

**What We Believe About God and Why It Matters:
Exploring the Apostles' Creed
Psalm 19:1-4 and Psalm 90:1-6
January 22, 2017
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Is there a God? How can we know? What evidence is there that God exists? Does it really matter one way or another? If there is a God, what is God like?

We might be tempted to think that since we're gathered in a church on a Sunday morning for worship that these questions don't need to be asked here. But, as we touched on last week, because belief is ultimately an act of the will, even among the most faithful of people, doubts creep in from time to time. And, even for those for whom the question of God's existence has been largely settled, there is the ongoing issue about what God is like and what that means for our lives.

Over the past three or four decades, more and more people have rejected the idea that there is a God. This growth in atheism has brought with it some vocal proponents who seek to demonstrate that belief in God is anti-intellectual, absurd, even dangerous, and the world needs to be rid of it. Steven Weinberg, a theoretical physicist and atheist, once said that "The world needs to wake up from the long nightmare of religion. Anything we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done, and may in fact be our greatest contribution to civilization."

Before we rush to condemn them, perhaps some humility and charity would have us acknowledge that the atheists do make some valid points. When certain groups of Christians insist on reading the creation accounts in Genesis as science, adding up the genealogies in the Bible to proclaim that the universe was created less than 10,000 years ago, it is an affront to nearly every discipline of modern science. When religious extremists cry, "God is great!" as they detonate suicide bombs, it is easy to conclude that the problem is belief in God. When religious people study their scriptures and find commands that lead them to deny full partnership to women or to demonize people of a particular race or culture or sexual orientation, it is understandable that the atheist might equate belief in God with injustice and ignorance.

But is God, or belief in God, synonymous with anti-intellectualism, violence and bigotry? Or, would these very human impulses exist regardless of belief in God? After all, the officially atheist regimes under Lenin, Stalin and Pol Pot

burned books, imprisoned and slaughtered millions, and fostered their own forms of bigotry. God or no God, human beings seem determined to find reasons to oppress and kill one another. They will resist progress in ideas, justify their own prejudices, and act upon those prejudices.

Just as Christians or theists of other religions might hold their convictions with a bit of humility, recognizing that the facts leading them to their convictions might have other explanations, I think atheists would do well to maintain a similar humility to the question of God. Albert Einstein said that on the question of God he maintained, “an attitude of humility corresponding to the weakness of our intellectual understanding of nature and of our own being.”

The Apostles’ Creed begins with the bold statement, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” Christians believe there is a God, a Supreme Being, an Ultimate Reality that created all there is.

Many people are willing to use the term “God” to refer to the creative and powerful forces that gave rise to the universe as we know it. But Christians don’t stop there. We believe God is not simply an impersonal force or power but is, in fact, an entity, a Being, that is conscious and powerful. This Being is the source from which everything that is derives its existence and upon which all that exists depends.

But, is there any evidence that God exists? Is there good reason to believe? Throughout most of human history, the argument for God’s existence started with the fact that the universe exists and that we exist. It seemed unthinkable to most people that the beauty and majesty of creation could have existed without a beginning or could have spontaneously generated out of nothing with no One to create it. The order evident in creation—the natural laws, the complexity of what we can observe, including human beings capable of reason—seemed further evidence of a Being, a Mind behind the creation of the cosmos.

The question of God is unlikely to be resolved by science. Scientists who are theists and scientists who are atheists look at the same data and reach different conclusions. Theists see the fingerprints of God in the mysterious, invisible forces of nature, in dark matter and dark energy. They see the guiding hand of God in the evolution of our universe. When the atheist considers the universe, there is always a natural explanation that does not require God, some x-factor that helps explain the inexplicable. For the theist, the truth lies one layer beyond these explanations, and the x-factor is what we call God. Oxford mathematician John Lennox notes

that the odds for the self-organization of life on earth are in the neighborhood of 1 to 10 to the 40,000 power—very slim odds indeed. Astronomer Fred Hoyle has used an analogy for the improbability of life on earth organizing on its own, saying the chances are about the same as those of a gale-force wind blowing through a junkyard and, after it passed, revealing that a Boeing 747 had spontaneously assembled itself.

As a Christian, I see God’s glory and creativity throughout creation. I appreciate everything that science can tell me about what I see, but still, there are times when my heart bursts with gratitude for the beauty and majesty I behold, and I want to thank Someone. A couple of weeks ago I was in the Florida Keys on vacation. If you’ve been there you know that Key West is Mile Zero, the southernmost point of the US. Every evening throngs of people pack into Mallory Square to watch the sunset. I have never in my life seen a bigger, more orange ball in the sky than I did that night at Mallory Square. People from all walks of life were transfixed as this huge globe lowered itself over the horizon, and when it finally disappeared altogether, the entire pier erupted into applause. For me, that was a God-moment.

What I see in creation points me to God. And, my own experience points me to God. I believe in God in part because I am; because I think and reason and love and perceive. I believe that my very existence, and yours, points to something greater than we are. But beyond that, I believe because of the thousands of moments in prayer, in worship, in reading and reflecting on scripture when I have felt something—Someone—offering guidance, assurance, comfort and grace. I feel connected with God when I take long walks; when I need to express gratitude; when in all the painful, grievous times, I have felt held in the midst of the storm, strengthened when I was absolutely at the end of rope, carried when I could not take one more step on my own.

The atheist has explanations for all of these—chemicals washing across my brain, or a “God gene” that causes me to have spiritual and mystical experiences, or simply wishful thinking. But for me, the simplest and most rational explanation is that these experiences point to something, to Someone, that is real. When it comes to the foundation I choose to build my life on, I am led by these experiences, by the intuitions and intimations in my soul, by the fact of my existence and by the witness of Jesus Christ to proclaim these familiar words: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.” That seems far more plausible to me than believing that all of life is random.

However you arrive at it, if you accept that belief in God is reasonable and consistent with our observations about the universe and our experiences as human beings, what difference does this make? For many people, very little. Sometimes those who say they believe but whose lives are not affected by their belief are called “practical atheists”—people who live their daily lives as though there is no God while giving mental assent to the idea of God.

That is exactly what the Apostles’ Creed is NOT. The creeds of the church do not intend to merely put forth ideas to which we give mental assent. Instead, as we defined it last week, a creed expresses “a set of beliefs that *guides the actions of a person or group*.” The Apostles’ Creed, then, states our particular Christian beliefs, beliefs that are meant to fundamentally change our perspective on the world, on our place in it, and on our own lives. If there is a God, then we are creatures who are to live in a particular kind of relationship with this God.

That relationship allows us to realize that we are creatures who are not nearly as important in the scheme of things as we might like to think. We are but a tiny speck in the cosmos, a brief dot along the timeline of humanity and one of billions of people who have inhabited the earth before us and billions more who will inhabit it after we are gone. The psalmist captures all this in Psalm 90: we are dust, a tiny dot in God’s eternity.

This view promotes a healthy dose of humility which, interestingly enough, is also offered by science. The more we learn about the cosmos, the more we realize that each of us is quite small in the big scheme of things, but a belief in God as both creator and Father adds something to our smallness. We are small and seemingly insignificant on the one hand, yet on the other hand, we matter to God. Scripture speaks of God as our Father and of us as God’s children. We are known and loved by God. We bear God’s image, the divine imprint in our bodies, minds, souls and spirits. To complement the psalmist’s teaching that we return to dust, scripture also teaches that we have value and worth as human beings. That is why we are not to kill one another. We are to treat one another as we wish to be treated. We are to love one another, bear one another’s burden and work for justice while demonstrating mercy. Why do we act in this way? Because our fellow human beings matter to God, as do we. We are not expendable cogs in an evolutionary machine. We are children of God. Our lives matter. All lives matter.

If there is a God, and you and I are his creatures, then the appropriate response, according to scripture, is praise, gratitude and worship. We are to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength. We are to give thanks for each

day, for it is a gift. Each good experience is a blessing. In an ultimate sense, everything good in life is an act of God's grace. We don't deserve any of it. Faith in God leads us to humility, and it also leads us to gratitude.

Belief in God also has huge implications for our care of creation. If God created all things, and the earth belongs to God, then we are stewards of it. Tending to the planet, God's garden, is an act of discipleship and a responsibility of each one of us. Believing in God should lead us to care for God's world.

But believing in God goes beyond that. If God exists, then my aim is to understand God's will for how I am to live as a human being. Jesus modeled for us what it means to love our neighbor and even our enemy; what it means to forgive rather than seek vengeance; to overcome evil with good, and to do justice and practice lovingkindness. What Jesus modeled for us, he called us to also practice. As Christians, we see ourselves in daily pursuit of God's mission in the world, as agents who are bringing about the reign of God when we follow Jesus' call to live and love as he did. To be authentically human is to know God's will and do it, and in the doing, we find our deepest satisfaction.

One more thing: if God exists, and God is as the scriptures describe him, then we are never alone. As the psalmist puts it, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we do not need to fear, for God is with us. Over 100 times the biblical authors tell us not to be afraid, for God is with us. If God is with us, there is always hope.

As we said last week, ultimately belief is a choice. An atheist would brush aside all these arguments in making the case for their unbelief. They would not likely come to faith as a result of my arguments any more than I would lay aside my faith because of theirs. In the end we each have to weigh the information that we have, including the world as it is, our experiences as they are, and the witness and experiences of those around us, and then decide what and in whom we choose to believe.

If you have been inside St. Paul's Cathedral in London, you know what a magnificent structure Christopher Wren designed following the Great Fire of 1666. Construction of the church began in 1675 and took 45 years to complete. The dome rises to 365 feet, making it one of the highest in the world.

In the bowels of the church are crypts where a number of famous people from centuries past are buried. Many of the crypts have detailed statuary with

intricate ornamentation. But on one wall is a rather plain marker, easily missed, upon which are written these words:

Here in its foundations lies the architect of this church and city,
Christopher Wren, who lived beyond ninety years, not for his own
profit but for the public good. Reader, if you seek his monument—
look around you.

The evidence that Christopher Wren lived can be seen in the cathedral as well as in building after building in London that he designed and built. Many people visit the city without knowing about Wren. Some visit the church and never see his grave. But the evidence of his existence and importance is clearly displayed throughout the city. The same, I believe, can be said about God as we look around us at the magnificent world God has created. Amen.