

Text: John 1: 29-39  
Title: Retail God in a Wholesale World  
Date: 1.20.08  
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*I am indebted to an essay by William Willimon for setting me on this path as way to preach this text...*

In 1902 William James, a psychologist-turned-philosopher from Harvard, published “The Varieties of Religious Experience.” It is a series of lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh concerning the nature and study of religion. It is one of those grand, groundbreaking, influential, heady, dense, formative books of western intellectual history. Toward the end of this hefty tome, Williams writes:

*The God whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively, a God who does a whole sale, not a retail business. He cannot accommodate his processes to the convenience of individuals. The bubbles on the foam which coats a stormy sea are floating episodes, made and unmade by the forces of wind and water. Our private selves are like those bubbles... their destinies weigh nothing and determine nothing in the world's irremediable currents.*

That is a whimsical, beautiful, and despairing image. God is a big box god ~ distant, removed, abstract, impersonal, and immutable. God is not the shopkeeper on the corner whose face you recognize and whose name you know; God is Wal-Mart..... And, we are just bubbles floating in the foam of a stormy sea.

Now, that quote from William James is lifted out of a much larger argument, and I am tweaking it a bit, but you get the point: The “wholesale God” (Marcus Borg) is the God above and beyond and behind every idea of God. But, the God who does a “retail business” is God with a face, God with a name, God who is specific. A wholesale God is a mysterious, mushy, and vague deity, but a God who does retail knows my business and we know his.

I think it is a helpful, albeit playful, distinction.

Most everybody that I know, except for hard core atheists, believes that there is a God; it is when you get down to the specifics that things get dicey.

The Gospel of John opens with a big box God.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God from the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...*

*John 1:1-5*

The God of those lines cannot be contained by the poet's lyric, is outside even the philosophers ruminating, and cannot be squeezed into time or space or place. That God is beyond our capacity to contain...But, then the very next line reads.

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John.  
John 1:6*

And, suddenly from the rarified air of eternity, creation, light, and dark, we're at the corner shop talking to the clerk behind the counter who is wearing a camel hair shirt tucked into a leather belt, with breath that has a faint hint of locusts and honey.

For, with that quick turn the Gospel of John went from whole sale to retail.  
And, no sooner have we met this shopkeeper and he is pulling Jesus off the shelf.  
Just 23 short verses later John is pointing to Jesus.

*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!  
John 1:29*

This whole "wholesale ~ retail" analogy might strike you as crass. It makes God a commodity and every church a local distributor. We're just a mom and pop God shop. But, you get the drift....

The stumbling block is the identification of Jesus as an expression of God.  
Everything is fine until we locate God in a specific person.

The idea of God is not necessarily offensive, it might even be quaint and reassuring, but the identification of God with an individual is unsettling and disruptive.

God with calluses on his feet and dirt under his nails,  
God with a particular timbre of voice,  
God with a unique smell and a distinct name,  
that is where it gets difficult and divisive and dangerous.

This is further complicated in that John doesn't look up to see Jesus walking toward and him proclaim "Look, the Light of the World," or "the Prince of Peace," or the "Lord of Lords," but he calls him "the Lamb of God."

Now, this is the only time in all scripture where that phrase is used. No Old Testament prophet ever referred to God's Chosen One as "the Lamb of God" and no New Testament writer will repeat it. Even in the Book of Revelation, where the apostle John often mentions the image of the Lamb, the exact phrase "the Lamb of God" is not repeated.

So, of course there is no scholarly consensus about what John meant by this designation. The most obvious choice is to connect it to the Passover lamb, but even that is disputed. There are other ideas scattered here or there in the Old Testament, because it seems unlikely that John would have made up a whole new name for God's Chosen One on the spot. It is an odd moniker.

I know we sometimes call Ron Beversdorf, “Beav.”  
And, I know that I’ve called Jeff Carpenter, “Carp.”

But, with present company excepted, calling people animal names is rarely positive. Pig, dog, tortoise, whale, snake ~ they are all descriptive but none are very complimentary. I find myself annoyed when a friend continually asks, “So, how are you birds doing?” Even stallion and cougar have their particular drawbacks.

*Eagles and lions are the only ones I can think of that don’t have negative connotations. It must have something to do with being at the top of the food chain.*

Linking God to a lamb is odd.

Lambs are often a symbol of gentleness and meekness, so calling Jesus a lamb could have been nice to say, but it would hardly be the type of description that would fit a God. It certainly is not a slogan that would get our next president elected. *Gulliani the Lamb of New York...*

Lambs are not the brightest animal, so calling Jesus a lamb may have sounded like the equivalent of accusing Jesus of being a little slow and a little vulnerable, one easy to gang up on. Again, not very flattering. Meek and the sacrificial doesn’t scream, “Big box God.”

Then John adds the kicker that somehow this particular lamb-like Jesus would “take away the sins of the world.” So, now sin is linked with the lamb and the traditional connection between lambs and sin has always involved the death of the hapless lamb.

Again, the wholesale God finds expression as one would be led to the butcher’s block, as one destined to die. (*I am indebted to Scott Hoezee for that little riff on the “Lamb of God”*) As Scott Hoezee puts it:

*John could just as easily have said, "Behold, the one who is going down the tubes! Behold the loser, the victim, the dead man walking." How odd it must have sounded. The next day, though, John repeats it, letting you know that it wasn't some foolish slip-of-the-tongue on John's part. This is central to who this Jesus was.*

And therein lies the rub.

In his opening sales pitch, John names Jesus as an expression of God who was bound to die and that death would “take away” our sin, our brokenness, and our death. But, for many, for most, in the market place of gods, in the mystery of how God would be poured out in a particular man,

    this is too far to stretch,

    too much to take,

    too hard to believe ~

        and we would run back to the comfort of a distant deity tucked  
        away in a big box

Part of what William James suggests in “The Varieties of Religious Experience” is that the study of religion should not be limited to an analysis of text, doctrine, and theological system, but to understand religion you need to examine the experience, the life, the witness of the individual. Don’t just look at what religions claim, look at the experience of people.

And, dear friends, I would suggest that central to our faith is the notion of testimony, or witness.

*There was a man sent from God whose name was John.  
He came as a witness to testify concerning the light...  
John 1: 6-7*

Some of you can bear witness with this morning’s Psalm:

*I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry.  
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire.  
Psalm 40: 1-2*

And some of you can testify to a life of wrestling with God,  
and some of you can speak to felt experiences of God’s presence,  
and some of you can tell the story of seeking and searching your whole life long.....

I don’t know how you experience Jesus,  
or what experience you attach the name of Jesus to,  
but we gather in the mystery that God took expression in a specific time,  
and a specific place, and specific person. We gather to proclaim that the  
way of God, that the light of God, that the face of God, is found in Jesus.

And we bear witness that

in the bread that we break and the cup that share,  
in our collective confession of brokenness and sin,  
in seeking to follow the teaching, the steps, the way of Jesus,  
in finding Jesus in the company of his people,  
in learning that love and forgiveness are wholly grace,  
in giving our best worship to the Lamb....  
we bear witness to the mystery of God in Jesus.

I don’t need or want a big box God.

I need or want a God who is present ~ not distant, distinct ~ not vague, personal ~ not  
ethereal, real ~ not imaginary. I need a God with a face and name.

Together we bear witness that Jesus is that God.

*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*

Amen.