shelf by using inclusive

language for God and people, and by opening us to more expansive metaphors, images, and names for God.

As we sing our way through new hymns, we reaffirm the wisdom of some old hymns, like “Immortal, Invisible . . .” that we worship an out-of-the-box God, and through such affirmations and practices our faith is deepened and God is glorified.

Another way that we may try to put God in a box may be to **limit the scope of God’s grace**. While we don’t actually have the power to do so, many Christians have yet to give up trying to limit the scope of God’s grace by claiming that God’s grace wasn’t meant for all people, or that it is only offered on a conditional basis. But, such thinking is in-the-box theology, and we worship an out-of-the-box God.

So in order to get right with God, we need to get some out-of-the-box theology and practice going in our lives. This is easier said than done. A good place to start expressing our out-of-the-box theology is by daring to believe that God’s love and grace are meant for us—yes, us—not just for those people who we presume to be better Christians than us.

A further way to walk our out-of-the-box talk is to explore how the scope of God’s grace may relate to people we experience as less than gracious, or as holding divergent views from us on grace, such as say, Pat Robertson or Fred Phelps.

So, to review, the passage challenges us to explore and select names and images for God that expand our spiritual vocabulary and our interior lives. This passage also invites us to think more expansively about the scope of God’s grace, especially for ourselves and for those whom we may deem profoundly different from us. A third way to express our out-of-the-box theology is to **be open to new ways that God may be at work in our life and in the world**. *How do we do that?*

Well, for starters, we could try to apply David’s learning to our situation. In his effort to design a God Box, David learned that God often has different plans for us than we have for ourselves. So perhaps when things are not going our way, we could pause and say, “Hmm, does my plan, like David’s plan, need to be mothballed? Is it a plan that God wants me to leave for my successor, or maybe even abandoned all together?”

If we stop for awhile and do an assessment of whose plans and which plans we are or should be working with, we might discover, as David did, that God has an awesome plan in mind for us—even if it isn’t the one we came up with.

In David’s case, God’s plan was different than the plan he had imagined for himself and his royal watch. David had imagined building a house of worship for God, but God had a different plan. God planned to create a great household for David—a people, not a place.

What might we discover about God's plan for us, if we stopped trying to put God in a box, and instead did some praying and meditating that helped us imagine what our out-of-the-box God is up to in our lives and in our world?

Those who know me know what a big planner I am, and how important planning is for me—from planning my day to strategic planning for our church. Because of this quality, I have latched onto and have often been humbled by the Chinese proverb that says: “if you want to hear God laugh, make a plan.” How, I wonder, might the sound of God's laughter be cueing us into the fact that we have tried to put God in a box, and our out-of-the-box God will have none of that?

V

So, in closing, let me summarize the key points that emerge for us from today's text. First, the opportunity is before us to learn with David that we worship an out-of-the-box God, who invites us to develop an out-of-the-box spirituality that expands our names and metaphors for the divine.

Second, we learn with David that we worship a God who invites us to expand our sense of God's graciousness toward ourselves and those who seem very different from us.

And, third, we learn with David that God is at work in our lives and world, and that the way that God is at work in and around and among us may be different than we would work, at least on first blush. But the spiritual wisdom is not to be found in arguing with God; the spiritual wisdom is getting right with God and getting in step with God's plan.

These are our opportunities and challenges. May God grant us the wisdom to worship and witness to our out-of-the-box God, by living as out-of-the box Christians. Amen.