

God in a Box

In the name of him in whose birth this day we rejoice, dear friends in Christ: I do not claim to be the first one to discover them; but I have in my years as a theologian stumbled across two iron clad and inescapable rules. They are: first, that religious people are always trying to find God; and second, that left to their own devices they will consistently look for him in the wrong places. These rules are the inevitable result of the fall into sin – which itself was attempt to find God not in the Lord of Creation, but in humans whom the Lord created. That was the temptation: you can be like God. By eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were trying to find God in themselves. And we know how that turned out. When the true God came strolling along through the garden in the cool of the day, they ran from him. And it's been that way ever since: man has been running away from God and attempting to find him elsewhere.

Just look at how things turned out. Adam and Eve and their children knew the Lord, and yet within a few generations we see the birth of all kinds of pagan religions; people worshipping the sun, moon, stars, and idols made to look like people and other creatures. As Paul says in Romans, "Although they knew God, they did not honor him or give him thanks, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and reptiles." The same thing happened again after the days of Noah. He and his family were the only survivors of the flood. They all knew the Lord. And yet a few generations later, most of the world is back to looking for gods and goddesses in everything other than the one true God.

Nor was it any better among God's chosen people Israel. You remember what happened when the Lord led them out of Egypt. They saw his mighty arm in action with the ten plagues. They saw him divide the Red Sea and destroy Pharaoh's army. They saw the Lord in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. And they saw him descend on Mount Sinai amid thick smoke and fire, earthquakes, lightning, and thunder. He was right there in plain view on the mountain. And what did they do? They turned their back on him, made an idol of a golden calf, and worshipped it saying, "*This* is the Lord who brought us out of Egypt!" Meanwhile the Lord is on the mountain shouting, "No, you knuckleheads. I'm over here!" But nobody was listening. They thought they found God on their own right where *they* wanted him to be.

The reason I mention all of this is that there has been a resurgence of mysticism in the Christian Church of our day. Mysticism is the attempt to find God and to know him more intimately through one's feelings and experiences. Usually it involves following certain procedures that are meant to clear the mind and open the way for God to reveal himself directly to the person who's pursuing this greater level of spirituality. Let me give you a few examples.

The other day I was meeting with a group of local pastors, one of whom said that she (yes, *she* – that's a red flag) had recently attended a retreat at a Trappist monastery. She said it was a very rewarding experience: five days of total silence except when chanting psalms in the worship services. What was most rewarding, she said, was what she felt when engaged in a practice called "centering prayer". "Centering prayer", says I, "What's that?" All the pastors gave me a funny look. From some it was pity, I think. From others it was more like, "What planet have you been living on?" Anyway, very patiently, as if explaining something "*everyone* knows" to a dimwit, they told me. To engage in centering prayer one must completely clear the mind. Usually it's best to concentrate on a single word, and think it over and over again like an unspoken mantra. And then, after perhaps an hour or more of this – however long it takes –

you are to (and I'm quoting here) "get yourself into the Lord's presence and just feel him all through your body." And then you're there. You're engaged in centering prayer, communicating directly mind to mind with the Lord. As I'm listening to this I'm thinking, "I'd choose as my mantra the word "cheeseburger". And the only thing I'd feel after an hour or more of thinking it is hungry." But this is what I mean by attempting to find God in one's feelings.

Another technique that some churches are trying is what's called a labyrinth. They're springing up everywhere. In a courtyard or large room at the church they'll draw out on the floor a complicated pathway that twists around and turns on itself like a Celtic design. And what you do is follow the path, stopping at various intersections and nodes to recite certain prescribed prayers. It's kind of like a rosary for the feet. It takes quite a bit of time to get through it. You know that you're at the end when you come back to the place you started. But again, the idea is to clear the mind and concentrate on the repetition of the prayers and thus feel a greater presence of God. I think it's strangely fitting that in Greek mythology, the labyrinth was a maze under the palace in Crete where an evil king sent people to get lost and die.

One more example of mysticism: there's a book that was written in 2004 that's currently enjoying a surge of popularity. It's entitled *Jesus is Calling*, and it's about one woman's attempt to find God and cement a closer relationship with him again through her feelings. What she does, and counsels her readers to do, is to sit alone at a table with a pad of paper and something to write with. And then – what seems to be the common theme here – clear the mind and feel the presence of God. And then, while doing this – in sort of an altered state of consciousness, she jots down whatever random thoughts come to her, whether she's actually aware of them or not. Then, later, having come out of that trancelike state, she reads what she's written and holds them to be personal messages directly from God – hence the title of her book *Jesus is Calling*. Now, she claims that she doesn't regard these messages as having the same authority as Holy Scripture; but don't be ridiculous. Either God is speaking to her or he's not. And if he is, then it better be authoritative. What's he going to do, lie? What concerns me most about this practice is that it's exactly the same thing I personally witnessed some spiritists doing when I lived in Brazil; but they didn't think it was God sending them messages. They claimed their messages were from the spirits of the dead. And I've got news for you: anything they wrote that didn't come from their own thoughts came from demons. This is dangerous stuff.

So, by now you've probably figured out that I'm dead set against mysticism. And I'm not the only one. Sound theologians have always been against it. But here's the problem: you can't argue with someone's feelings. If I'm happy, sad, infatuated, or afraid you can't tell me that I'm not. Nor can you tell me that I didn't have the experiences and feelings that I did. I had them. They're mine. They took place inside me. And so when anyone tries to explain to someone engaged in mysticism that they're looking for God in the wrong place, they'll come back with, "What do *you* know? *I felt* this. *I had* this experience. *I know* it to be true." And look, I don't deny that they had the experience or feeling. The problem is where it comes from: the human heart and mind – which we know to be desperately sick with sin and lost in its ability to find God. Sinful man always runs from the true God and attempts to find him elsewhere. I don't deny that they're being religious. The problem is the religion they're pursuing. It doesn't lead to God.

But this is where anyone practicing mysticism will play their trump card. They'll say, "You know what your problem is? You're trying to put God in a box. You're saying that he can't come and reveal himself to people in other ways. You don't get it. God is bigger than that. He can do what he wants. And if I experience God in these ways, you have no right to tell me otherwise. Shame on you for trying to limit what God can do. You can't put God in a box."

But that is precisely where they're wrong. God can be placed in a box. That's what we're celebrating today: the fact that Joseph and the Virgin Mother did exactly that. They put the baby Jesus, the Son of God in human flesh, into a bed they made for him in a feed trough for sheep. And that's where the angels told the shepherds to find him: not in their hearts, not in their minds, not in their feelings, not in their journeys to find God where they thought he might be on mountain tops or in great marble temples. No. Come see God in a box, in a stable, in a tiny, backwater town, in a disgraced and conquered nation – the very last place anyone on earth would ever think to look for him. And the shepherds did. They went and found God where he told them he would be: in a box. In a box precisely so that he could be found and so that they would know what they were looking at. "This shall be the sign for you." Because otherwise all they would have seen was a baby that looked like all the other babies in Judea. They knew this one was God because they were told to look for him in a box.

Left to our own devices, we will never find God. If we did happen to see him, we wouldn't recognize him. And even when we're told what to look for, as a rule, we don't like what we see. But that's how God reveals himself. That's how he comes to us. He comes down looking for us and telling us how we will know him. And that's important: God speaks. He communicates to us with words. This is where the mystics go wrong. They insist on clearing their minds. Instead they should be filling their minds with what the Lord has spoken. And then, by faith in the Word they would recognize God where he locates himself despite what they see or how they feel about it. And they would know that God only ever wants to be found in the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ. Not in feelings. Not in experiences. Not in pious procedures designed to pursue a higher level of spirituality. These are all pathways to deception. God wants you to find him where he locates himself in Jesus.

And then you'll find God in all kinds of places you'd never expect to see him: an infant nestling at his virgin mother's breast; as a twelve year old in the Temple, astonishing the doctors of the Law with his questions and answers; standing in the Jordan, being baptized by John; being tempted by Satan in the wilderness for forty days; attending a wedding in Cana, where he performed his first miracle; preaching on a hillside in Galilee; sleeping peacefully on a seat cushion in a boat in a storm. God in a box, as it were.

But even then, people rejected the God they saw. He wasn't the kind of God they wanted. It didn't *feel* right to them. And so it is that we find God praying desperately in a garden asking if there's another way to bring about the salvation of lost mankind; standing trial for blasphemy and treason under false accusations; being condemned; lashed to a whipping post having his flesh ripped away; nailed to a cross gasping out his last breath; dead, sealed in a cold, stone tomb. God in a box – a box he said he wouldn't stay in; but nobody believed that either. Not even those closest to him. They too turned their backs on him and went looking for God someplace else. And so, as always, God came looking for them, revealing himself in the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

This is what we celebrate today. That God put himself in a box precisely so that we would know him, know his love, and know his work to save and redeem us in Jesus Christ. And he continues to put himself in a box, as it were, so that we can find him today: in the preached Word of Christ, in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper. God spoken into your ears. God felt in the water. God on a plate. God in a cup. God in your mouth. God in you. God *for* you, in the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ born this day to save sinners. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!