

Dr. Seuss!: Green Eggs and Ham

Ezekiel 1:1-21

Acts 10: 9-23

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I. Introduction

On September 24th last year, Senator “Tank” Ted Cruz was working hard to maintain what would become a 21-hour filibuster, thank you, brain-lock. Now, if I was planning a filibuster I might pick something like *Moby Dick* to read from or the Bible, there’s some good material there.

Senator Cruz picked *Green Eggs and Ham*, interestingly. It may have been an indication of somebody’s reading level in that chamber, I don’t know. But it’s an interesting choice and it had the benefit, at least, of being a book that everybody knew because it’s one of the most popular children’s books ever published.

Green Eggs and Ham was actually the result of a bet that Bennett Surf, who was the founder of Random House Publishing, made with one of his writers, Theodore Seuss Geisel. Ted Geisel or Dr. Seuss had turned the world of early childhood reading on its head just a few years before, in 1957, with the publication of a book called *The Cat in the Hat*. In a world of children’s reading that was dominated in those years by books about *Dick and Jane*, *The Cat in the Hat* went off like a bombshell and really swept the nation with a new vision of what teaching our children to read could be like.

Dr. Seuss had written that book using just 225 words. And Bennett Surf made him a \$50 bet that he couldn't write a publishable children's book using just 50 words. And *Green Eggs and Ham* was the result of that bet.

We're spending the month of January reflecting on some of the wonderful moral teachings of this sage that we all know as Dr. Seuss. We started off last week reflecting a little bit on *The Grinch* and are continuing now with this wonderful story of *Green Eggs and Ham*, the essence of which is fairly straightforward stuff. It's about the importance of being willing to try things in a different way. To try things that are new and that we're not familiar with, to get outside of our boxes and engage the world in some different ways.

II. Outside the Box (with a Fox?)

I don't actually usually tell you the headings on my sermon outline because they're not particularly important. I've entitled this one *Outside the Box with the Fox*. These are the ways I keep myself entertained while I'm preaching to you.

So, we have spent a lot of time as a congregation sort of working with this idea of how do we get outside of our boxes and engage the world in some different ways. We did this several years ago when we became a reconciling congregation. We've done it a couple of points since then as we become a broader and broader merged congregation with Wesley and St. Luke's. So we spend a bit of time on this issue but *Green Eggs and Ham* has, I think, some helpful pieces to offer us as we continue that ongoing journey. And it's ongoing, of course, because we hate change. We just do. Everybody hates change and we hate it particularly in the church, right?

The line that most pastors complain about most often is the one that they hear on an ongoing basis which is -- you know it, right? "We've never done it that way before." This is the church's mantra, "We've never done it that way before."

And so, the process of getting outside of our box and engaging the world in some different ways is an ongoing journey for us. The irony, of course being, we can't get away from change. It is the one constant in our life. And those of you who are philosophy majors -- and there was a lot of us here -- we remember reading Heraclitus saying, "You can't step into the same river two times, right?" Because once you do it again, it's a different river.

We are always in a process of change and while we want to understand God as immovable and immutable and unchanging, we also talk about God being a living God and if God is a living God, God is always seeking to engage us where we are. That is always in a different place which means, of necessity, God is going to engage us in some different ways.

Our passage from Ezekiel is actually about exactly the same thing. I know it's a very confusing passage but we learned right at the very beginning that Ezekiel is of a priestly family and he's just turned 30 years old which is the year in which he would have been consecrated or ordained a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. But he's not in Jerusalem and there is no temple. He's an exile in Babylon because the Babylonians have torn Jerusalem down and burned the temple. So there is no temple for him to be a priest in. And you can sort of envision him mourning that on his 30th year, the year

that he would have been able to go into the Holy of Holies and offer the sacrifices. It's not there anymore. And as far as he knows it's never going to be there again.

So, he's reflecting on that when he is given this wondrous vision from God, which is filled with very obtuse and obscure images but all of those -- and I'm not going to take the time to unpack them all -- but all of them are growing out of temple worship. The repeated references you heard to the cherubim's wings touching each other's -- the tips of the other -- is a very explicit reference to the Ark of the Covenant where the tips of those angels' wings touch each other and where Moses was told by God that that's where the divine presence would be and that's where the divine presence would lead him.

And now that place is gone. So this vision that Ezekiel has is what would theologians call "theophany", it's a sighting, a revelation of God, but it's not in the temple. It's taking that imagery of the art and then literally as you've heard read, putting it on wheels. These cherubims are riding on wheels that take them any place that the spirit wants them to go.

And the message there is a wonderful, powerful, hope-filled one for Ezekiel because what God is telling Ezekiel is, "It doesn't matter that you're in exile in Babylon. I'm going to be there with you," so that Ezekiel as a priest doesn't know exactly how he's going to be living out the priesthood in this place but he knows that God is still there and that his role as a priest is still a crucial one. He now just has to figure out what that looks like in this new place.

Likewise, in this passage from Acts that we have touched on as a couple of points over the last few years, we have this very powerful image that Peter receives from God. Peter, of course, is a very devout, very upstanding, upright observer of Jewish law and he's right at this critical point in the life of the early church in which the Good News is being spread to the Gentiles, people he doesn't know how to engage or encounter. And so God gives him this revelation of dropping down in front of him all of these un-kosher animals to eat and saying, "Eat." And Peter as a good observant Jew would do said, "No, I can't eat that stuff. That's been forbidden." And God says, "What I have called clean don't call unclean." It's a very powerful image of the evolving nature of divine revelation.

We had a wonderful session here at church on Wednesday night led by Rabbi Aaron Miller from the Washington Hebrew Congregation talking to us about the Talmud. And he talked at some lengths about this whole idea of the written Torah and the oral Torah. The written Torah being the Torah that is written down, is locked, is unchanging. But then the oral Torah being how we, through our conversation and discernment as a community, figure out what that means in a new context in a new world. And the oral Torah, that ongoing process of discernment and revelation has the same authority as the written words. So again, there's this invitation to not let ourselves get locked into the same old way of doing things but to be looking for the new places and the new revelations that God is seeking to share with us.

III. Lessons from Sam-I-Am

So, I think that *Green Eggs and Ham* has some very helpful suggestions to offer us in that process. I was reading *Green Eggs and Ham* the other day as a part of my always thoroughgoing research as I prepare to preach for you all. And Julia walked down into the library and said, "What are you doing?" "Well, I'm reading *Green Eggs and Ham*." And she comes over and is looking over my shoulder. I was struck at the very beginning of the story by the first words where the narrator, whose name actually we never know, starts off saying, "That's Sam-I-Am, that's Sam-I-Am. I do not like that Sam-I-Am." Well, that's an odd place to start a story, right? So, I said to Julia, I said, "Why doesn't he like Sam-I-Am? I mean, what has Sam-I-Am done to him?" And Julia says, "Well Sam interrupted him."

And when you look at the picture the guy is sitting in his chair reading and Sam-I-Am, of course, is running right in front, back and forth on top of some camel-like thing with this sign and Julia appropriately said, "Well, Sam has interrupted him and of course he's going to be mad."

And that was a very helpful insight for me because, of course, that is how I always respond when I'm interrupted, right? Amen?

So, I get that. We sort of get in our zone, in our structure that whether I'm reading or working on a project – and I suspect some of you may be like this, also -- we don't like being interrupted, right? And we also get mad at the person who interrupts us and therefore, whatever idea of the person who interrupted us is bringing we're not going to like. We just know that.

And the reality, of course, is that God is always interrupting us. That's the only way God knows how to get our attention because otherwise, we're locked into our plan and we're not open to some new direction or new insight that God may want to share with us. So, God's only option is to interrupt us through Sam-I-Am or whoever. And part of the message there I think is how do we maintain some openness in the face of being interrupted? How do we start to shift the way we think to instead of resenting the interruptions, beginning to look for where God might be in those interruptions. So that if we are deeply engrossed in a book and some iteration of Sam-I-Am is running back and forth in front of us, calling for attention, maybe there's an invitation there that God wants us to pay attention to. If we are deeply enmeshed in a project at work and one of our colleagues comes and interrupts us in the middle of that, maybe, instead of reacting with hostility or tired resignation, we look for where God might be inviting us to take a different direction in whatever is going on because life, dear friends, is what happens in between our planning stages, right? So, how do we maintain some openness to where those interruptions may be leading us?

Sam, of course, himself also offers us a helpful word because if we are to be changed agents in the world, one of the things that Sam reminds us of is the importance of persistence, right? We work in systems that are highly resistant to change, we work with people who don't like change and don't want to be changed. And Sam models, I think very helpfully, the power of persistence. Sam is trying to get the narrator to try green eggs and ham in whatever way possible. In the house with the mouse, in a car, in a boat, he explores every single option in this relentless quest to have the narrator try green eggs and ham and there's a helpful word for us there.

As you all know one of my favorite books is a book by psychologist Ed Friedman called *Failure of Nerve* which is subtitled *Leadership in the Age of Anxiety*. He spends chapters exploring how people avoid engaging change and avoid engaging risks. We collect data endlessly before we are willing to make decisions. We raise empathy to a level of creating a system that is immobile because we don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. All of these are techniques that we use to avoid change and what Sam models for us is the power of relentless persistence in helping systems change.

So, for us, whether that's a process of forcing our church or denomination to change its stands on marriage equality or whether it's us working with the city to get Parkway Overlook redeveloped as affordable housing. None of that stuff is going to happen easily. So that when we pick a cause like that, either of those or any of the others that we have chosen to focus our time on, we've got to know from the start that we're in for the long haul. It's the only way we create change in the world.

The last piece I want to suggest actually grows out of the way Ted Geisel wrote this book, which is the power of limited resources. Ted Geisel had 50 words to work with and he had to create a creative and publishable story. And I think that's a helpful model, too, because often when we are seeking to engage change, the thing that becomes a barrier for us is we don't have enough time, right? We don't have enough money; we don't have what we need to make the change. And what *Green Eggs and Ham* models for us is that you can do some unbelievably creative stuff with very limited resources and in fact maybe, limited resources are a blessing because they force us to be creative in some ways that we might not have been prepared to be creative.

If you're five-foot-seven and you're Spud Webb and you're going up against Dr. J -- I'm dating myself.... You've got to figure out creatively how you're going to engage that problem, right? If you are Steve Jobs and you're going up against Microsoft, you've got to bring some significant creativity to what you're doing if you're going to engage in that process of changing the computer world.

Limited resources force us to be creative in some wondrous and life-giving ways. Time is a resource and I will tell you quite honestly that if I didn't have to preach every Sunday morning, I would never have written a sermon in my life because I'd just endlessly refine it. Time constraints are a gift. They force us to bring creativity and structure to the problems that we are called to solve.

IV. Conclusion

So Ted Geisel, obviously, won his \$50 and in that process continued changing the world of early childhood education with 50 words that have shaped, now, generations of children. And in that process, I think, models for us and calls us to continue the process of engaging the world in the journey of life-giving change.

So, thank you. Thank you, Sam-I-Am.

Amen.