

This I Believe? Let's Begin with This

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Genesis 19:1-4a; Acts. 17:22-28

The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. He said, "Please, my lords, turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet; then you can rise early and go on your way." They said, "No; we will spend the night in the square." But he urged them strongly, so they turned aside to him and entered his house, and he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house, Genesis 19:1-4 (NRSV)

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely spiritual you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all peoples to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps fumble about for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are his offspring.' Acts 17:22-28 (NRSV)

Please join me in prayer. *God, I pray that the words of my mouth, the meditations with all of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

Many of you have heard me say this. I grew up in a house with really faithful parents. They took us to church, sometimes multiple times a week. They read Bible stories to us, so it was probably most informative in the way that they lived. They really lived as poured-out people who gave themselves away for others. They modeled a life of faith. So, I grew up with this sense that there's just nothing to doubt. There's nothing to question. Why would anything about what I had been taught ever be called into question? It blew my mind the first time it ever experienced some kinds of doubts.

I went to a middle school where there weren't a lot of Christians. There were not a lot of Christian families, a school that was really focused on sciences and sort of tended to go that way. I remember so vividly that there was a guy named Brett in my middle school who used to mercilessly tease me for how involved I was in youth group. He'd say, "You have to be dumb to believe in God." Well, it shook me, rocked me to my core, and it worried me so much. Was I dumb? Did I believe in something that wasn't true? Oh, goodness, no, hang on. I don't want to think that I don't want to indulge these beliefs. I'm going to cast this aside and I'm going to pretend I'm not even having these doubts. I'm going to double down on my Bible reading; I'm going to double down on my prayer. I'm going to go to the youth group more often. I'm not going to have doubts. I'd just push them aside because I'd never been taught how to manage and how to deal with those doubts.

That would work for a little while, and then I'd have a time when they'd start to come back again. Then I'd be more involved in church, or I'd pray more, and I'd feel the doubts sort of ebb and flow. And there were times when I didn't really feel like there was anyone I could talk to about it. I didn't say anything to our youth group director because, in my 12-year-old brain, I was sure I'd be shunned from youth group if I ever expressed any doubts. I didn't say anything to my parents because I didn't want to disappoint them. I just kept sort of managing, and by that, I mean just casting aside these doubts and not letting them have any place except that meant that every time I had doubts again, they grew. Sometimes, it was because of something someone said to me. Like what Brett said. Sometimes it was because I saw things in the world; I saw children that were starving or unjust wars. And it caused me to have doubts.

There were times when my brain almost exploded because I tried to make Genesis a textbook for science, and it caused me to have doubts. There were times when I prayed it felt like I was just praying to a brick wall. And it made me have doubts.

I keep talking right now in the past tense, but I would be more faithful to you if I told you there is a present tense component to this as well. Most of the time, the vast majority of the time, I feel assured of my faithfulness, that I trust God. That I feel the presence of God. I don't feel the need to cross my fingers during any part of the Apostles Creed. But every now and then, there's this tiny thing that sneaks in, and it feels like doubt. And I wonder if you've had that as well. I wonder if you've experienced the same thing if there's been something that someone has said or some life circumstance or some thought that you have wrestled with. That has caused you to have doubts. And subsequently feel alone, ashamed, or frustrated by it.

I want to tell you that if that is the case, you are not alone. You are not unique in this at all. And that's the reason that over the next several weeks during Lent that we're going to spend time talking about all of the things we believe. The basic tenets of our faith, the pieces of the Creed, about God, about the Bible as the word of God that points to Jesus. What we believe about the resurrection and the Holy Spirit and the church. Here, together, we're going to wrestle with these things, these beliefs that Christians have had over the centuries. How that's understood even now by folks so that we might come to some clarity, each of us. And be able to say with conviction, this I believe.

The church should not be a place where we require you to have an assent like a unified and unquestioned doctrine. This is not a place where there are no questions, and there are only answers. This is a place for us to wrestle together with it. And we think that's very important because if you never wrestle with your faith, if you said to me "I tell you what I learned when I was six years old in Sunday School and here I am and I'm 40 years past that. And I still believe the exact same things – no change." I would not be impressed, friends. In fact, here's what I think: I would think it's remarkable that you had been able to somehow separate your faith and your life so they had no impact on each other. Because there would be no other explanation for you having the exact same beliefs for an entire lifetime. If you had not let your own experience and the tradition of the church around you and reason and science and Scripture continue to shape you.

And the more that we do this, instead of what I did, just ignore my doubts and try to double down on things and pretend they don't exist. And hope they go away and hope they don't come back; the more that we do that, the shakier our faith is. The more that we are able to wrestle with the things that cause us to pause, the stronger our faith will be. As counterintuitive as that sounds, it will no longer be a house of cards that can be blown over if one piece of it changes. It will be something that we can really grab hold of. And be steady with.

If God said to each one of us, "Whenever you have doubts, whenever you are shaky in some piece of your faith, that is a disqualifier from being Christian. From continuing the life of faith." If God had actually said that to all of the folks in Scripture, then we would have an empty Bible. Look at Abraham and Moses and the ways in which God used them in spite of their doubts. And the disciples. The entire Gospel of Mark go back and read it; it's just a narrative of the disciples not understanding who Jesus was and not fully being able to understand their faith. Remember Jacob, who wrestled with God all night long? And after he did, he walked away and he had a limp in his hip. But he had a blessing as well.

When we go deep with God, when we wrestle with God about our doubts and our beliefs, we might be a little bit battered. But we are the better for it. We are closer to God. We have something that we can trust a little bit more. Just because something is sacred doesn't mean we don't get to engage with it. Or think critically about it. One of the reasons I love being a United Methodist, one of the reasons I love the Wesleyan tradition is that John Wesley was a man of his head and his heart. God gave us brains and did not ask us to check them at the door.

God wants us to use them to think about our faith. Now look, I want to tell you that our faith is a good thing. That our doubt can move us, our faith struggles are good things because our doubt can move us closer to God. But what I want to tell you as well is that you cannot wait for the moment of certainty to go all in. You can't assume that at some point on this side of heaven, you are going to get the full certainty and knowledge of everything about God. After all, the Scripture tells us that we walk by faith and not by sight. I know all of you have heard the phrase that faith is not the opposite of doubt. It's the opposite of certainty. So, we can't cling to certainty and think that we are going to come to faith through that.

At some point, we have to say, "God, these are the things that I'm wrestling with, and there are things I'm uncertain about, but I'm going to trust. I'm going to take a leap of faith. I'm going to go all in. I'm going to jump in on this because there are a lot of reasons to trust you. Because you

have been faithful, and I can point to that. And I can decide that I'm going all in." And that is what faith is. It's not waiting for this moment of certainty.

What I want to do is to share with you a number of the reasons that I believe in God. These are things upon which I hang my hat that I cling to. This is the scaffolding upon which I build my faith. And it may be different for you. There might be pieces of this that might resonate with you. But I hope, in some way, it opens up all of our hearts to really think about what it is that we believe about God. What it is that we're clinging to.

Here's the first thing. I look around and I read what scientists have written, and I believe that, and I see the intricacies of the world. The orderliness of the world. The fact that our DNA is so complex but it's so perfect for sustaining life. Our ecosystem is so delicately balanced and fragile that exactly the way it is it works, but there are things that can get it off kilter. And if it weren't perfectly ordered, it wouldn't work. That there are physical constants in the world that hold true that allow for our world to exist, that if they didn't like gravity - without it we would cease to exist. I look around the whole world, and I see intelligent design.

I see a Creator that made this earth intelligently and particularly. That the chances that our world can be the way it is and function the way it functions and have it be completely left to chance is just very small. That our brains can't even comprehend it. So many things have to go right for us to be able to live in the world. And that points to intelligent design.

I said earlier that my brain explodes when I tried to use Genesis as a science textbook. That's because that's not how it was intended. The people who wrote Genesis had so much less scientific knowledge than us, and if they'd had an equivalent amount, they would not have written Genesis for that purpose. Genesis was written, the creation accounts were written to tell us about God. To teach us about God and God's character and what God's capable of. That God is a creator. And to teach us a little about ourselves as well.

So just because we don't read Genesis with pen and paper and start up all the generations and years that the earth wasn't created 6000 years ago doesn't mean that God is not the creator. In fact, how many of you are tracking these images that come out of the James Webb telescope? These are just phenomenal all these images in the universe that we are getting back the newer version of the Hubbell. The most recent ones tell us that the universe is 13.8 billion years old. A mind-boggling number. That 13.8 billion years ago, there was this tiny little point, and there was a big bang, and everything has been expanding out from that ever since.

If you're a person who says, "Science explains it, I don't need God. I can point to everything from the big bang on." I want you to hear this. Even Stephen Hawking, the scientist, the famed atheist, said this: "The area that religion can lay claim to is the origin of the universe." God is the prime mover. Even Stephen Hawking gives an attribution to that.

Look, it's incredible what God has done in the world. God is the one that has done it. And it's not just the orderliness and intricacy of the universe, but the beauty. The sheer beauty of it. Did you see that sunset last night? The days don't have to end that way. But God orders them to end that way. You heard when Amy read in Scripture, "The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands. They have no voice; they have no sound, and yet it is heard out of all of the earth." You can't look at a child's face or someone you love or the plants and the world and not see the beauty in all of this.

The second reason I believe in God is because we have this universal and shared desire for transcendence. We have a deep longing. Every single one of us has this deep longing to understand purpose and meaning in our lives. And this isn't something that we point to that can be explained by naturalism, this desire for transcendence. This is something that God has put in us. If we were just accidents of creation we would not have in us this longing. As Augustine says, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." We would not have restless hearts until they found the divine. We have a deep desire. Every single one of us, whether we practice Christianity or another faith or something, has a desire for a relationship with God. And meaning and purpose and longing.

Another universal thing is objective morality. There is objective morality. There are more laws that govern us that are not just a matter of personal preference or social convention. These are things that, as human beings, we can agree on. And that there are variations in religions and variations in cultures, but we agree that murder is wrong. We agree that we do not spread falsehoods and tell lies. We agree that if someone needs help, we give help. These are things that come from God. That comes from a central place because otherwise, humans over the millennia would not have come to an agreement about this. And yet, we are always in understanding about these rules that govern the way we treat each other and in morality.

I believe in God because of my personal experience with God. I believe that as I have grown more and more in my faith and continued to bend my life more toward God and follow Jesus I am changed. My experience of God has changed me. I am frankly more generous and more compassionate than I know myself to be capable of on my own. I wonder about you too, if you

have this same thing where you think goodness, I am more patient when I am in a relationship with God than when I am not. There are things that God does in our own lives to change us.

God has made me more forgiving; God has made me more empathetic than I know that I would be on my own. My experience of God is that I know I have been changed and bent. Even sometimes against my will.

I've experienced God in a way that is undeniable when I have needed the peace and comfort of God. Jesus says, "My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." There is peace that the world can give and it falls short of what we need. There is a peace that only God can give when we are in crisis. I've had an experience of lying in a hospital bed waiting for an emergency surgery that I had no reason to believe I'd ever survive. I worried that I would orphan two children and had an unbelievable amount of peace. A comfort that when I came out of surgery, the first thing I could think of was God. I can feel it still now. And I know that it was carrying me through not by any other worldly thing, not the doctors, not my husband, but God gave me exactly what I needed there. And that's happened to me other times, as I imagine you've experienced that type of overwhelming, unexplainable peace.

I believe in God because I've seen God in the lives of others. Not just my own. I've known people who have broken addictions that have already ruined their families, and it seemed like they'd never come back from or never be able to break free of them. I've seen relationships that, if you had asked me, I maybe would have said should be beyond repair. That ended up being reconciled because of the power of God. People that I never thought would end up together again or be in a relationship again because of only what God can do. God could change their hearts and their behavior. Not anything they could do on their own. We don't have bootstraps long enough to pull ourselves up into a different way of being. Compared to the way God can change us.

God makes us more generous. Like immediately. Six weeks ago, we said we were going to raise money for Habitat for Humanity, and we wanted to be able to build a house, and our Christmas Offering came back at \$120,000. Just people willing to open themselves up and give themselves away and be generous in a way you couldn't make happen with any other reason than that God is stirring people's hearts. And drawing them to generosity and making this big difference.

These are a myriad of reasons why I believe in God. These are the things on which I hang my hat. This is the scaffolding on which my faith is built. And I hope some of these have resonated with you, and there might be something else just ping-ponging around in your brain. Where you think, “I believe because of this or that...” But here’s what I want to tell you. Whatever those reasons are, at some point, there’s still risk. You still can’t have certainty. You still have to make the decision that you are going to take that leap. That we are going to decide to believe, and we are going to lean into it, to bend into that. To say to God, “I trust you, and I love you, and I want to follow you. And I believe it.”

This is the thing about which I am willing to be wrong. If I live my entire life as a Christ follower, if I live my life loving like Jesus did, pouring myself out in generosity and service. And I find out at the very last minute that it didn’t work, that it wasn’t true, and none of it was. I would have no regrets. This is the thing about which I am willing to hang my hat and be wrong. I believe in God.

God, we come to you today as people who have carried so many different versions of our own belief. We have been a multitude of people in all the ways in which we have lived like you and drawn away and had doubts and been faithful and assured. And in the midst of all of that, you have remained strong and solid and present and with us. Help us to remember if we are in the midst of a big struggle or when one might come in the future that you are always with us. That you are steady. That we can trust in you, we can love you, we can believe in you. We pray all of this in your name. Amen.