

Carry-on Baggage Only
God

Exodus 20:2; Isaiah 43:1-6

Call to Worship

Years ago, someone who was pretty cynical about Christianity said to me, “Christians should stop worrying about what they don’t know, and start practicing what they do know.” He did not mean it kindly. I was working at a seminary at a time, and he knew that more knowledge was what we were all about. But that one sentence has stayed with me, and formed more follow-up thoughts in me than that guy will ever know.

Today we begin a new series of worship and sermons called *Carry-on Baggage Only*. The idea is often we lug around with us big suitcases full of theological questions, and spiritual dilemmas, and lists of things we think we have to get right before we can live the kind of joyful, light-hearted, self-releasing life that God is inviting us to.

We are checking bags, paying extra baggage fees for oversized luggage, when really, all we need is what will fit in in the luggage compartment over our heads. Maybe even under the seat in front of us.

Over the next four weeks we will explore together four beliefs—just four—that might be enough to take with you, no matter where you are traveling.

Similar thoughts, in a poem called *Instructions*, by Sheri Hostetler:

Give up the world; give up self; finally, give up God.
Find God in rhododendrons and rocks,
passers-by, your cat.
Pare your beliefs, your absolutes.
Make it simple; make it clean.
Only carry-on luggage allowed.
Examine all you have
with a loving and critical eye, then
throw away some more.
Repeat. Repeat.
Keep this and only this:
what your heart beats loudly for
what feels heavy and full in your gut.
There will only be one or two
things you will keep,
and they will fit lightly
in your pocket.

May it be so for us.

Sermon

God is love. That's all you need to know. The end.

You could say that in a worship series that's about carrying with us only the most essential beliefs—

...when I am suggesting that our faith tends to get unnecessarily cluttered, weighed down by a whole bunch of complex theology that we don't really need to carry around with us—

...when I'm preaching a sermon that takes a big question like "What do you believe about God?" and tries to fold it (or roll it, depending on your luggage packing strategy) into a carry-on bag—

...I should say 'God loves you to the moon and back, and there is nothing you can do to change that,' and then just say 'Amen,' and sit down.

And that very short sermon would be true. It might even be enough. But I've always wanted something more. Even if it takes a little more space in my bag, I want to know something more about who God is. I want to know what God's love looks like in a world that is full of gray tones and realities that don't always look like my picture of love.

All people, in all of human history, have had some concept of God, some explanation of the universe that is above and outside of human life. It's not belief in the existence of God that sets people of faith apart from anyone else in human history. It's the kind of God we choose to believe in.

About twenty years ago, as the millennium turned, some Christian scholars hosted a conference in which they asked a bunch of smart people—from many different religious traditions—to talk about what God might look like at this age. 2,000 wasn't God's age, of course—but it was roughly Christianity's age, and it seemed like a good time to ask the question. I love the whole book that came out of that conference, but it was the voice of one speaker—Sister Joan Chittister, who's one of those rabble-rousing Catholic nuns, whose picture of God stays with me. Each of us, Sister Joan said, carries with us a private God—a face that shapes our demeanor, our way of being in the world. A story that gets mirrored in our own lives.

And it's there long before we make any conscious decision about pursuing a religious path. Most of us don't *decide* on our image of God, she says. We discover it, because that picture has been steadily constructed over a lifetime of experiences. So it's buried deep in our unconscious self, invisible most of the time. It takes self-reflection, mining our own soul, to find and identify the God that motivates us and shapes our attitudes.

Thinking about this, identifying the God we believe in, matters, because whether we're intentional about it or not, what we believe about God goes everywhere with us. All through our lives we are growing into the image of the God that's inside of us. The God we believe in will determine a lot of things about how we live.

Let me see if I can give you some concrete examples of how this works. At that conference in 2000, Sister Joan said, *There was a time in my life when I walked around feeling a sort of cosmic loneliness. My attitude during that time, about lots of things was some version of Why bother? Who cares, anyway? I realize now, she said later, that that was a time when I imagined that*

God was a sort of Holy Nothingness—not a person, but more like an abstract philosophical question that didn't ask anything of me—not conviction, or attachment, not even much interest.

The distance she felt from her God echoed in her remove from other people. It showed in her reluctance to engage in the world. It's often true, I think, that our image of God is visible in the way we live, the ways we respond to the things that happen to us.

If I'm most sure that God exists when traffic lights turn green on the days I'm running late, or when the perfect parking space opens up, maybe the God I'm waiting to see is a magician.

If I am surprised when things don't go my way, if I feel like life constantly treats me or someone I love unfairly, then maybe I've unconsciously imagined God as a sort of vending machine that's supposed to exchange potato chips for the right change, or an insurance provider whose premiums I'm paying with my prayers, or my attendance at church, or my good behavior.

If my first inclination toward someone who is different from me is to judge them, if I silently think that good people are the ones who act by the same rules that govern my life, maybe it's because deep down, my God is a harsh judge...of me too.

When I work myself into a frazzle, as if nothing is more important than exceeding my professional goals; when our expectations say to our children that they must not only do well in school, but excel at everything, all the time, then maybe it's because my God expects that of me. Maybe no matter what God I say I believe in, deep down I think that everything good that happens to me in life will come only when I've earned it. Maybe I believe in a God who has expectations of me, but offers me no grace.

These are small gods—too small. We would never say this is what we believe in. But what do our lives say?

The God we really believe in is revealed by the way we live. This is true for everyone. But only honest, self-reflective people can admit it. The writer Anne Lamott says: I know that when God starts hating the same people I hate, I've probably remade God in my own image.

I've been thinking this weekend about one more way our lives—our life together—might suggest that we believe in a smaller God than we think we do.

Just this last Friday, there was another, horrific shooting in Virginia Beach. A disgruntled city employee walked into a public building and, with guns that carried the power of an army, he shot dozens of people—randomly. It took a police force to stop him. 13 people died; many more were injured. Shootings like this don't even surprise us any more. It wasn't the first time this happened this year. It wasn't even the first time this week. It's awful. We all agree about that, I think. No one wants things like this to happen. No one wants them to happen again. *And* we act as though there is nothing we can do to stop this evil. As if acts of human violence were *acts of God*—like we used to think of floods and hurricanes before we knew about climate change. Like these things are completely beyond our control. Bigger than anything we humans could possibly do to set things right. For so many human problems—gun violence, over-use of

the earth, even foreign powers interfering in our elections—we do not insist on change. We don't even resist very strenuously. What our actions say is that we have surrendered. That we are powerless in the face of human actions that are just so wrong.

What does that say about the God we believe in, the God in whose image we are created?

That God too is powerless?

That God is too restrained to resist evil?

Or too far away to notice it?

That the God who used to send prophets to stand up to empires has lost his mojo?

That's not the God whose stories our tradition tells.

It is not the God I want to believe in.

It's not the God I want my life to reflect.

That God is too small.

Sister Joan said, 'Over years of thoughtfulness about my faith, my God has grown infinitely larger.' Bobby Jo Valentine said something similar sometime this last year, and it's a thought that I often come back to and wonder about. He said, life is like a funnel. We often try to squeeze God down into the small part, but the real God resides at the large end of the funnel. God is bigger: more powerful, more inclusive, more open-hearted than we thought or imagined—always. If our ideas about God push us toward the smaller end of the funnel—that the world is limited by our narrow perspective, that we are confined to the way things are, sure that anything new is impossible—then maybe we've lost sight of who God really is.

I'm really intrigued by this image. In the human world, what comes into a funnel always runs down toward the narrow end. But maybe in the Kingdom of God, movement is toward the bigger end. Maybe that's one more way in which God's ways are upside down from ours.

The thing about God is that who God is doesn't depend on what we think of God, or what we believe. If our image of God is too small, we limit ourselves—our power, our love, the grace we notice and carry around with us. We can shrink ourselves right out of the story God is still writing, right now—the story of a wide inclusive love, an infinite energy for justice, goodness as the most powerful force in the world. That story is going to get written, in our lives or in some other way. If I'm not a character in that story, God will find another way.

But I'm pretty sure that's the story I want to be part of.

Maybe it is enough to say that God is love. Not because it's soft and fuzzy and makes us feel good, but because love is the ultimate form of goodness, and hope, and power. Because love is infinitely big. Because love is the only thing big enough to hold the fullness of God.

And even the smallest carry-on bag is big enough to hold that.