

HEAR, LEARN, LIVE GOD’S WORD—LITMUS TEST
JOB 38:1-7; MARK 10:35-45
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THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

This past week, while on business at Auburn Seminary in New York, I saw the Bob Dylan exhibit at the Morgan Library and Museum. The show covered the first ten years of Dylan’s meteoric rise to fame after graduating from high school in Minnesota.

Dylan has been in the air recently. New books about his life and work are out. And mention of him as a long-shot for the Nobel Prize in literature. When you consider his influence and genius maybe the Nobel Prize is not far from the mark.

What the exhibit highlighted for me was the inability of anyone to put Bob Dylan in a box. Not his fans or management or record label or other performers. Though they all tried to squeeze him into categories of folk or rock or blues music, social protest, secular values, Christian faith—he defied them all. Part of it was Dylan himself, part of it was the age of non-conformity but most of it was the boxes were just too small.

Remember his song “All I Really Want to Do”? “I ain’t lookin’ to compete with you, beat or cheat or mistreat you, simplify you, classify you, deny, defy or crucify you. All I really want to do is, baby, be friends with you.” Dylan didn’t like boxes.

It’s human nature to put things in boxes. Then we can control them, keep the lid on if we want, take the lid off when we choose, store the thing away somewhere.

Management consultants talk about compartmentalizing: putting parts of your life in boxes so that they don’t interfere with one another. While this has benefits for efficiency on the job it has a downside: the notion that you can organize life like California Closets can organize your home.

What is fascinating about the Scripture readings today is that they blow the lid off the little boxes into which Job and the disciples try to confine God and Jesus.

You’d think we’d learn. Some of the greatest critics of Christianity in modern times have challenged the church on exactly the sin of downsizing God. Emerson said, “let me admonish you to refuse the good models, even those sacred in the imagination of men, and dare you to love God without mediator or veil.”^[i]

Or Nietzsche, “The Christian conception of God—God as god of the sick, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of the divine ever attained on earth...God degenerated into the contradiction of life, instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yes!”^[iii]

Crate training is great for puppies but at some point the puppy becomes an adult dog and is able to handle the freedom of the house. Have we been living in our childhood theological crates for too long?

I was talking with a young professional recently. She said it was hard for her to imagine having the ultimate responsibility her job was preparing her for.

I said not now, but that’s what her training program was designed to equip her to face someday. Is the church equipping us for bigger discipleship?

Putting our lives and God in a box does not lead to bigger discipleship. When James and John upstage the others by dividing cabinet posts they think will be theirs in Jesus' coming reign, Jesus doesn't throw them out on their ear he patiently tells them they don't know what they're talking about.

The point is, he says, the road to "glory" runs straight through the valley of suffering and death. Even to get to glory, one preacher says, much less to occupy the seats of authority and prominence, one cannot bypass the events of Good Friday and their implications.^[iii]

There are risks following Jesus. When the ten rebuke James and John for their ambition Jesus resists scolding them. He just says real leadership has to do with serving others not being served. You see, he expands their ideas of who he is and the life to which he calls them.

What the story reveals is that our neatly labeled boxes say more about us than about God or Jesus. Sometimes like James and John we see God or define God in terms that translate into comfort, status quo, and personal gain.

But we know what happens to James and John. They get to Jerusalem and things fall apart. The secret police show up after a sobering final meal with their leader. He is arrested outside the house; no charges, no Miranda Act; he's whisked away under guard. The next day there's a public trial; the man they'd hitched their star to is held before the crowd like a despicable criminal; the crowd shouts revenge.

It's all a terrible nightmare. When they start trying to square these experiences with what and who they thought Jesus was their heads start spinning. None of it makes sense. All they can do is run and hide.

Job is another example. As if some hurricane were blowing his life apart he loses everything. First the shrubs in the front yard, then the roof lifts off and flies away, finally the walls of his house crumble and collapse.

The next day like the survivor of a shipwreck, barely clinging to life, his four famous friends appear to sweep the scattered debris of Job's life into their theological dust bins.

But God speaks out of a whirlwind. I'd wager that most of us in this room have been there one way or another. We get to the point in our own lives where we say OK, I surrender. Life is unmanageable. I can't do it alone.

Actually, we're pretty close to being there on the international scene. An out of control war in Iraq, nuclear devices in the hands of angry, unpredictable dictators.

And at least one wing of each of the Abrahamic faiths—Christianity, Judaism and Islam—offer dangerously stern and rigid certainties to navigate these times.

A recent article someone sent me in *Time Magazine* said that Muslim extremists are not alone. The new Pope seems to represent the return to a more authoritarian form of Catholicism—emphasizing the tradition of papal infallibility. And U.S. Protestant Christianity preaches the adherence to a narrow, simplistic notion of Scriptural inerrancy. The attempts to box God into simple, nationalistic terms by some Christians, Muslims and Jews is reminiscent of James and John's ambitious grab for power.^[iv]

Andrew Sullivan, author of a new book entitled *The Conservative Soul* says this, he says, perhaps there is another spiritual alternative for our time. It affirms “if God is God, then God must, by definition, surpass our human understanding.

Yes, we have Scripture and reason and religious authority and our own spiritual experiences of the holy. But there is something we will never grasp, something we can never know. Because God is beyond our human categories, it follows that we cannot capture God for certain.

We cannot know with certainty that allows us to proclaim truth with a capital T. There will always be something that eludes us.^[v]

If you don't resort to putting God in a box in the first place you won't be searching for a new box when the whirlwind of a broken dream or illness or personal loss comes.

Rather you can let your trust in God lead you through the crisis. Not unlike the Amish community in eastern Pennsylvania a few weeks ago when a deranged gunman tragically killed defenseless children.

While the media tried to make sense out of this senseless act the Amish citizens of Nickel Mines, PA were oblivious to it all, their religion long ago having instructed them to forgo TVs, radios and other devices of modern mass communication.

Instead they quietly buried their little girls. Collected money for the families of the deceased, including the horrified, grieving wife and children of the murderer. They also invited that family to the funerals.^[vi]

If you were used to putting God in a box nothing would have prepared you to respond to those events the way that faithful Amish community responded.

Rather the measure, the litmus test of their faith began with surrender then led them to face the darkness of life, still trusting, still knowing death is not the final answer. And when the category five winds of life bore down on them their beacon and light was God's victory through Christ over death. Where else could such dignity in the wake of such loss come from?

There is little doubt that religion shapes world events these days because it shapes the lives of millions of people across the planet.

But the question this morning is how is our faith shaping us. Are we still cramming our personal lives and national issues into our own notion of who God is or what God should do or are we willing to give up packaging God at all and simply be led into the holy mystery.

Bob Dylan, after a life of major success, asked himself that question. Somewhere, someone introduced him to Jesus and he wrote a song about his life changing, “How was I to know/you'd be the one/to show me I was blinded/to show me I was gone/how weak was the foundation I was standing upon/shine your light, shine your light down on me.”^[vii]

That's not a bad prayer for any of us today. Shine your light, O God, shine down upon each one of us and upon this congregation so that we can face our darkness and the darkness of this world trusting in the hope and light of eternity. Amen.

[i] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson ed. Stephen E. Whicher, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960) 113.

[iii] F. Nietzsche, "The Antichrist," The Portable Nietzsche, Walter Kauffmann, ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1968) 585.

[iii] Walter Brueggemann, et. al. Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year B (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 556.

[iv] Andrew Sullivan, "When Not Seeing Is Believing," Time Magazine, October 9, 2006, 58.

[v] Sullivan, 60.

[vi] Bruce Kluger, "A glimpse of grace," USA Today, October 9, 2006.

[vii] Bob Dylan, "Precious Angel," from the CD "Slow Train Coming," 2003.