

## **WHY BELIEVE**

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent,  
June 3, 2018 based on Genesis 12:6–8; Exodus 3:1–7; 10–14***

The sermon this morning is the beginning of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe.” In many ways in our day, religious belief is under question or outright assault. During this series we will consider what grounds we have for belief in God, and how we might answer the questions that we hear around us, or in our own minds. {prayer}

The most famous Time magazine cover was an issue in April of 1966, when the cover consisted of three words—Is God dead? That caused a bit of an uproar. The magazine featured a look at the so-called death of God movement, which was a movement among theologians, a small group of whom had concluded that belief in God was on its way out, and they were attempting to do theology without God. This was not successful.

The whole episode might call to mind the story about Mark Twain, who, upon learning that there were rumors that he was dead, is said to have remarked, “The reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated.” Indeed in the years following that Time magazine issue, there were a number of notable developments in the field of religion. In America, there was a resurgence of faith among precisely the young people that the death of God theologians thought were abandoning faith. In Africa, there was an explosion of Christian faith that continues to this day. In the Soviet Union in the 60’s and 70’s, the situation looked quite different, as religion was severely repressed; since 1917, Soviet governments had closed churches, killed religious leaders, and persecuted believers, with declared aim of eliminating religion from society. If belief in God were on its way out, you would think that after a decades-long extermination campaign it would certainly have been wiped out in Russia. Yet when the Soviet Union finally collapsed in the early 90’s, what emerged strong from the ashes was the Russian Orthodox Church. A similar scenario unfolded in China. When Chairman Mao took over in 1949, there were only about five million Christians in all of China. Mao did everything possible to destroy religion and especially Christianity, yet today there are well over 50 million Christians in China, even as repression continues. Belief in God seems to be deeply rooted in the human spirit.

This has been true since the dawn of time. It is remarkable that no matter where we look—no matter what continent or culture—every ancient culture was religious. People thought of God in different ways, often envisioning multiple divinities, but every ancient culture had a strong sense that there is a divine Reality behind and beyond all things. Not only did people believe in God, but their belief in God was to them of central importance. You can see this in the structures that people built. Ancient people built worship centers that were far more substantial than anything else they built. Perhaps the most striking

example of that is a recently excavated temple site at Gobekli Tepe in Turkey. It is similar to Stonehenge, with circles of large standing stones, but it is much more elaborate, as it contains numerous carvings and is much larger; and it is six thousand years older, dating from before 9000 B.C., smack in the Stone Age. It was constructed on the top of a hill, where it was clearly used as a worship center. We used to think that people developed agriculture, then built cities, then built temples. But Gobekli Tepe shows it was the other way around. This huge temple complex was built before agriculture, before pottery, before the wheel, by people who were semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers, living in very simple homes. Using stone tools and multi-ton blocks of stone, they organized hundreds of workers to engage in a grand, long-term project to build an extraordinary center of worship.

It illustrates the primacy of religion in human development. Throughout the millennia, responding to God has been a central human impulse. The idea that people might build a worship center before they had much of a house is illustrated also in the stories of Abraham. The book of Genesis tells us that as Abraham journeyed, living in tents, he built a series of altars –at Shechem and at Bethel, as we heard in our Scripture passage from Genesis, and then he would build altars at Hebron and at Mount Moriah. He never had a permanent home, but he built four altars at sites that would continue to be significant for the people of Israel for centuries. Even when people started living in cities, their worship centers were generally the most central and impressive structures. You can see this pattern in temples everywhere.

How is it that people in widely different cultures—in completely different places and completely different times—have demonstrated the same basic religious impulse? It is as though human beings are hard-wired for God. The Bible accounts for this in the opening pages of Genesis, when it says that human beings were created by God “in the image of God.” [*God created human beings in His image. Genesis 1:27*] We were created to be in relationship with God, with an innate ability to connect with God.

Those who wish to deny the existence of God must therefore try to come up with some sort of explanation for why there would be this universal belief in God and devotion to religious practice if there is no God. A number of theories are commonly put forward. Maybe, it is often suggested, ancient religion was explanatory—people sought to explain the natural world by positing the actions of gods behind everything that they observed. But while there is some explanatory function in religion, one of the significant things to notice about Biblical faith is that it is not really designed to explain things. When Abraham is called to go leave his homeland, there is no explanation for why *he* has been called, or why he is supposed to go to Canaan, or why he is promised that he will have many descendants and then he does not have a child for years. Explanations are slim throughout the Bible. The Bible does not explain events in the natural world, and when it comes to the most perplexing question of all—why do bad things happen to good people?—the answer

given, in the book of Job, is that such things are beyond human comprehension. In the Bible, no one is motivated to come to faith to get explanations.

Another suggestion to try to account for the widespread human belief in God is that religion perhaps is an effort to get benefits—in this view, people looked to the gods in order to get good crops or a large family or a healing. Certainly across all religion there is a sense that God is the source of blessing, and so a natural component of religion is to seek divine assistance. But again, if you look at Biblical faith, you find that people do not come to belief in God because they think it is going to pay off. To the contrary, in many cases, a serious devotion to God carries a cost. Abraham gave up a comfortable life in order to follow God's call into being a wandering nomad. Moses likewise embarked on a difficult path when he answered God's call to deliver the people of Israel out of slavery; and the disciples of Jesus would enter into the costliest path of all. Serious faith does not view God as some sort of Santa Claus.

Perhaps the most common suggestion today to try to account for religion is the idea that religion arose as an effort to find an answer to death. People, it is argued, turned to religion in the hope of thereby gaining eternal life. But this theory is flat out denied by the Biblical story, because for the entire early part of Old Testament history, the people of Israel did not believe in life after death. It is only late in the Old Testament period, in the years leading up to Jesus, that people began to get a sense that maybe God would open up the way into life beyond death. For most of Old Testament times, people believed that when you die, you're dead. If they tried to envision the realm of the dead at all, they envisioned it as a Pit that they called Sheol—a dark realm where the dead are nothing but a shadow. As the book of Ecclesiastes put it, "there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:10)

So if belief in God does not explain things, and if it does not necessarily bring earthly benefits, and if it does not bring life beyond death, why did ancient Israelites believe in God? They believed in God for the same reason that they believed in the sun and the moon and the mountains and the sea—because God was a Reality that they encountered in life.

Scholars who have deeply studied the origins of religion have found that this in fact is the case worldwide—religion arises because people have a profound sense of a divine Reality. God is not an idea that they dream up in their minds. God is a Presence, a mysterious Power, an Other that they confront, which on the one hand may often seem frightfully overwhelming, but which at the same time appears gracious. You can see this in the story of Moses at the burning bush, which we heard this morning. Moses is not engaging in speculative theology as he walks along a mountain. He is tending sheep, when he encounters a mysterious Reality. In the Presence, he feels overwhelmed. He takes off his shoes. He bows his head. But while the Power that he encounters is fearsome, at the same time it beckons. God calls him into a relationship and into a life purpose.

As time progresses through centuries, people will come to recognize that there are many solid reasons to believe in God, and we will be pursuing those during this sermon series. But at the origin and core of belief is encounter with God. This is at the heart of what happens in New Testament, as God comes to us in Christ and is with us through the Holy Spirit. One place we can experience that encounter today is through the sacrament of Communion. We recognize in the elements of Communion that God is near; and just as God beckoned Moses, so God is calling us to enter into his presence, and find life-giving relationship and purpose.