

During Lent this year, I want us to seriously think about “what we believe and why.” To help us answer this question, we will be studying the Apostles’ Creed, one of the most concise statements of the Christian faith. Each Sunday leading up to Easter, we will discuss one of the belief statements in the Apostles’ Creed. I will be using a book by Adam Hamilton entitled *Creed, What Christians Believe and Why* as one of my reference sources. This morning, let’s start our discussion with the first and most important statement of belief: “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” All of our religious beliefs start with the questions: “Who is God? Is there a God? How do 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?”

Moses had the same questions when God appeared to him in the burning bush in the third chapter of Exodus. Listen to the first part of the conversation between God and Moses as recorded in the first fifteen verses of the third chapter of Exodus. You can follow along on Page 48 in the Old Testament of the Pew Bibles.

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses had been raised as a son of Pharaoh, but when he killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Israelite, he had to flee Egypt. He flees into the desert where he marries Jethro’s daughter and starts tending sheep of his father-in-law. One day he sees a curious sight, a burning bush. As he approaches it, God tells him to take his sandals off, because he was standing on holy ground. God tells Moses that he has a small job for him to do. He wants Moses to go back to Egypt, where by the way, he was wanted for murder, and lead the Israelites out of slavery and to the Promised Land. Now it is interesting to note that Moses, like Skip, was 80 years old at this time; thus, there no retirement from the service of the Lord. In the following verses in Exodus, Moses tries to get out of the assignment by coming up with excuse after excuse for not going; he really tries God’s patience. In our text he tries to get out of the task by asking God: “Who are you? What is your Name?”

Today there are many people who ask the very same question: “Who is God?” It appears that there is an ever increasing number of people who reject the idea that there is a God. One reason is that we are now in the second or third generations of families who do not attend church or worship God anymore. You may have friends or even family members who think this way. Many people today don’t know much or anything about God.

For example, there’s the story of two little boys who were best friends and were always getting into trouble at church. One Sunday, one of the boys was sick at home, so the other boy, not wanting to let his friend down, was twice as bad as usual. So as he was running through the sanctuary after worship shouting, the pastor stopped him and said in a loud voice: “Do you

know where God is?" The little boy was scared and didn't know what to say. The pastor loudly asked him again: "Where's God?" At this, the boy ran home and called his friend on the phone. "Guess what," he said, "They've lost God and now they're trying to blame us for that, too."

In the seventeenth chapter of the Acts that Sandy/Lisa read to us earlier, the Apostle Paul encountered many in Athens who did know the one true God. Athens was full of idols to every known god at that time; and just to be on the safe side and not miss one, they even had an altar "to an unknown God." Paul used this opportunity to introduce the leaders of Athens to the real God, the maker of heaven and earth.

Of course, there are those who don't want us to believe in God. Steven Weinberg, a theoretical physicist and atheist, once noted 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." A host of others have taken up this challenge because they think that they are doing the world a favor by turning people away from God.

Now some of this opposition is due to Christians, certain denominations, and churches promoting beliefs and actions that oppress, exclude and harm other people; doing things that are contrary to the Bible and God's will. Let's face it; we Christians have been guilty at times of taking biblical passages out of context to justify our own personal opinions and positions. John Wesley said that a "text taken out of context is a pretext."

The Apostles' Creed begins: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." As Christians we believe there is a God, a Supreme Being that created the universe. Many other people use the term "God" when referring to the creative and powerful forces that formed our universe and hold it together. Max Planck, the father of quantum theory, captured part of this idea in a speech in 1944 where he indicated that "all matter originates and exists only by virtue of a force and that behind this force was the existence of a conscious and intelligent mind." He did not see his work in the field of quantum mechanics as incompatible with his Christian faith. To him, there is an almighty force sustaining and holding the universe together that is both "conscious" and "intelligent."

George Lemaitre, a Catholic priest, was perhaps best known as the father of the Big Bang Theory. He championed the idea that the universe had a beginning, a day on which it was born. His theory of cosmic expansion pointed backward to "a day when there was no yesterday." Lemaitre did not see this idea as proof of God's existence, but he did seem to recognize that his theory, now widely accepted, made it intellectually possible to reconcile faith and science.

There are many scientists who believe that faith and science are incompatible, but many others throughout history have believed, and continue to believe that in fact the two complement

each other. That is why for several years at St. Paul's in Socorro we hosted students and faculty from New Mexico Tech in a successful Faith and Science Lecture Series that demonstrated that the two are not only compatible, but support each other. The point is that despite frequent statements by some scientists that science and the Christian faith are incompatible; there are numerous other scientists who have played a significant role in the advancement of science and who also believed in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

Christians believe that God is the creative force, the power, the source from which everything that exists derives its existence. We see this idea in the name by which God revealed Himself to Moses in our scripture text. Moses was basically asking: "Of all the many deities people worship, which one are you?" In response, God stated: "I Am Who I Am." This phrase, *I Am Who I Am*, is a Hebrew wordplay on the proper name Yahweh (or Jehovah), usually rendered in our Bibles as Lord. In referring to Himself as I Am, most likely, God was revealing Himself to Moses and to Israel as the source of all that is, from which everything that is has come to be and continues to be.

When Helen Keller was ten years old, her father asked the famous Boston minister, Phillips Brooks, to tell her about God which he gladly did. After their first conversation, Brooks was moved by Helen's response. She said that she had always known there was a God, but just didn't know His name.

Many physicists accept and occasionally use the term "God" as shorthand for describing the mysterious, invisible forces that govern our universe, but as Christians we don't stop there. We also see God as a being with all the attributes of a person: intelligence, emotion, reason, logic, and will. God knows, feels, loves, thinks, wills, acts, and creates. Remember, as His children, we are created in His image.

The Apostles' Creed, drawing from Jesus' primary way of addressing God, speaks of God as Father, a very personal, intimate, and relational term. The concept of God as our heavenly Father is fully developed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which could be called the Parable of the Waiting Father, in the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The father in this parable represents God who is compassionate, loving, caring, fair, patient and forgiving. No other image is more descriptive of God than the waiting father, peering down the road, longing for the return of his wayward child, then springing to his feet and running to embrace him.

Throughout history, the argument for God's existence, the case for God, started with the fact that the universe exists and that we also exist. I don't know about you, but when I look at the beauty of the Sandia Mountains, the night sky, our sunrises and sunsets, I realize that this just didn't happen; there had to be someone far greater than me that created all of this. Can you imagine the creativity, the complexity, the power and the beauty that went into creating our

world? I have a hard time understanding how anyone could reject the idea that somebody greater than us could have created all this beauty around us. Go out tonight and gaze into the night sky and tell me that this just happened. Stuart Hine must have understood this when he wrote our closing hymn: "O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, thy power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee; how great thou art."

Oxford mathematician John Lennox notes that the odds of life creating itself on earth without some outside force are in the neighborhood of 1 to 10 to the 40,000 power – very slim odds. Astronomer Fred Hoyle suggested that the chances of life organizing itself on earth were 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.

A similar analogy might be to inquire what it would take for cocoa, eggs, flour, sugar, and oil to assemble themselves spontaneously into a three-layer chocolate cake. No matter how many billion years we might wait, there will be no three-layer chocolate cake without it being mixed, baked, and iced by someone who knows what a chocolate cake should look and taste like.

Now there will always be a debate over whether God exists, especially since we live in a world that believes that God is dead and Elvis is alive. Two people can look at the same data and reach different conclusions. As a Christian, I see God's glory and creativity throughout the world around me. However, an atheist, looking at the same things, sees the glory and creativity of nature. At some point we all must choose to believe or reject the idea that there is One whose power and mind created this earth and universe.

The writer of the 19th Psalm believed this when he wrote: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words, no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

We can all cite experiences when we have felt or experienced the presence of God. When we have seen God's hands at work in our lives or we have felt God nudging us to do or say something. These are hard to explain to someone who does not believe or rejects the notion of a God. But in our hearts, we know that there is a God and He loves us.

So, if we believe in God based on our knowledge and experiences in life, what difference does it make? If there is a God, and you and I are His creations, then the appropriate response is one of praise, gratitude, and worship as we sang in *Glorify thy Name*. We are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We are also called to care for His creation and all His children through acts of love and service.

In his book, Adam Hamilton tells about a visit to St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. St. Paul's is a magnificent structure that was designed by Christopher Wren following the great fire of 1666. Construction began in 1675 and took 45 years to complete. The dome rises 365 feet, making it one of the highest in the world.

In the basement of the church are tombs where a number of famous people from centuries past are buried. Many of the tombs are decorated with statues and other ornaments. 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 all the buildings 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 London. The same can be said about God as we look around us at the magnificent world He has created. As we sang earlier, "This is my Father's world." Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth? I hope so; I know I do! It is the foundation of my faith and life. Amen