

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne PA  
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B, December 24, 2017  
Text: 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 and Luke 1:26-38

*Come, O Holy Spirit, come. Come as the wind and cleanse; come as the fire and burn; convert and consecrate our lives to our great good and your great glory; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.*

This is the fourth Sunday of Advent when we hear God announce to the world the great gift God is about to give the world. And this is also Christmas Eve, the time that we celebrate the arrival of that gift into the world, the incarnation of God into this world.

The announcement of the coming gift and the arrival of the gift do not get any closer together than this. Not often do we get to celebrate the fourth Sunday of Advent with the Christmas decorations all in place, the gifts all wrapped and under the tree, and young children, and old children like me filled with the anticipation of opening those gifts. Perhaps that's why my mind this morning is filled with the idea of boxes.

As I pondered the lessons for today, I kept coming up with boxes. Perhaps it's because Kim and I have moved 13 times in our marriage and are now considering downsizing. Of course, there will be less boxes the 14<sup>th</sup> time but still there will be a lot of packing and unpacking, a lot of boxes to deal with, a lot of filling them with what we must have, and then emptying them and breaking them down as soon as possible.

Or perhaps it's all those beautifully wrapped packages under the Christmas tree that makes we think of boxes this morning. They are so inviting, and tempting.

Whatever the reason, boxes are what is on my mind this morning. And I can't think about boxes without remembering a friend who is forever etched in my mind as Jennifer the gift-giver. Jennifer loves to give gifts, and her gift boxes are always special with the right bag or paper, the perfect sentiment on the card. And she watches expectantly as the recipient opens the gift, waiting to read the facial expressions to see if it was the correct gift, the right thought. The only thing more beautiful than watching Jennifer the gift-giver, is to watch Jennifer the receiver as appreciates the wrapping of the box put before her, as she slowly opens that box, as she registers the appreciation and gratitude contained in the contents of that box.

For Jennifer, in both giving and receiving, it is as though the beauty and thoughtfulness of the packaging is the prelude that whets the appetite, and sets up the expectancy of freeing the contents of the box. For her, boxes are important and serve the purpose of preparing one for what is to come, but they are only temporary containers that must never become permanent. For the permanence would forever cage the contents, the gift.

Now while we can understand this about a gift and its container -- its box -- it is difficult for us to realize that we often do the same thing to God. We cage God in a box. We take the mystery of God away and we shrink God down to a miniature little super replica of our own ego. Then we put that God in a box and go to church to worship the contents of that box. We approach our liturgy, our songs of praise, and our prayers as though we were strolling through an art museum, looking at beautiful but dead paintings of a God that is alive and anything but dead.

In this morning's lesson from Second Samuel, King David has that same problem. He wants to build a temple to house the Ark of the Covenant (the place the Hebrew children considered the seat of God), but God says to him: "Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day...Whenever I moved among the people did I ever [say], 'Why have you never built me a house of cedar?'"

David wanted to put the God who freely roamed the wilderness – who roams everywhere – into a box. God says, "no!" The house I will build through you, your legacy has no walls. The house of God cannot be contained in a box.

And yet, we are often "God-in-a-box" people. We become so bound in the past that there is no understanding of the present -- of what is -- and no concept that there is a future, much less what it can be. We want God safely in a box, neatly contained so that everything can stay as it always has been.

This resistance to change is because we know that if we ever open that box, even a little, and let God out, nothing will ever be the same again. God is living and ever-changing. And where we are called today will most certainly be different from the past, and only God knows where we will go tomorrow.

Think about today's Gospel lesson. Mary could have kept God in a box and said, "no!" I want to marry Joseph and have a family. I want a regular life. She had to let God out of the box of her construction so that she could be transformed, changed, and renewed – made new so that she could discern God's will and say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." As the Holy Spirit empowered her, she stopped worshiping God with her piety and worshiped God with her heart. Mary could not fully understand the gift of God until she took God's grace out of any boxes she may have built around it, until she freed the gift to be fully effective within her.

It is only natural for us to refuse to acknowledge our created nature, and for us to want to be self-sufficient and fully in control. But this sense of our own adequacy pulls us away from a true and honest relationship with God, and puts God in a box. Just like Mary, only by opening ourselves to the working of the Holy Spirit through prayer and meditation do we open those boxes and let God be fully alive within us.

Now, when we open those boxes – those beautiful packages under the tree – in a few hours or tomorrow sometime, I doubt we'll be able to practice restraint and admire the beauty and thoughtfulness of the packaging as a prelude that whets the appetite, and sets up the expectancy of freeing the contents of the box. But at least we can remember that the boxes are only temporary containers that must never become permanent. For permanence would forever cage the contents, the gift.

Let us remember, and then also open the boxes we have built to contain the God of our ego. Let us be empowered by the Holy Spirit to embrace a God that no box can ever contain. Amen. And Merry Christmas.

(See my sermon for the Celebration of New Ministry for The Rev. Jennifer West and the People of St. Bartholomew's Church, Baltimore: November 6, 1999)