

A DEEPER LOOK 7

“THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX”

“Then David again gathered all the elite troops in Israel, 30,000 in all. He led them to Baalah of Judah to bring back the Ark of God, which bears the name of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, who is enthroned between the cherubim.” 2 Samuel 6:1

Thinking ‘outside the box’ is the name given to a process of looking at a situation from a different perspective, or considering a problem using speculative solutions, or exploring options and answers from unusual sources or in unusual ways. It has become somewhat standardized in entrepreneurial business settings, and is making its way into other disciplines as well; for example; education and health care. The last two frontiers to accept this discipline would appear to be government and the church...both of which might need it the most, and benefit from its practice most immensely.

Today I would like to try to help us ‘think outside the box’...literally and figuratively. The title of my message contains an intentional ‘play on words’. I want to visit with you about the Ark of the Covenant, a golden box that occupies center stage in the drama of today’s text. The whole point is found in the last part of this verse: *“The Ark of God, which bears the name of the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, who **is enthroned between the cherubim.**”* Before I give you the background, let me give you the point: The Israelites have (AGAIN) mistakenly come to believe that God lived in the Ark of the Covenant. God will not be confined to any box, golden, wooden, brick, concrete, mental or otherwise...God is outside the box, and we need to think about that!

During instruction and construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness; (that portable tent we discussed last week), there were provisions made, and commands given for the Israelite priests to construct this wooden box, cover it with gold inside and out, and erect on top these two angelic beings called the Cherubim, and Seraphim.

Into the Ark of the Covenant were placed some symbolic and sacred reminders of the Jews troubled past. The 10 Commandments were placed there, reminding the Jews of God's law designed to connect them with the Almighty and show them how to live God honoring lives. The staff of Moses used to bring the plagues on Pharaoh, and separate the Red Sea, and bring water from the rock was placed therein; as a reminder of God's miraculous power to secure God's people, and keep them safe. Also placed there was a loaf of Manna bread, a wonderful reminder of God's care about the ordinary things necessary to sustain their lives and families.

Though the box was God's idea, it has become a source of trouble and heartache for Israel, largely because of their misunderstanding about God literally residing therein. The box became a lucky rabbit's foot that the General's of Israel used to help them win battles and wars; but during one of those wars the Israelites lost, and the Ark was captured by the Philistines.

It became a source of cursing for those wicked hands that mishandled it. It was one time placed in front of the statue of Dagon, a Philistine Idol in Dagon's own temple. The next morning the statue was found lying in front of the Ark of the Covenant. The idol was replaced on the Altar, and the next day it was again lying on the floor in front of the Ark of the Covenant, with it's arms and legs cut off lying across the front door threshold. The Ark became a dreaded curse and was passed from one town to the next by the Philistines who were trying to get rid of it. That leads us to the text for today. It is contained in some detail in 2 Samuel 6 and again in I Chronicles 15. Let me tell it for the sake of time.

King David has come to power, conquered the Philistines, was rebuilding Jerusalem, and the temple, when it dawns on him that he ought to return the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place. This he sets out to do, and that is where our adventure begins today.

I want to look at this story and consider 5 very common “boxes” into which we try to put or keep God. With similar results as the Israelites I’m afraid. Let’s just make sure we are clear; God will not be confined to any box we try to put Him in. #1

1. MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN THE THEOLOGICAL BOX

The Ark of the Covenant was God’s idea to help the people remember. But as so often happens, the object established to provide reminders, begins to take on a life of its own, and soon replaces God as the object to be worshiped...its called idolatry.

As righteous as David was, and upright his desire to return the Ark to its rightful place, he still had not straightened out the improper theology that got them into trouble in the first place. It was this; that God belonged only to the Jews; and instead of fulfilling the second part of the covenant (spreading that good news to the rest of the Gentile world), the nation of Israel began to use their special status with God as a means to keep themselves safe, and keep unbelievers out. God was in their box!

You and I both know that God has never lived in a box. God can never be confined in a building, a city, a country, or a particular church. And as much as I believe that Christianity is the only true and authentic religion in the world able to connect people ultimately with God; I’m not able to dismiss other religions as completely devoid of truth. I believe that any honest person seeking ultimate truth no matter what their religious flavor; will eventually run smack dab into Jesus who said he was THE TRUTH! But not unlike the Israelites we sometimes mistakenly try to confine God in our own little theological boxes. We spend more time judging and dismissing those who may believe differently than us, than we do loving them and inviting them to join the adventure of following Jesus. We sometimes have to think outside our own sacred ‘theological’ boxes.

2. MISGIVINGS FROM THE CULTURAL BOX

“They placed the Ark of God on a new cart and brought it from Abinadab’s house, which was on a hill.” 2 Samuel 6: 3

Returning the Ark to Jerusalem was a good idea, but returning it by any other means than what God had originally instructed proved to be a fateful thing. God had given the Priests specific instructions that the Ark of the Covenant was only to be moved by Levitical Priests who would insert long golden poles through the 4 golden rings attached to the Ark at each corner, and carry the ark on their shoulders. The Philistines used a cart to carry the Ark. And unfortunately David adopted the culturally accepted standard of Ark moving, rather than obeying God's standard, and it eventually cost Uzzah his life!

One of the great paradoxes we face as a church, as Christians, is Jesus' reminder that we are called to be in the world but not of the world, we are commissioned to convert our culture without being conformed to that culture. We are called to do everything in our power (as Paul said: "Becoming all things to all people in order that I might win some") to win the unbelieving world to Christ, without selling our souls in the process.

And let me tell you that line of demarcation is often a thin one. We are going to continue to use contemporary means and methods and technology to reach our culture without watering down or compromising the Gospel in any fashion. It is a fine line sometimes. We must be careful, but we must also be courageous. God becoming one of us in the form of Jesus Christ; is our example. After 4000 years of using Patriarchs, prophets, psalms and proverbs and a paltry Jewish effort; God changed methods, he adapted the means; choosing to become one of us, to reach all of us. Do you see that? We don't take our marching orders out of any cultural box, but from the Gospel and example of Jesus. Thirdly we must break out of the:

3. MISGUIDANCE FROM THE PUBLIC OPINION BOX

"The whole assembly agreed to do this, because it seemed right to all the people." I Chronicles 13:4

Again this political season we are all too well aware of the dangers of riding the fickle waves of public opinion as our guiding rudder, and 'true north' navigational system. In the Chronicles account of this same story this verse is included. David's well laid, and masterfully communicated plan to return the Ark by means of a cart, was agreed upon 'because it seemed right to all the people.'

The lesson we must remember is this: even when attempting to do something good to bring Glory to God, it must still be done God's way. David's mistake was not in returning the ark to Jerusalem, but when seeking endorsement for that plan, he looked for the people's approval, instead of seeking God's! Instead of continually relying on the best of our human inventions, the best of our human planning; we must be consumed with only one consideration: Is this what God wants, and is the way God wants it done? As we have in the past, we must in our future vow to keep this focus in focus: God's Will, God's Way, is Our Wish! We work, plan, discuss, debate, vote and we do the best we humanly can to prepare; but ultimately we must rely on God as our only "true North".

4. MISHANDLING THE 'HOLY THINGS OF GOD' BOX

"But when they arrived at the threshing floor of Nacon, the oxen stumbled, and Uzzah reached out his hand and steadied the Ark of God. Then the Lord's anger was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him dead because of this. So Uzzah died right there beside the Ark of God." 2 Samuel 6:6-7

Seems a bit harsh doesn't it? He too was trying to do the right thing. The ox slipped, the Ark was about to fall on the threshing floor, it must not touch the floor. All Uzzah did is what any one of us would do. Uzzah was a victim of David's mishandling of the holy! As right as it was to return the Ark to Jerusalem, David has taken a casual, even cavalier attitude and approach to this endeavor. He misunderstands the theology of God's omnipresence, he consults the people instead of God, he uses the culturally acceptable standard of transport rather than doing it God's way, and he goes off dancing like he has no care in the world.

Unfortunately this is not the first time David's passion has led him astray... remember Bathsheba? Same David, that time it cost him his son, and Uriah his life; this time Uzzah is killed.

I can't help but think we must think outside this box as well. Some people have a casual approach to God. Oh, they'll come to worship, they'll believe in God, they'll give a little left over money; but let's not become fanatics! Let's not take this stuff to seriously!

Wilbur Rees has written that 'many folks would like to go to church and buy \$3 dollars worth of God. They want enough God to make them comfortable; enough God to give them hope when they feel down; and enough God to comfort them when death strikes. But they don't want too much of God. They don't want so much of God they might have to rearrange their priorities. They don't want so much of God that they have to reach out and love people who are different. They don't want so much God that they have to start treating GOD as more important than...ANYTHING else. Many folks prefer about \$3 dollars worth of God.' #5, we must think outside the

5. MISTAKES IN THE WORSHIP BOX

"And David danced (unrestrained) before the Lord with all his might, wearing a priestly garment." 2 Samuel 6:14

There is a huge gap in our story here. After Uzzah is killed David leaves the Ark for a number of months. After he gets his priorities right, and his theology straightened out, and re-reads the instructions about the priests and the poles, he returns to fetch the Ark, and does so. As the entourage enters Jerusalem, David is leading the excited parade. He is literally dancing down the street wearing a 'priestly garment'. This garment might have been a weighty ankle length robe, but, it is more likely an ephod, a short, thigh length apron...and he was probably wearing...nothing else. David was dancing almost in his birthday suit as the young maidens and servant girls watched their king. High above the din, was Michal, David's wife, and she was mad.

She was embarrassed that her husband (in her opinion) was acting inappropriately as the King of this Nation. She knew how kings were supposed to act her daddy Saul was the king before her husband. David responds to her jealous and self-righteous questions this way: *“What I have done, I have done in the presence of the Lord, who chose me instead of your father to be the prince over Israel.”*

What David figured out (thinking outside the box) that Michal didn't was that when worship is done in spirit and truth and IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD, nothing is inappropriate. Michal's mistake was that she allowed her prejudices, her anger, her jealousy, her prestige, power and position to interfere with her celebration and worship. She made a mistake of putting worship in her own little selfishly defined box!

Many forms of worship are acceptable; many styles are inviting, many variations are necessary to engage people fully in encountering God. The worship box mistake we must break out of, is that only worship that pleases me...pleases God! David cared not that his worship might be construed as undignified by Michal, or anyone else, as long as God is pleased. He apparently had spent some time thinking outside the box in those intervening months.

God doesn't live in a box; theological, cultural, public opinion, or worship. God is holy, and we must handle that holiness with the greatest care and with the greatest abandon! That may require some out of the box thinking...and culminate in some out of the box action, but let's at least keep our clothes on!

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