



A House or a Box?

Sermon for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost, July 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Very Rev. Holladay Sanderson
[2 Samuel 7:1-14a, Psalm 89:20-37, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#)

Several years ago, I discovered a great little book that I used over and over again in church study, book, or discussion groups. It was called **Blowing the Lid Off the God-Box** by Anne Robertson. The cover picture showed a crate labeled Handle with Care and Fragile and the lid was blown off by all the popcorn that had popped the crate open and was now surrounding it.

The subtitle was "Opening up to a Limitless Faith." The entire brief book was a reminder that we humans LOOOOOVE to box God up for ourselves. If God is a he or a she, then God belongs only in one of those boxes. If God loves everyone or everyone except THEM, then God goes into one of those boxes. If God is present with us always or only when we are repentant all the time, well, there's always another box.

Whatever WE humans need to believe about God, we can easily box up God to suit OUR needs. The God of Sundays only. The God of always. The God of limitless lovingkindness and steadfastness. The God who judges us on everything. What is it that WE need God to be? What kind of box must we put God into so that God will be the God whom we need?

Or maybe God cannot be boxed up. Anne Robertson certainly reminds us of that fact in her gem of a book. This is particularly an interesting topic for Episcopalians to consider since we are such a ROOMY faith tradition. Or because we are, in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "lovable but messy." Our roominess and messiness offers us a lot of grays in the midst of some desires for black and white answers.

We have only to look around to see just how many denominations and faith traditions there are in the world. Each has a particular picture of God or idea of how God is supposed to be or truly rather, how each one NEEDS God to be for them.

Perhaps one of the biggest boxes we make for God is the church or worship building we create. Gothic style like our own church? In the round? With the Torah up front in a symbolic Ark as found in synagogues? No cross on the steeple? No steeple? A renewed jet ski building or movie theater? Or out in the woods where some say this is where they find God the best?

David is certainly wrestling with that question in the reading from the Second Book of Samuel this morning. He realizes he has this great and fancy residence in his new capital of Jerusalem but God remains in a tent. Shouldn't he build God a better house? One of cedar perhaps. After all, God has been with Israel since the people were freed from Egypt. Just like a King, God needs a suitable residence as well! Nathan, David's prophet, hears from God directly as usual and is told to tell David that, no, he does not need to build God a house of cedar. God has never needed one. Simply stated, God has been with Israel wherever they went, house or not. So why worry now?

Indeed, God tells Nathan, God intends to... listen carefully now... to make [DAVID] a house.... "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish

his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” Many read this and think immediately, “See, we know Solomon will provide the house.” We know this because Solomon IS the king who winds up building that marvelous temple.

But David is told that HE will be the house. David himself will be the house. When we remove our natural assumptions about Solomon, it appears, especially to Christians, that God is looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, the one whom we call Jesus the Christ.

In today’s Gospel, we actually meet Jesus. He is not housed anywhere. Sometimes he sleeps on the ground; sometimes in a private home... not his own; sometimes maybe in a tent. Simply put, he stays wherever. And wherever he goes, people find him. Wherever he goes, he is in the midst of need and he heals and teaches.

He does all this because he “has compassion” on these people. They are like sheep without a shepherd. That last is a reference to the description, made in Ezekiel 34, of the right and wrong kinds of king for the people. The good king will be a good shepherd, just as God is a good shepherd... and just as we ourselves refer to Jesus himself.

With God in his own heart and soul, Jesus has compassion on the people he meets, those who are like sheep without a shepherd. Wherever he goes, he demonstrates the good shepherd to them. He shows them “God with us;” the one foretold in Isaiah.

Jesus never needed a house. Where there was need, he was present. Where there was a longing for relationships, he was present. We have discovered the same thing today. Where there is need and longing for relationship, Jesus IS present in our midst.

Over the last year and more, we have wondered about our ability to attend church in our house; how we might be present together again in one building. We got lax about attendance and began to enjoy attending in our lovely tops and our PJ bottoms without the formality of church. Zoom provided us with a lifeline AND with a way to discover what we have learned from lockdown.

The CHURCH is NOT the building itself. This house is so much more. God cannot not boxed up inside four walls and a roof. God is in our hearts and in the hearts of those whose lives we touch. God is in our relationships. God is in our worship in all of its variety. God is present in our need... even that need and longing we held so long JUST TO BE TOGETHER again; to be in direct relationship once more.

This is a GREAT house! St. Luke’s is a wonderful 230 year old house: filled with relationships and stories of lives that were, that are, and that will be. And in the midst of them all, God is with US: here, at home, and in the world. We come into this house, our house, to celebrate and to discern how to know God better so that we can better be God’s hearts and hands in the world and in our homes. Really though, God’s house is wherever God is found. And we simply cannot box up God. God will be where God will be. Fortunately for us, we know that, eternally, God is ours and we are God’s. Our God who is beyond limits will always be God With Us.

Amen.