

WHERE'S THE PROOF

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, June 10, 2018
Based on Matthew 16:1-4; Romans 1:19-20a; Psalm 14:1-2**

The sermon this morning is the second in a summer sermon series entitled, "Why Believe." Recent polls have announced that atheism is on the rise in our society, although it is not clear whether there are really more atheists than in the past or if there are just more people willing to tell the pollsters that they are atheists, as atheism in our society has become more socially acceptable. In addition to rising numbers of atheists, who deny the existence of God, it is reported that there are also rising numbers of agnostics, who say they do not know whether or not there is a God. The poll numbers are a bit garbled by the fact that there are some people who say they are atheists who also say they believe in God. There is some confusion. The total number of atheists and agnostics, according to the polls, amounts now to about 7% of the U.S. population; and the total number of atheists worldwide is a similar percentage. Some estimates put the total number of atheists worldwide at a bit over ten percent, while other estimates put the figure much lower. Regardless of the precise figure, those percentages in the end are rather surprisingly low, particularly given the fact that belief in God has been under assault from various quarters for quite some time. And while the percentage of atheists in the United States has been rising, the percentage worldwide is declining. This points to what we observed last week—that there is among human beings a deep-seated religious impulse, found among people in every place on earth, whereby people sense the reality of God. Nevertheless, even if we believe in God, our belief is often tested by questioning. In this sermon series, we are considering what grounds we in fact have to believe. {prayer}

One of the earliest known references to atheism is in the Bible. It is the verse we heard from Psalm 14 which states, "Fools say in their heart, 'There is no god.'" [Psalm 14:1] This dates from probably around the sixth century B.C. There are no known references to atheism in any documents anywhere in the world earlier than that, although maybe there was some Stone Age guy someplace who was not a believer. As we noted last Sunday, human beings are innately spiritual, and we can see this in every single ancient culture. At the same time, doubts arise, as indicated in Psalm 14. The nature of human doubting and questioning comes to a very interesting expression in the gospel passage we heard from Matthew.

Matthew reports, "The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven." (Matthew 16:1) The Pharisees and Sadducees were groups within Judaism, so of course they believed in God, but they did not believe that God was working through Jesus. So they asked Jesus to prove who he was. They wanted some sort of sign that would establish beyond a doubt that Jesus was from God, and then they would believe.

This often is what Jesus' skeptics demanded—some sort of proof, some incontrovertible sign from Jesus. In the hours before the crucifixion, when Jesus was brought before King Herod, the gospel of Luke tells us that "Herod was hoping to see Jesus perform some sign." (Luke 23:8) There's a striking rendition of this scene in the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which got another renowned performance this past Easter season that was broadcast on TV. In the scene, Herod is interrogating Jesus and sings a little ditty:

"So you are the Christ, yes, the great Jesus Christ. Prove to me that you're divine. Change my water into wine . . . Prove to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool. That's all you need do and I'll know it's all true. Come on, King of the Jews."

Human beings would like proof. Today many people would like to know what proof there is, not only that Jesus is the Son of God, but that there is a God at all. Where's the proof for God?

Jesus made a very interesting response to the Pharisees and Sadducees. He said, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.' And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times." (Matthew 16:2-3)

In response to the demand for signs, Jesus declared that there are already signs, as clear as the signs in the weather, if only people would open their eyes to see them. The same point is made in that passage we heard from Romans, which stated, "What can be known about God is plain to people, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made." (Romans 1:19-20) In other words, the evidence for God is all around us.

Across the centuries, as people have reflected about this, they have identified a number of elements in the world which function as clear signs, pointing us to the reality of God. Over the years, those reflections have coalesced into a series of so-called proofs for God. Each "proof" involves observing something about the world—recognizing the signs of God's presence—and then making an argument for the reality and power of God based upon that observation. During the course of this sermon series, we will be considering the various proofs for God in successive weeks, and we will see in the end that the world in fact has abundant evidence for the existence and activity of God.

The first of these so-called proofs is called the ontological argument; each proof has a technical name. The word "ontological" comes from the Greek word, "ontos," or being; this argument starts from the very being or nature of God. It starts, actually, from the idea of God that people universally have in their minds.

We noted last week that there is across all human cultures and times an idea of God—a sense that there is an ultimate Reality behind all things. A thousand years ago, one of the leaders of the church, Anselm of Canterbury, came to a very interesting perception

about this idea. He said that if you were to define the idea of God in its most essential terms, you would have to say that “God is that, greater than which nothing can be conceived.” Everyone, he noted, has this basic concept when they think of God, that God is the ultimate Reality beyond which there can be nothing greater. If you can think of something greater, you are not yet thinking of God! Now suppose you want to say that God does not exist. In that case, there would be something greater, because what exists is greater than what does not exist. Therefore God must exist, in order to be that greater than which nothing can be conceived.

Ever since the days of Anselm in the eleventh century, not everyone has been quite sure that this argument works, and there has been a lot of debate about the logic of it. The argument has been restated by other famous thinkers such Rene Descartes, who argued that existence is an inherent and necessary part of the idea of God. But what is most significant about the ontological argument is its perception that the very idea of God is itself a sign that points to God’s reality; because where does this idea come from? Why have human beings universally had an idea of God? People, of course, have made many different embellishments on the idea of God, imagining God in different ways, but every culture in every place for tens of thousands of years has had an idea of an ultimate Reality. The most reasonable explanation for that is that there is an ultimate Reality, namely God, who has implanted this idea in the human mind. This is exactly what the Bible says when it says that God created us in God’s image—we have been created with an awareness of our heavenly Parent.

So just as the Scriptures declare that we have been given various signs which point to the reality of God, so the persistent and deep idea of God in the human mind is itself one such sign. But does this prove the existence of God? Interestingly enough, while Jesus spoke of there being many signs in the world, he refused to offer proof. He offered no proof to Herod; and when the Pharisees and Sadducees wanted some obvious and incontrovertible sign, or proof, Jesus said, “No sign will be given this generation except the sign of Jonah” (Matthew 16:4). By this he was referring especially to his resurrection—that just as, in the story of Jonah, Jonah comes forth from the belly of the great fish after three days, so Jesus after three days would arise from the dead. The resurrection would be a particularly great sign; but for people then and today it is not proof, because it is something that people also can doubt.

Why did Jesus refuse to offer proof? It is because the human problem finally is not in the mind, but in the heart. The problem is that we turn from God and alienate ourselves from God. The fundamental problem, as spelled out in the Garden of Eden story, is that we want to make ourselves God. And this is why Jesus viewed so dimly the demand for proof. If God must be proven to us, then we are the ones in charge, the ones who hold judgment on whether God passes muster. Jesus perceived that the Pharisees and Sadducees were in

precisely this position—of setting themselves up in authority over against God. So Jesus said, “An evil generation asks for a sign.” (Matthew 16:4)

What we need is a change of heart that opens our eyes to the many signs of God that are already all around us, and that opens us up to a relationship with God. In the end, God is not a proposition to be proved, but a Reality to be encountered; and this is what Jesus makes possible, by coming to us with the forgiving and reconciling love of God, which would bring us into connection with God.

It is significant that shortly after Jesus’ conversation with the Pharisees and Sadducees he spoke his decisive word to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24). Jesus invites us so something far more than just giving assent to the idea of God. He invites us to enter a walk with the Lord, in which we live in God’s grace.

As this sermon series continues, we will progress through the many so-called “proofs for God,” each of which will speak in some profound way to God’s reality and power; but as we do so, we will recognize in each of them that they are not really proofs for God but pointers to God. There are indeed, as Jesus said, many signs that would direct us to God. The purpose of those signs is not simply that we conclude that there is a God, but that we turn to God in faith, and so find genuine life and promise in fellowship with God.