

Text: John 1: 29-39
Title: A Retail God in a Wholesale World
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In 1902 William James, a psychologist-turned-philosopher from Harvard, published a series of lectures concerning the nature and study of religion. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is one of those grand, dense, formative books of western intellectual history that I found impossible to read. But toward the end of this hefty tome there's a line that shows up on posters:

The God whom science recognizes must be a God of universal laws exclusively, a God who does a wholesale, not a retail business. He cannot accommodate his processes to the convenience of individuals

That's a substantive and unsettling claim.

God is a big box god – distant, impersonal, and immutable. God is Wal-Mart – not the shopkeeper on the corner whose face you recognize and whose name you know.

The “wholesale God” (Marcus Borg) is above, beyond, and behind our ideas of god. But the god who does a “retail business” is God with a face, God with a name, a god who is specific. A wholesale god is a mysterious, mushy, and vague deity; but a god who does retail knows our business and we know his.

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 can't be captured by the poet's lyric or the philosopher's ruminating. 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 from the rarified air of eternity, creation, and light, we're suddenly at the corner shop talking to the clerk behind the counter who's wearing a camel-hair shirt tucked into a leather belt, with breath that has a faint hint of locusts and honey....

Dear friends, with that quick turn the Gospel of John goes from wholesale to retail. And, no sooner have we met this shopkeeper and he's 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

And look, this “wholesale – retail” analogy is a playful, maybe crass, distinction that makes God a commodity and every church a local distributor. Hope is just a mom-n-pop-God-shop. But you get the drift. At issue is the move from wholesale to retail, from generic to name brand....

Because 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’s where it gets dicey and divisive.

Sandi and I have neighborhood friends we love. We’ve raised kids together, spent holidays together, danced at weddings and wept at losses together, and we get together every couple of weeks. To a person they’re thoroughly secular or lapsed Catholics. They believe there’s a god but don’t go to church or practice religion in any noticeable way. And, they’re always hoping to make it into a sermon.

We recently got into a discussion about who gets into heaven. I told them that those decisions are above my pay grade, but they were clear that there’s some qualifying standard of goodness. Child molesters and serial killers are out, and if you’re not good enough in the first go-round you can work out your issues in purgatory and then get your ticket punched. But mostly, there was a vague notion that being a good person gets you into heaven.

They like the idea of a big box god.
They may even like Jesus.
But here’s where things get difficult....

When John sees Jesus coming, he calls him “the Lamb of God.” And that proclamation comes with all sorts of implications about the nature of God and what it means to be human.

Consider....

Oddly enough, this is the only time in scripture where that phrase is used. No Old Testament prophet refers to God's Chosen One as "the Lamb of God" and no New Testament writer will repeat it. Even in the Book of Revelation, "the Lamb of God" is not used.

So, of course, there’s scholarly debate about what John meant by this designation. The most obvious choice is to connect it to the Passover lamb, but even that’s disputed. There are other ideas scattered about in the Old Testament, because it seems unlikely that John would have made up a whole new name on the spot.

And, linking God to a lamb is also odd.

Lambs were often a symbol of gentleness, vulnerability, and stupidity, so hardly the description that would fit a god. Meek, slow, and the sacrificial doesn't scream, "Big box God."

However! The kicker is John adding that this particular lamb-like character would "take away the sins of the world."

Because that information, introduced in this introduction, means there's some manner of transaction that impacts the moral order of creation. And therefore, this wholesale God now finds expression as a hapless lamb being led to the butcher's block. 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.

Therein lies the rub....

In his opening sales pitch, John foreshadows Jesus as an expression of God who is destined to die – and that death would "take away" our sin.

For our neighborhood friends God being poured out in a particular man is a stretch; but that man being sacrificed to make things right with God is too much to take. Or, that construct of reality is too hard to believe....

It's more sensible to rely on the comfort of a distant deity tucked away in a big box. It's easier, less demanding, and more reasonable to just be a good person. There's a calculus of sin and salvation embedded in this announcement of John that takes some acceptance, some getting used to, some humility, some witness.....

Part of what William James suggests in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is that the study of religion shouldn't be limited to an analysis of text, doctrine, and theological system. Rather, to understand religion you need to examine the experience and the witness of the individual. Don't just look at what religions claim, look at the experience of people.

And therefore, 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*

And 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*

That is to say that biblical faith is not only the retail expression of a wholesale god, but there's also the witness of how we experience God in Christ. Biblical faith bears witness to our encounter with, or our story of Jesus.

The gospels don't simply announce that Jesus came of God, but they also recognize a configuration of creation, wherein being a good person doesn't appear to matter all that much. Being saved by the Lamb of God supersedes ignorance and indifference and grace trumps effort. Being good enough is not a part of a biblical cosmology....

We're gathered in the testimony that God took expression in a specific time, specific place, and in a specific person. We're gathered to testify that the will and way of God is found in Jesus. And in that we bear witness to the mystery that in the life and death of Jesus we are made right with God.

I don't need a big box God.

I need a God who is

present – not distant,

distinct – not vague,

personal – not ethereal.

I need a God with a face and name.

I need a God who saves me from myself.

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

Amen.