

CHRISTMAS – December 25, 2010
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The Advent wreath is once again stored away; that four-week season of preparation and anticipation has come to an end. Tonight/today we celebrate what we have been preparing for: the birth of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God and Son of Mary—the Savior of the world. What a joy to celebrate this great feast with all of you! I wish for all of you a truly blessed Christmas; may the grace, truth, love and joy of Jesus be with you and all your loved ones in this holy season, in 2011, and always.

This holy feast gives us a great opportunity to reflect again on a question I have raised with you before, and that is: what is your image of God? Or, to narrow the focus a bit, how do you think God ought to act? On one level, I suspect we would all like God to do what we want, when we want it, and we would probably like to tell God just how he ought to do it. In other words, we like to put God in a box of our own design. We may think of God as a sort of divine eBay or vending machine where, instead of clicking on the item we want or “insert-coin-push-button”, we plug in our prayer and expect God to answer it just as we want. Or, to use a more seasonal image, we may see God as a glorified Santa Claus: we send him a letter and tell him what we want, and then expect to get it. We have all seen and enjoyed children’s letters to Santa; I was recently reminded of some of my favorites:

--one little girl wrote: “Dear Santa Claus—My mother needs a new stove. The stove she got don’t cook so good.”

--then there was Bruce: “Dear Santa Claus—I am not going to write to you this Xmas. When I know what I want I will send you a fax.” Santa is much more high-tech than he was when I was a boy...

--finally, a reminder from Susan that what we ask for doesn’t always work out according to plan: “Santa Claus—Last Xmas I asked you for a baby brother. This Xmas I want you to take him back.”

Of course, we should bring our needs and prayers to God—Jesus is clear about that, and so is the rest of Sacred Scripture. But we also know that we cannot force God’s hand—we cannot box him in and require him to do precisely what we ask.

But we can be tempted to put God in a box in other ways as well. This past summer I had a chance to visit with a young man now in college who I had come to know in a prior parish assignment (I’ll call him Adam; it is not his real name). He was raised in a solid, loving Catholic home and had a thorough education in Catholic schools. Adam is a fine young man, very intelligent and personable, but has come to have serious questions and even doubts about God and his faith. He is an engineering major and approaches life from a very highly scientific and analytical way—and thus believes that science can explain and prove (or disprove) everything. Adam accepts that there may be a God—but if there is, he certainly does not act in any personal way in our lives and in our world. He especially rejects the existence of miracles and said explicitly that he would not want a God who interferes with the laws of science and nature.

In other words, Adam has put God in a box and, moreover, he has determined the size and shape of that box and how God ought to act within the confines of that box. Now, please do not get the idea that I am singling Adam out here—aren’t we all tempted in our own ways to do the same thing? “God, I’ll do this for you so that you will do that for me.” Or: “I think you ought to do this or prevent that from happening...so just make sure it turns out that way.” But a moment’s reflection helps us realize that God is not and cannot be limited to what we think is fitting or to how we think he ought to act. By the very nature of God—divine in nature, infinite in power, and unlimited in love—he thinks and acts outside the box of our limited and necessarily short-sighted expectations.

Think about the miracle of creation. Before anything else ever existed, the one God lived with and in perfect and self-sufficient communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But then, because he wanted to love even more abundantly and powerfully, he created the whole universe...with man, made in God's own image and likeness, at the peak of that creation. Who can comprehend the power of God to create everything out of nothing through the mere utterance of the divine word? Consider further the tragedy of sin and death entering the world. God could have left humanity eternally separated from him—but God, who is love, did not just let us go. Rather, he put into action his plan for our reconciliation with him. And, in the fullness of time, he did so in a most incomprehensible way: by becoming one of us in that child miraculously conceived in Mary's womb and born in that Bethlehem manger. But even there it did not stop: that child would grow up to proclaim God's kingdom, to suffer and die on a cross and to rise from the dead. What's more, Jesus remains present to us concretely and tangibly even after his ascension into heaven through the Church he established on the rock of St. Peter and through the sacraments—especially the Eucharist by which Jesus wishes to nourish us with his Body and Blood every Sunday and indeed every other day as well. Talk about thinking and working outside the box! God creates, loves, redeems and saves us in ways we cannot comprehend and that we surely would never have been able to think of ourselves. And this great feast of Christmas is a most powerful and consoling reminder of this truth.

This is especially important for us to remember when confronting the struggles and crises of life, when we wonder if God has abandoned us or if he really cares anything for us—things like a serious illness, the death of a loved one, losing one's job, a troubled or broken marriage, family or other relationship. "I did all the right things, I prayed, I went to church—but these bad things happened anyway. Where was God? Why did he do this to me?"

These are very natural and understandable thoughts, but here too we must remember that God is so much bigger and loving and powerful than we could ever imagine. Remember all that God has already done, all the countless ways God has acted outside the box on our behalf—especially in the Incarnation of his co-eternal Son who became flesh and lived among us. Remember again what Jesus did and did when he grew up—preaching the need for repentance, authenticating his message by the miracles he performed, dying on the Cross and rising from the dead in eternal triumph.

Do you really think that the God who accomplished all these outside-the-box incomprehensible things—and who did so because of his personal and passionate love for you—will not see you through whatever crosses you have to bear, no matter how heavy? Just because we cannot fully grasp what God has done does not mean God cannot do it—his work of creation and redemption is proof positive of that. Likewise, just because we cannot see how our own struggles will be resolved does not mean that God cannot bring us through. He can and he does—and it happens all the time. I know that reality in my own life and I have seen it happen over and over again in the lives of so many others.

I forget many things these days, but I will always remember what one of my seminary professors said in a spirituality class one day: she said: "don't box God in!" The more we give up our preconceived and limited notions of what God should do, the more we will be open to the awe and wonder of our God who does such amazing, unexpected, "outside-the-box" things for us. All thanks and praise to God who gives us the ultimate gift of his Son now at Christmas and every other day of our lives as well. Come—let us continue to adore him.