

IS THERE A GOD?

Explore God Series (Part 2)

Text: Exodus 3:1-12

Intellectual Reasons for Belief

Is there really some Supreme Being -- like we read about in this story from Exodus? Someone who moves through and beyond the material world, meeting people and calling them to be part of his life and a greater purpose? If there truly was such a Being and he showed up to you and me in the spectacular way he appeared to Moses, who of us wouldn't also respond: **"I must turn aside and look at this great sight"** (Exodus 3:3, NRSV).

But not everyone here has had such a "burning bush" experience, have we? Maybe we've encountered a few "starry skies" or "crazy coincidences," but is that even close to enough to seal the deal? I don't think so. So, *"Why should I believe there is a GOD?"* Or why might you? Men and women have wrestled with that question since the beginning of history. More than a few have suggested, like Moses, that there ARE some blazing phenomena that when studied do seem to support belief. Some physicists, for example, have pointed out that because everything from the tiniest subatomic particles to the greatest galaxies are so clearly in motion, then there must be a Prime Mover that started it all going. Things at rest, don't just spontaneously start moving. Someone or something, set the universe on its path.

Some philosophers, Aristotle and Plato among them, have suggested that if you trace every occurrence back through the chain of cause and effect, you will ultimately come to the place where you must accept a mind-boggling truth: that is, that at the start of it all there was a First Cause that somehow always existed. People, of course, rarely think back that far.

I heard a fanciful story about a group of scientists who, after many years of effort duplicating various species of animals, finally succeed in cloning a human being. Extremely proud of themselves, the scientists said: *"Now that we're able to clone human beings, one of us needs to talk to God and tell him we don't need him anymore."* So they appointed one of their colleagues to go meet with God. He says, *"God, We've figured out cloning and all kinds of other advances. It's pretty clear the human race has evolved to the point where you're not required for anything."* God says. "OK, but just to make sure you're able to handle things on your own, let's conduct a little test. I was thinking that we could start at creation; you know, where the story tells you I created man from the dust of the earth..." "Sure thing," the scientist says, as he bends over to scoop up a handful of dirt. "Hey!" says God. "Get your own dirt!"

There is profound scientific evidence that our universe began with a Big Bang. You must, therefore, posit the existence of something or Someone that brought into being the stuff that went bang. Even if it was a particle of energy as small as a dust mote, who created that dirt?

Then there are those artists and physicians who sometimes argue for the existence of God because they see in life a complexity and genius they don't believe could have developed on its own. The intricate design we witness in even the most basic life form points to the existence of a Great Designer. To say that the molecular components which make up DNA, for example, simply "came together by accidental combination" is like saying that if you put all the parts of a car in a big crate and shook the crate a trillion times, one day you might open up the lid and find a completely assembled Lexus! No way.

Some psychologists offer another reason for believing in God. They observe that in every human being exists an intrinsic sense of right and wrong -- an internal "conscience" if you will. Anthropologists carry that observation further by noting that in every culture on earth there arises a sensibility that the rightness or wrongness of things is somehow linked to a reality larger than they themselves -- a reality they respond to through religious ritual. The very fact of individual conscience and corporate religion, some say, points to the existence of a Transcendent Ethicist who endows humanity with a sense of the appropriate boundaries of behavior.

I don't know which of these conventional arguments for God's existence ring closest to home for you. The idea of God as Prime Mover, First Cause, Great Designer, or Transcendent Ethicist, are certainly interesting ones to those of us who realize that Christians are not really meant to check their brains at the door when they enter the church. And yet, what is important for Christians to recognize is that the Bible advances *none* of these explanations to bolster faith in God. It's almost as if the writers of Scripture were trying to say that no empirical proof would suffice to convince someone who had made up his mind not to believe, nor dissuade someone who had decided they would.

Oxford historian C.S. Lewis understood that. When I was an atheist, said Lewis, my intellect sometimes told me I might be wrong and the Christians might be right. Now that I am a Christian, sometimes my intellect pushes me towards atheism. The problem with looking in the physical or psychological world for proofs of God's existence -- or God's non-existence -- is that invariably it is not the mind but the heart that determines our orientation to the most significant realities of life. We don't believe in love or forgiveness or God because we have or ever can prove them empirically, but because something in our experience tells us that they are real. At some point belief in them seems more reasonable than anything else, and so we choose to commit ourselves to living from that perspective, even when our mood swings in the other direction.¹

Listen carefully to this: The intellect alone will not lead you to God. Many geniuses throughout history and living today believe in God. But we who are Christians hold this conviction not primarily because we have ruled out all possible doubt, but because we have encountered in the world around us and within us a Presence which keeps stubbornly expressing itself.

Moses could, I believe, have stared into the burning bush all day, and never found out anything really very useful about God. He could have spent his whole life trying to infer from nature or humanity the essence of the Creator, or performing the mental gymnastics encouraged by so many popular seminars and it would have been an utter waste of time. If there really is a God who could have created and sustains and redeems the very cosmos -- and I believe with all my soul there is -- then we have about as much chance of figuring him out on our own as an insect has of using his simple neurons to grasp the nature of the oxidation process by which a fire burns. The Bible tells us that God is, first and foremost, "inscrutable." He can't be known by our reaching out to take hold of HIM, any more than we can reach out and take hold of fire. **As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:9)**

The God Who Reveals Himself

But here's where the good news really begins. You see, Moses didn't have to stand around staring at the fire for very long. The scriptures say that **When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:4)** This is an immensely important insight here! The only way to know God is if he chooses to make himself known. And the glory is: HE does. An essential difference between Christianity and any other religion is that it posits a God who is known not by our efforts to climb up to him but by his willingness to come down to us -- not by human *elevation* but by divine *revelation*. "Moses, Moses... Susan, Susan... John, John... Here I am!"

That's what God was trying to do when he lit the fires of creation, when he led the Israelites by a pillar of fire out of slavery, and when he spoke through the fiery words of the prophets. God was trying to say "**Here I am**" when he came in Jesus Christ to blaze a path for the world, or burned in the hearts of those on the Emmaeus road, or came like tongues of fire at Pentecost. Those times when you have felt suddenly seared in a moment of sin, or strangely warmed in a moment of need, or set ablaze in a moment of inspiration -- that was the otherwise inscrutable God saying to you, "**Here I am.**" That was God trying to reveal himself to us -- to tell us as much about himself as our minds are able to embrace in this life.

It's only natural and appropriate to ask, "*Is there a God?*" But the far more important question is: "*What does the God who has revealed himself seem to be like?*" Those of

us who have met his Presence find him to be like the God that Moses met. God is personal, not some abstract principal or impersonal force like we meet in philosophy or Star Wars, but a Lord who calls out to you by name, who knows when you rise or sit down, who knows the very number of hairs upon your head – or lack thereof!

God is also "holy." He does not exist for our pleasure. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once said: He is not like "a cosmic bellboy for whom we can press a button to get things."² Nor is the God we believe in like the one Deepak Chopra or Hinduism posits -- the kind that fills every rock, shrub, or vain individual and makes THEM divine. The God who has revealed his presence to me (and many others here) is so supremely pure and transcendent that when we encounter him in worship we want to take off our shoes, fall to our knees, and glory in the fact that Someone so magnificent wants US near.

If you have met this holiness, tell others that God is compassionate. He is not some Divine Watchmaker who simply wound the world up, set it in motion and left the room. He is the God who says: **I have observed the misery of my people... I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them. (Exodus 3:7-8)** This is the Reality that met me one night when I was eighteen years old. Someone helped me see that God is a Deliverer. He is not off beyond the veil of the cosmos someplace. He actually came down in history to deliver people. He showed himself willing to climb a cross and suffer and die to demonstrate how much he FEELS the pain and brokenness of this world. And he broke out of a grave on Easter morning to show us that suffering will not have the last word.

What God Asks About You

Then again, maybe it is not so much your friends or family who have questions about God. Maybe it's *you* yourself. Perhaps you find it pretty hard to listen to what I'm saying, because you've never really met this God I seem to be rambling on about, or feel you know him only slightly. And if that's the case for you, then let me try to suggest one last insight from this morning's text that may be helpful.

You see Moses did two things that helped him to know this inscrutable, personal, holy, and compassionate God. First, he turned aside to see him. The very fact that you've come here today shows that you've already taken that step. You've shown yourself willing to turn from where the sheep are going and ask the question that needs to be asked: *What about God?* And yet the most important question of all -- the one whose answer changed Moses' faith from an intellectual proposition into a life-altering reality -- is not the one we ask of God but the one He asks of us.

You see, sometimes we talk about God as if he were in the next room waiting for us to consider his merits, when the reality is that he is already here in the room with us, seated on the throne, and asking the most burning question of all: Why should I believe

in YOU? Why should I reveal myself more to you? Will you go forth and speak to Pharaoh for Me? Will you care for the people around you for Me? "Will you be Christ's Body in the world for Me?" We so often say to God: "Give me more reason to believe and then I'll obey you more." But God says, "Obey me more and then I'll give you more reasons to believe."

And so, if you've heard nothing else today, please hear this: The first step of faith lies in asking not "Does God exist?" but "What *kind* of God exists?" But the second step is more important still. Ask: "What would you have me *do* for you, dear God?" If you are really open to hearing, God will answer that prayer. And I believe that as you put his answer into practice, like Moses before you, you will come to know him in blazing ways. So, *what about you?*

Let us pray...

Lord, there are some of us here this morning who want and need to know you in a much deeper way. We give thanks that you have not left us to try and figure you out by the strength of our own intellect, but have revealed yourself as the personal, holy, and compassionate God you are. If we have never done more than regard you with intellectual curiosity then we want today to be a new beginning. Please come into our lives right now as never before. By the fire of your Holy Spirit burn away every failure, vice, or doubt that has separated us from you. Then send us forward into this new day to be your witnesses in the world. For we offer this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, chapter 11, paragraph 5.

²Harry Emerson Fosdick.