

September 13, 2015
The National Presbyterian Church
Basic Christianity: "God Are You There?"
Psalm 19:1-6; Romans 1:18-25

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In our sermons through the month of September we're looking together at four words which lie at the foundation of the basis of the Christian faith.

- One of those words we looked at last week is the word "Jesus." Not just a word, of course, but a person: Jesus clearly lies at the foundation of our faith as Christians.
- Another word which lies at the foundation of our faith that we will look at next week is the word "Bible." In our sanctuary this whole pulpit is built around this platform so that the Bible can be read and proclaimed central to our faith. The word Bible.
- A couple of weeks away from now I want us to look at a theological word: The word "salvation." What is it that we need in life that God provides? Well, the answer is "salvation"! . . . but we need to know what it means. So we'll explore the meaning of the word salvation.

Today, the word I want us to focus on is perhaps even more basic than any of these: and that is the word "God!" Without God none of the rest adds up to much whether it's Jesus or the Bible or salvation. God is fundamental, foundational, basic to everything and not just the word of course, but the person of God; the personal nature of the God that we believe in.

This morning I want us to think about reasons for believing and reasons for not believing in God. I trust that we will lean on the side of believing today (!). The topic is particularly timely in the light of a short article that appeared in yesterday's Washington Post. Some of you may have seen this article the headline read like this: *There Are More Atheists And Agnostics Entering Harvard Than Protestants And Catholics*. This year in the entering class there are more atheists and agnostics entering Harvard than Protestants and Catholics for the first time.

Apparently a poll was conducted (by the Harvard Crimson) of the university's entering class. The poll showed that Catholics and Protestants declined by over 8% as a proportion or percentage of the class in two years down to 34%. Other religious traditions stayed pretty much the same.

But the stunning information indicated by the poll was this: that the percentage of agnostics and atheists was three times the national average; in the incoming class two years ago the percentage of that category (atheists and agnostics) was 32.4% but it grew a year ago to 35.6% in that entering class and this year's entering class the percentage increased to 37.9%, a 5.5%

increase in two years. Within this group, just under 21% said they were agnostic; they didn't really know if they believed in God or not and just more than 16% said quite clearly oh no, I don't believe in God I'm an atheist.

I share these statistics because they indicate that lots of people, a growing number, are bolder to proclaim that they don't believe in anything than they used to be. It's hard to tell exactly if the numbers of atheists/agnostics is growing or simply the willingness to admit it. There's certainly less and less social pressure against saying that one is an atheist or agnostic. What can be said with certainty, however, is that a growing number of educated intelligent young people within our society are asking the most basic question of all about God: Is there a god? God, are you there? And while large numbers still answer by saying yes, increasing numbers are answering by saying "mm, no!" Or, "Not so sure."

Interestingly the Bible never really argues for the existence of God except to say that the very existence of creation itself, the created world, the material world points beyond itself to one who made it. The creation points back to a creator.

- The Book of Genesis begins with the words "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*"! In the beginning God . . . the opening statement of the whole of the Bible: In the beginning God. A statement, not an argument.
- And then our Scripture today, from Psalm 19: "*The heavens declare the glory of God. There's no speech, there are no words but their voice, goes out to all the Earth.*" That is, God is proclaimed in the things that God has made.

I would have to admit that I find that this linkage with creation to be convincing: it seems to me that the creation does point to One who is before and behind it – God. But I'd also have to admit that for many people today this linkage is not as convincing as it is to me. There are other arguments in their minds, other thoughts in their minds pointing them in a different direction. And as Christians we need to know and think about the ideas that influence those who move in this other direction, away from God.

I. THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN WITNESS. One reason, for example, given for not believing in God has to do, unfortunately, with people like you and me! People look at those of us who say we believe, they look at our lives and say, "*There's nothing in you that I want. I'm not sure that I find your life compelling. You say that God is at the center of your life, but I do not see much evidence of that, and sometimes I see evidence which points in the other direction.*" This should make us shudder. And beyond the personal level it can get worse! The bigger picture involves religious wars in history, and hypocrisy in general. They look at the tussle between Catholics and Protestants, or, in the last couple of decades, the tussle between Shia and Sunni. They look to the history of the Crusades, and to Jihad; and to the fear among some who claim to be believers, the fear of the intellect, caused often by the rise of science, seeing these things as being opposed to God. They hear about fights within churches and they see and hear and at times experience sexual scandal that is horrific. And they say, "I don't want anything to do with that."

All of these things when you put them together make me at times, and perhaps you, and certainly other people, say at times: *“Isn’t it any wonder that large numbers of people drive by churches without turning their heads at all these days. They have no time for organized religion, and no time for the God behind that religion either.”*

And Jesus himself would say that they actually have a point. He said to his disciples before he left them (see John 13) that it would be because of their behavior, his disciples’ behavior, that people would come to believe in him. *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another.”* In other words, “Your behavior matters! It is part of the evidence which points to my importance, and to the existence of the God whose Son I am. That you love each other.”

Is this what people see when they look at the lives of those who are Christian believers? The evidence is that that is not there as much as it ought to be. Now that should make us think about our lives and our witness and I hope it does. The truth is that that’s part of the argument against God. Not the whole argument but part of it: the picture of those who believe is not always a pretty picture.

What I want to add though this morning (and I’m going to do this two or three times in different ways) is the comment that the other side of the coin also is true. That is, while I lament the fact that my life (and Christian history!) is not better than it ought to be, on the other side of the coin in the other camp there are problems as well. This does not justify the weakness of my faith and witness, but it sometimes gets left out of the discussion when it needs to be part of the discussion: sometimes the argument against God is so one-sided that we forget there are two sides of the coin.

Let me put it like this: for those who are believers in atheism, for those who believe ideologies which are atheistic, behavior in recent history has not been all that good either! In fact at times it’s been worse than ours. Christopher Hitchens in his book, God is not Great (Chapter 17) at least has the courage to admit this (even if he doesn’t place much stock in it!). Look back at the 20th Century in particular, at atheistic or secular ideologies, and see all the havoc and death and suffering caused by them. Think of Hitler and Stalin and Mao Tse Tung and Pol Pot. Put these characters and their philosophies together and it’s not hard to see that far more damage to human kind has been done by them and their kind to humankind than by those who name the name of God. You add to that of course the destructive power of tribalism and of greed which have no necessary religious boundaries (in fact some religious wars can be seen more basically as tribal wars), and the picture on the other side is really not a great picture either.

All I want to point out is this: that there is a blaming game going on in our world just now and *almost all the blame goes in one direction*: against those who believe. But if you want to look statistically at what’s going on – it’s on both sides: we’re all flawed, we’re all sinners. That reality doesn’t justify our poor behavior, but it is only fair to say that the bigger context is important too. Public arguments today are notoriously one-sided.

So: Why do people reject belief? Well, the witness of believers matters: it isn't and hasn't been all that it ought to be. We believers need to be in prayer about that. Beyond that, of course many people don't believe because of another issue: the age old question of the problem of evil; because of the very existence of evil in this world.

II. THE PROBLEM OF EVIL. You don't have to look too far to see that evil is a reality in this world. Evil and injustice and tragedy and war: whether it comes from believers or from unbelievers, from individuals or from organizations or from nations or from the world of nature or from some hellish combination of all of these things put together.

So we look at the Middle East for example, and we think of the turmoil in Syria. We may well think in particular in the past ten days or so of one picture that has gone viral of a little boy fleeing from Syria with his family who drowned. Three years of age and the picture seen around the world of this little boy's body being carried from a beach in Turkey having drowned when a 15 foot boat capsized. He drowned, his mother drowned, his brother drowned. The only one who survived was his father. [<http://www.wsj.com/articles/at-least-12-syrian-migrants-including-eight-children-drown-off-turkish-coast-1441213565>]

Quite naturally, there are some people who would look at this situation and say "How can you believe? How can you believe in God in the face of such tragedy and in the face of such evil when these things are so rampant?" And this is a real problem. In fact, it's a real problem, most especially for those of us who believe not just in a god-in-general, but in the Christian God, the God described for us in the pages of scripture in particular.

Let me put it this way. There is no "problem of evil" if there is no god. If there were no god then we might expect the world to be a mixture of good and evil, or even purely of evil (from our perspective). Or, there is no "problem of evil" if the god we believe in is pretty weak or evil or arbitrary, and is therefore either not in control of things, or doesn't care much about the world. Rather, the "problem of evil" exists only when you believe that God is in control of things and that this God has a passion for justice and love, and you put these things together and that's when you say "so how come so much evil in the world?" That's when you have a problem. And so some people discuss -- or experience in their own lives -- problem and they say "Forget it. I have no time for this God at all; there's too much of a disconnect."

Obviously I think that there are some good explanations for the problem of evil. I certainly don't have time to go into any depth with them this morning -- except for one foray, mention of one way to understand the presence and reality of evil that might provide some food for thought. Could it be that the existence of evil has to do with something really positive? With God's positive passion for you and me? With God's passion to make us in his image? With God's passion to make us creatures who are not just puppets on a string but who have real choice?

That is, if God makes us and we have real choice, then that real choice ultimately is the ability to choose for God -- or against God. Right? To choose good -- or to choose what is not so

good: evil! So that the very existence of choice points almost inevitably to the possibility that evil might or even must be allowed to exist.

To turn things around: if God had chosen not to give us choice, had made us puppets on a string, there'd be no problem with evil: we'd always do the right thing because we had to. But given what God wants for you and me -- to make us in his image -- the possibility of an alternative choice to what is good is created by default.

This idea doesn't prove anything; it doesn't resolve all the problems relating to evil, but it certainly points to the fact that God is not necessarily malicious or malevolent in permitting evil, and that God in the end may know exactly what God is doing – for our good and glory!

So much for arguments. I really don't want to pursue them today, but, rather, what I want to do again is to turn things the other way around! I want to say, "Well, yes, it's true. If I'm a Christian and I believe in the God of the Bible and the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the sovereign God who has a passion for love and justice and is in charge of everything I have a problem . . . but so too do those who don't believe in God. They have a problem too and we rarely think about this. The atheists have their problems as well.

There's another side to the coin and the other side to the coin raises this question:

- *If there is no God why is there so much good in the world?*
- If there is no God how is it that goodness arises in the world at all?
- Why is there a passion in people, even in the midst of evil, to believe in and seek for that which is good?
- If survival of the fittest is the only real law of the universe, if blind chance is all that there is, how come that time and time again, remarkable things arise out of the most unlikely of circumstances?
- How is it that love and sacrifice and beauty and joy come out of the most unlikely of places. How is this possible?

Sir Edward Elgar was once asked if a particular opera singer was great. And he said "*No, she's not great. She's good, very good but she's not great. She will not be great he said, until something happens to break her heart.*" He knew that when that happened something would be unleashed in her singing that would turn it around from technical perfection to something glorious.

And we know that this is true: sometimes it takes that breaking of our heart for the passion and the beauty to emerge. BUT, why is that the case again and again and again, if there is no God? To bring that up to date I want to quote one of my favorite singers, Fleetwood Mac's Stevie Nicks. She once said this: "*Devastation leads to writing really good things.*" And if you want an example of that (to bring this even more up to date) from our modern popular culture, this is precisely why Taylor Swift has made so much money: because she's had one failed boyfriend relationship after another, which she can then write about and sing about it -- and make the basic theme of much of what she does so successfully. So, to put it rather crassly, all

that bad stuff she has turned into good stuff. But in the more serious level it happens all the time. How is it that it happens (and this is the atheist problem) if there is no God?

This is not a proof, just a question, and an attempt to try to correct that balance in the discussion, which in public spheres tends to go only in one direction these days rather than in two. There's a problem on both sides. And yet, I'm doubtful that arguing will solve anything. You can argue until you're blue in the face one way or the other, and in the end it is a matter of faith. It is a matter of "what you believe": indeed, it is critically important to say that the atheist believes as much as the person who believes in God. There is belief at the foundation of both.

III. PROOFS? OR CLUES AND RUMORS? In fact I believe with Pastor Tim Keller (in his book, The Reason For God, p.127) that the "proof way" is not the best way to deal with the question. Rather, Keller says the best way to deal with it is to speak of clues: clues for God that God (if there is a god!) has placed within the universe. And in this he's really picking up on a book written 50 years ago or so by sociologist Peter Berger who speaks of "rumors" that God has placed within the universe (A Rumor of Angels). I love that word "rumors"! Rumors and clues that God has placed within the universe, that point to the God behind the universe.

This morning I'd like to leave you with two clues or rumors which point us in the direction of God. The first has to do with science and with creation, and is a reflection of our scripture reading this morning, Psalm 19: an affirmation that "the heavens declare the glory of God"; the universe itself 'speaks' and points to the one who stands behind it. The clue comes from Doctor Francis Collins who now heads up the National Institutes of Health. Dr Collins was the lead scientist on the human genome project and is a deeply committed Christian. He was interviewed in Salon.com (http://www.salon.com/2006/08/07/collins_6/) and said this:

We have this very solid conclusion that the universe had an origin, the Big Bang. Fifteen billion years ago the universe began with an unimaginably bright flash of energy from an infinitesimally small point. That implies that before that there was nothing. I can't imagine how nature in this case the universe could have created itself. And the very fact that the universe had a beginning implies that someone was about to begin it and it seems to me that that had to be outside of nature – that is beyond scientific investigation before the material world existed. Whatever that statement means because time is tied in with matter. When you look from the perspective of a scientist at the universe he says, it looks as if it knew that we were coming. There are 15 constants, the gravitational constant, various constants about the strong and weak nuclear force and so forth that have precise values. If any one of those constants was off by even one part in a million or in some cases by one part in a million million the universe could not have actually come to the point where we see it. Matter would not have been able to coalesce. There would have been no galaxy, no stars, no planets, no people.

Your existence and mine, hanging on a thread! And not only our existence, but our ability, as it were, to step out of ourselves and to ask these questions about our lives and environment. This is not a proof for God, but it is surely a strong clue . . . these staggering percentages and

probabilities. So that science from Dr.Collins' point of view certainly doesn't point us away from God but towards God, as the Psalmist would write. Not a proof but a clue. Clue number one.

Clue number two comes from a completely different direction. If Collins is a believer working in the realm of science, clue number two comes from two authors and writers who are known for being secular if not atheistic, from the early to mid 20th Century. Somerset Maughn writes these words. He says:

If one puts aside the existence of God and the survival after life as too doubtful one has to make up one's mind as to the use of life. If death ends all, if I have neither to hope for good nor to fear evil I must ask myself what I am here for and how in these circumstances I must conduct my life? Now, the answer is plain but so unpalatable that most will not face it. There is no meaning for life and thus life has no meaning. (in The Summing Up; see Keller, p. 127)

This is about as bleak as it can get. He presses that side to its logical conclusion. There are many pressing the religious side to a logical conclusion, the other way, but very few have the courage to do what he does and say this godless side does not look too good either: no meaning; no purpose. Echoed, by Jean-Paul Sartre who writes:

It was true. I had always realized that I hadn't any right to exist at all. I had appeared by chance. I existed like a stone, a plant, a microbe. I was thinking that here we are eating and drinking to preserve our precious existence and that there's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing. (Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea; see Keller, p.127)

Without God? Absolutely no reason for existing? I think everyone asks "Why? Why am I here? What's the reason? What does it all mean?" It's deep within our psyche. We have a hunger for meaning deep within our souls. A hunger that is met on the human level mostly in relationships.

Sometimes people point to what we do and what we achieve, to find meaning. These are important. But even then, when we've accomplished something, isn't the urge, isn't the rush to tell someone else? Isn't that where the meaning comes from? "Look what I did!" says a child to us. And all through life we say that too: "How was it? How did it go?" And if there is nobody there, then even what we have accomplished falls flat. But when there is somebody there, there is meaning to what we do. We find meaning and purpose.

It was Francis Schaeffer (Death in the City) who said that for him this was in fact one of the clues or rumors that made God real and vital: that what we hunger and cry out for in relationships on a human level always fails us at some point; it will never last forever; it will always go away; it will always eventually disappoint – and in the disappointment points to our need for a relationship with one who is eternal who will never disappoint; one into whose presence we come, and who will bind us to himself in such a way that we will know him forever and he will know us fully.

This is what we believe we were made for. And the clues abound on the human level that point in that direction, including this . . . that when people discuss whether God exists or not, those who discuss it most don't always discuss it in objective terms, but in personal terms, so that in the midst of the discussion they are almost inevitably end up speaking to the universe (!) and saying, "If you are there, tell me!" And in that very speaking they point to one of the deepest clues in our being that we are desperate, desperate, for eternal relationship; not merely for "proof" for the existence of God, but to relate personally to one who is there.

I would hope to say that my life is banked on that fact.

I would hope to say that as imperfect as my life is that I would strive to make it at least a little more like the life Christ would intend so that I can be a witness to this truth.

I would hope that it would be the case that you would share in that passion and that as a church we would share in that passion.

And even if we don't have all the arguments down pat that we would know that there are two sides to the case, and most of the time we hear just one side.

I would hope that we would come to realize that there is enormous power in people simply seeing a community like ours in which as Jesus said love is playing, so that those who are lost and lonely would come to know God even through us . . . through our lives as remarkable and wonderful clues and rumors of God!

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