

Sermon: Opening the God Box    Luke 4: 14-21 (Isaiah 61:1-6)  
Rev. Brian S. Kirk

---

For many of us, this morning means we finally get to breath a big sigh of relief. The long process of calling a new pastor is over. It also brings lots of questions. Johnathan and I are wondering how will we fit into this new community (we've already found our favorite restaurant, favorite park, favorite movie theater.) Many of you are wondering, "What is this new pastor going to be like? Is he up to the task? How will this new chapter for our church work out? Will this fellow be able to meet all the expectations we have for him? Well, to answer that last question, let me share a story with you.

It's the last Sunday for a preacher before he moves to a new church. He is standing at the door shaking everyone's hand. One woman is just overcome with weeping. The preacher, touched by this outpouring of emotion reassures her, "Don't cry, sister. Even if I am leaving, I know that God will send you a wonderful preacher." To which she replies through her tears, "That's what we've been saying at this church for 20 years and it ain't happened yet." In all seriousness, it's okay if we all admit to a little grief this Sunday, even perhaps a little weeping. You have had to say goodbye to a good friend and fine minister, Chase Peeples.

Johnathan and I have had to say goodbye to a congregation we've been part of for 8 years, had to say goodbye to friends and family. We've had to pack our life in St. Louis into little boxes, part with some stuff we really didn't need anymore, and arrive here, our boxes in tow. And I'm happy to say a welcoming committee from the church was here that first day to greet us, to help get all those boxes into the church and into our temporary living space.

And so I have boxes on my mind this morning. What do you suppose is in this box I have with me today? Well, surprise: There's nothing in it...yet.

I recently heard of a documentary called [God in the Box](#). The filmmakers built a large box, much like those old photomat booths, and set it on a street corner. The box included a video camera and a table with paper and pen. Passersby were invited to step into the box and talk, draw or write about their thoughts about God. As you can imagine, all sorts of people stepped into that box and they offered a great diversity of responses to two challenging questions: What does God mean to you? What does God look like, to you?

I wonder what would happen if we set up boxes like that in churches all over the country next Sunday morning? What sort of responses might we get?

Of all the things we are about when we are "church together" -- fellowship dinners, Christmas pageants, fixing holes in the roof, going to camp, committee meetings -- it all pales in comparison to the real reason we all come together: God and Christ. Without those two to center who we are, we have no identity.

So it makes complete sense that one of the ways we'll come to know each other better in the coming weeks and months is to find out more about what we think about God together, and what we think about how Jesus reflects our understanding of God.

So this morning I want to use this small box I'm as part of our own "God in the Box" experiment. What would you put in the box to represent God for you? Would you put in a word? Object? Photograph? Favorite book? Memory of a loved one? A question? Or nothing at all? For the next few minutes I want to pass around this box and invite to hold for 20-30 seconds and just think about what symbolically today you would put in this box. And I give you permission for those 20-30 seconds to pay absolutely no attention to anything I'm saying up here!

I can only imagine that, were we able to look into that box at the end of worship and actually see what everyone put inside, we would find an amazing diversity of responses, some familiar and I'm certain some very surprising. It occurs to me that the challenge of coming to understand how we think about God together is that even as I say the word "God," we are all thinking different things. Perhaps you've heard the old folktale about God creating the first person. Each day God takes the hand of the person and they walk through the garden together. And as they walk, the person always looks up at God and see that the heavens above are like a giant mirror, reflecting back the image of God and the person walking hand-in-hand in love. And this image always fill the person with a complete sense of joy and contentment. Then one day - and no one knows just why -- the person decided that they didn't need to hold God's hand anymore. And the moment they let go of God, that heavenly mirror shattered into a million pieces and those pieces fell all over the world. As time passed, and more and more people populated the world, they would find pieces of that mirror, each reflecting just a piece of the image of God. The problem: each person who found one of those pieces mistakenly believed that they had the complete image of God and defended their image of God as being better than anyone else's. Our challenge is to realize, even today, that we each only have a piece of that heavenly mirror and we are to seek out others who have peices and work with them to bring together that one image of God together.

As I think about what pieces of that heavenly image of God that Jesus might have held as most important, I also want to imagine what he might place in our God Box. Certainly our text today gives us an idea of what Luke believed Jesus might include. We have before us a text in which Luke's Jesus declare solidarity with a God who is for all people but first and foremost is about helping those who are oppressed....

- To bring good news to the poor
- Bring release to the captives
- Sight to those who cannot see
- Freedom to those in bondage

And for Jesus, this was no "pie in the sky" ideal of God. He states firmly "today this is fulfilled in your hearing." It was to happen now! He would not just preach a God who helped the oppressed, he would live it out. Jesus would devote his life to a ministry of

bringing good news to the poor, healing the needy, gifting sight to those who had lost their "vision," offering freedom to those in bondage and community to those others would marginalize. And it almost gets him killed. In fact, his own home town folk try to throw him off the cliff that this good news is not just for them but for all people, Jew and gentile alike. His idea of God was just too big for them to wrap their hearts around.

As we work together in the days ahead to live out together our understanding of God and God's call on our lives, we too, if we are really following the gospel, will run into opposition, into those whose idea of God is perhaps a little narrower than ours, a little more restrictive than ours, a little less loving. We'll even encounter times when we in this church do not see eye-to-eye, when our ideas about God right in this very church bump up against each other. And that's okay. Because, ultimately, this church thing -- it isn't about us! It's about God and God's love for the world.

So yes, there will be bumps along the journey together. We even find ourselves at times standing on the edge of the proverbial cliff together. That's part of what makes being a church a sacred calling. It's part of what makes being church together so exciting, too!

So, I'm looking forward to exploring our God box together.

By the way, if you are like me, some of you still have boxes from your last move that you've never opened. Our God box can't be one of those boxes. Just as important as it is to fill it, it's even more important that we open it up, invite others in to help us fill it and share its contents with the world.

Rev. Brian S. Kirk