

God in This Box

Isaiah 9: 1-4; Matthew 4: 12-23

January 23, 2005 SBCC

Calvin the dog, who published his first book a few years ago, wonders why people come to church. Calvin himself loves exploring the building and, like all dogs, he enjoys sniffing the wonderful smells in the area surrounding the church. But of his humans, Calvin says this:

“...they are made to sit and stay in but one room of the building on hard sofas for an hour or more while one person barks, allowed occasionally to stand and bay together at the yowl caused by someone scratching the teeth of a box. The best part of that time is when they walk around and pet each other, passing the treat of God. Their only other reward for being good through all this is hot muddy water and, occasionally, treats.

How can they feel wonder at God when they are kept in a box like this?”¹

Well, why are we here today? What would you tell Calvin the dog, if you could speak dog language? How would you explain to your friends why it is that you are here rather than sitting and sipping your morning coffee in front of a warm and cozy fire? Why you are here, rather than watching the Crystal Cathedral? Rather than reading the Record Eagle or the New York times? Rather than skiing? Or sleeping? Or, as young people would say, just hanging out?

Children often say it best. The reason why we come to church on Sunday is like one child’s answer to the Sunday school teacher. When asked why he loved God, the child said proudly, “I think it runs in the family.”

We’re here today, my friends, because we, too, love God, and it “does run in the family.” The stories of Jesus, the One whom Isaiah and then Matthew called the great light, the light in the darkness, the One whom Simon Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John were so eager to follow: that story has become our very own story. It has become the family story of Suttons Bay Congregational Church, and we come and sit on hard sofas and listen to one person bark, just because we love to hear the story of Jesus Christ over and over again.

That repetitive telling of the story is what makes it our very own story. We need to keep hearing again the words of Jesus to those first disciples: “Come follow me.” We need to remind ourselves that there is a light in our darkness.

We need this retelling of the story because it is our human nature to forget the story just when we most need to remember it. I know, because I lose my faith just like you do when the going gets tough. Periodically, when bad things happen in my life, my faith takes a nosedive. I keep saying to myself, “But, look, you’re a minister, you should have enough faith to get through this.” What I need, and what I usually get, is the response of others, telling me that God is with us. I need others to help me “catch” the story again, during times of trouble. We all do. We’re

here today so that we may keep on saying to one another: “There is a light that shines in the darkness. The darkness will not overcome us.”

“But that’s not enough. The Christ story is not just our story, not something we can package up and keep to ourselves. We began our worship today with singing, “Tell me the Story.” We will go from worship singing, “I love to tell the story.” The story is ours to share. The Gospel lesson, the part where Jesus calls his disciples is about what we call “evangelism.”

We don’t like that word, “evangelism.” Evangelism has become the “E” word of mainline Protestants. It has bad connotations. A bad reputation as words go. Most of us have been asked, at one time or another, by a neighbor or co-worker “Have you been saved?” Think “evangelism” and most of us here could tell some such negative story. We find such questions offensive. They’re not part of our repertoire.

But evangelism is easy. It’s as easy as telling our Christ-story in little acts of kindness.

There was a story in, I think, the Record Eagle a week or so ago. It was about a woman doing her Christmas shopping on Christmas Eve. The store was packed, the clerks were tired, everyone was in a hurry. There was a very long line at the check out. The woman got her total then looked for her money in her purse. She picked through for a couple minutes, then in her pockets, then back in her purse. People were getting impatient and she was getting flustered. Then the tears started to flow as it became obvious she wasn’t going to find her money. The man at the very back of the row pulled out his wallet, took out a twenty and passed it to the person in front of him. The next person took some of her own money and passed both contributions forward. By the time the money got to the front of the line, there was over two hundred dollars. Those people were practicing evangelism. They didn’t hand the woman a tract or ask her if she were saved. They simply told the story of Jesus, and his love, in little acts of kindness and compassion. Evangelism is like that. It is so easy, and with a little practice, it comes naturally.

Evangelism is as easy as including others in our own Christ-story. A pastor tells the story of returning to do pulpit supply at a church she once served. She and her husband were delighted to be introduced to the congregation by a woman named Anna.

When the pastor and her spouse had first known Anna, she cowered in the corner, afraid to talk to anyone. She had a history of severe abuse. And here was Anna, stepping up into the lectern without hesitation, and speaking in a clear, strong voice.

“What did you do?” the pastor asked of one of the long-time members. “We did what you started,” was the reply. “We just kept including her.”

“We just kept including her.” Nothing fancy. Nothing difficult. Just good old-fashioned human kindness and decency in which the doors of the church are open to all who will come through them. Evangelism is easy. As easy as inclusion. And, with a little practice, it comes almost naturally.

Friends, the good news of the Gospel is that we have been given a story. It is the Christ-story, the stories of Jesus we love to hear.

So, what will we tell Calvin, the dog, when he asks why we are here today? Those of us who can speak dog language will tell him that it is worth sitting on these hard sofas, and most of the time it is worth listening to one person bark, and it is good to stand up and bay together while someone is scratching on the teeth of a box. It is especially good to pet each other and to pass the treat of God, and oh, how we love that hot muddy water when we drink it together. And, we'll say, yes, dear doggie Calvin, we do find God in this box, as we hear over and over again, the stories of Jesus, "catching" the story from each other to renew our faith. Better yet, we find God in this box as we tell that old, old story in simple acts of kindness and inclusion, to all who pass our way, saying: "Jesus loves you. Every one of you. Come listen. Come follow. There is light in our darkness. God is with us.

1. Unleashed: The Wit and Wisdom of Calvin the Dog. Calvin T. Dog, Westminster John Knox Press (Louisville, Kentucky, 1998), 29. Translated by Chris Glaser, Illustrated by Jim Kelley.