

THE SPIRIT BEARS WITNESS WITHIN US
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, July 1, 2018
based on Romans 3:15b–16,26–27; Genesis 28:10–22

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Why Believe.” Currently we are considering each week one of the classic “proofs for God,” which are a set of arguments designed to demonstrate the reality of God. We have noted that these are not so much proofs as they are pointers to God; they look at evidence in the world which would point us to God. This morning we are looking at the “argument from religious experience.” {prayer}

Have you had an experience of the presence of God? Many people would say “yes” to that question; and for some who have had a deep experience, no more “proof” of God is necessary. You don’t need to prove the existence of Someone you have met.

The classic “proofs for God” are designed for people who are skeptics, or who may have sensed the reality of God, but still have doubts. It is typical for believers to have had some kind of experience of the presence of God. As Paul said in the passage we heard from Romans, “The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” (Romans 8:16) God is near and speaks in our hearts, making us aware, at deep level, of our connection with God. At the same time, we may still have doubts; we will return to the theme of doubting in the future in this sermon series. The various “proofs for God” can help us to respond to such doubts—either the doubts that we ourselves have, or the doubts expressed to us by our friends and acquaintances.

One such proof is the *argument from religious experience*, which begins, not so much with our own personal religious experience but with the broad experience of humanity. We noted in the opening sermon of this series that human beings across the ages have had a universal awareness of God. In every single ancient culture, people have sensed that there is an Ultimate Reality, and they have believed in God. They may have had different conceptions of God, but they all claimed to have experienced on some level a spiritual Power, a divine Presence.

If there is no God, how can we explain the fact that millions of people say they have experienced God? Perhaps one could try to say that people have claimed to have experienced other things that are not actually real. People claim to have sighted UFOs, or claim to have seen Bigfoot. But such claims are quite different from religious claims to have experienced God, because they are very limited in both space and time. Supposed sightings of UFOs only began with the dawn of the space age, and the sightings of Bigfoot only began after rumors emerged of some creature in the northwest. These claims are clearly contingent upon a certain culture, region, and point in time.

But the experience of God can be found in every culture, in every corner of the world, for as far back in time as one can research. If God does not exist, then billions of

people from countless societies across the millennia have somehow all been deluded, because they all testified to an experience of God. The commonality of religious experience through the ages is strong evidence that people are in fact experiencing a Reality.

Sometimes people will try to argue at this point that the experience of God is not in fact so common to humanity, because there are many differences between religions, and thus people must not be having any kind of common experience. But in fact the opposite is the case. It is true that there are many differences between religions in doctrine and practice. But the more one penetrates beneath doctrine and traditions to the level of experience, the more commonality there is among religions. Look at mystical writings in any religion—the writings of those who have had a deep experience of the Divine—and you will find a remarkable similarity in the descriptions of what is experienced. Those who study the phenomenology of religion will often observe that while religions have significant differences in doctrines, they are more similar on the level of story and symbol, and they become very similar on the level of experience. Why would this be? The only coherent explanation is that all religions on a deep level are connecting with the same reality of God.

A further indication of the authenticity of religious experience is the effect it produces. People who report a powerful religious experience are changed and typically motivated thereafter to great devotion and often self-sacrifice. A prime example is the apostle Paul, whose experience of the Risen Christ reversed the course of his life and motivated him to devote the rest of his life, at great sacrifice, to the spread of the gospel. How can an experience have such a powerful effect unless it is the experience of something Real?

If so many people at so many places and times say that they have perceived Something, and if their lives show real effects of that experience, it follows that that Something—namely God—actually exists.

At the same time, if religious experience is fundamentally encounter with God, then it makes sense that just as human encounters between people will occur in many different ways, so the religious experience will likely take many different shapes and forms; and this is in fact the case. Sometimes people have an intense experience of an encounter with God. In the Bible there are a number of stories of such encounters, from the story of Moses at the burning bush to the story of Paul on the Damascus road. Today such intense experiences can range from near death experiences to dramatic conversion experiences, when people have a particular moment when they have an overwhelming sense of the gracious presence of God. Our Methodist founder John Wesley had such an experience on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738, when he said he “felt his heart strangely warmed” by the merciful presence of Christ. People who have such intense experiences can typically name the day and the hour.

Other times religious experience is more subtle and may actually include an expanse of varied experiences over time. Sometimes when people are out in nature—taking a walk through the woods, or standing on a shore looking over the water—they have a sense of Something More, an awareness that there is a greater Power behind all that is seen. People can have a similar kind of experience in worship, perhaps during a particular song, or in a moment of silence, when they sense the nearness of God. Sometimes religious experience comes through an intentional religious practice, such as prayer; other times it just hits people unexpectedly. Religious experience can also take the form of an experience of guidance or help at a moment of need. But as varied as religious experiences can be, there is a common element at the core of them all—a sense of an Ultimate Reality, who, although infinite, is immediately at hand.

One of the most illustrative examples of religious experience is found in the Bible in the story of Jacob's ladder. At this point in the book of Genesis, Jacob is a young man who is something of a rascal and not at all religious. He is mainly focused on getting himself ahead in life. This moves him to swindle his brother Esau on two occasions, in order to get Esau's share of the family inheritance. Jacob thus connects perfectly with the common values of contemporary culture, where many people are primarily concerned with self-advancement, and religion is not a priority.

But then Jacob hits a rough spot. His escapades drive his brother Esau to seek his life. Jacob is forced to flee to seek refuge with his distant uncle Laban. Genesis 28 describes how Jacob, running for his life, finds a spot to lie down for the night. [*Jacob came to a certain place and stayed there for the night. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. Genesis 28:11*] He uses a rock for pillow, a poignant illustration for being in a very rough place in life.

There Jacob has a dream or a vision in which he sees a ladder extending from earth to heaven, and angels are ascending and descending on it. [*Jacob dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. Genesis 28:12*] The ladder is a powerful symbol of a connection between earthly humanity and God, a connection actually initiated by God. Jesus would later expand upon that symbol when he said of himself, "You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." (John 1:51) In other words, Jesus would be the "spiritual ladder" by which many people could experience a real connection with God. In the story of Jacob, the ladder signifies a direct personal connection to God—an experience that culminates as Jacob senses God standing beside him and saying to him, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go." [*The Lord stood beside him and said . . . "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" Genesis 28:13,15*]

It is significant that this experience happens when Jacob is in distress, in a lonely and insecure place. When life is disrupted and people are suddenly confronted by their

limitations and their mortality, that very disruption of life's comfort zones can sometimes open the door to the experience of God. In the case of Jacob, it was a low point in life that became precisely the place where he had a high point of religious experience. He would subsequently name the place, Bethel, which means "house of God," because there he had a transformative encounter with God. [*He called the place "Bethel" (house of God) Genesis 28:19*]

Jacob immediately responded to that encounter in three key ways. His initial response was one of fear and awe. "He was afraid," reports Genesis, "and said, 'How awesome is this place.'" (Genesis 28:17) This response relates to something we noted in the opening sermon in this series—that the fundamental human awareness of the Divine provokes a sense of awe and a feeling that the Divine Mystery is both fearsome and yet also gracious and attracting.

This leads to Jacob's second response, which was that of worship. Genesis reports that "Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it." (Genesis 28:18) This describes a very ancient form of creating a sanctuary or place of worship. The erected stone pillar calls to mind other ancient sanctuaries with pillars such as Stonehenge or Gobekli Tepe, and there are many examples of individual pillars like this in the ancient near east. The anointing of the pillar with oil was an act of consecrating it for worship. The story thus describes how the experience of God leads to the worship of God.

Many centuries after Jacob, a legend emerged that this stone somehow made its way to Scotland where it supposedly became the Stone of Scone, used for the coronation of Scottish and then British monarchs. The only thing useful about that legend is that it might move people to look into the actual story of Jacob!

Finally, Jacob's experience resulted in a moral change in his life. It is remarkable to read of how grasping, self-centered Jacob made a vow in which he said, "Of all that God gives me I will surely give one-tenth to God." (Genesis 28:22) This is an early statement of the tithe—what would become the Biblical practice of giving ten percent of one's annual income to God. Today Americans on average give less than two percent of their income to charity. What would move Jacob, who up to this point had been nothing but a self-focused rascal, to suddenly resolve to give ten percent to God? It is an illustration of how an authentic encounter with God changes people's behavior and priorities, moving people from self-centeredness to a life of giving. It must be noted that Jacob at this point was still fraught with imperfection—he had some spiritual maturing to do—but his experience of God began moving his life in the right direction.

The story of Jacob's ladder thus encapsulates the key elements of religious experience. Not everyone sees a ladder, of course—religious experience will take many different forms—but the core of an authentic experience of God always has these elements: the sense of the presence of God, the response of awe and worship, and the

effect of a changed moral life. Billions of people throughout the history of humanity have had some kind of religious experience of this sort.

But what about the atheist, who claims to have had no experience of God? Sometimes people want to say that the “atheist experience of no god” counterbalances the believer’s claim to have experienced God. Yet it must be noted that while the experience of something is strong evidence of that thing’s existence, the absence of experience is not evidence of a thing’s nonexistence. If you experience snow, you know that there is snow, and you can speak of what it is like. People who have not experienced snow cannot claim that there is no such thing as snow just because they have never experienced it. If you have not experienced the presence of God, it only means that it is an experience yet to have.

God is with us right now, so that the experience Jacob had is one that can be our experience today—to recognize that God stands next to us and is saying to us, “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.”