

IS GOD REAL?

HEBREWS 11:1-6
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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As promised, our faith questions series begins today.

The idea for this sermon series came out of a pretty ordinary realization that I had one fall day. Nearly every Sunday, I, as the preacher, get to decide what scriptures and topics will be covered during worship. Inevitably, I tend to bring my own questions and concerns and interests and convictions to the text each week.

But my questions are not always your questions. So, our worship committee thought, “what if we take some time in the early part of next year to have a sermon series based on questions from the congregation?”

The response was greater than I anticipated. I had planned on a 5-6 sermon series that would take us to the beginning of Lent. I got so many questions that I had to add another four after Easter, as you’ll see.

Here’s an outline of the road ahead.

[Series outline slide]

I’d like to begin with a few caveats:

1. I know in advance that I will not answer any of these questions as comprehensively as you might like; I don’t really apologize for this, I simply acknowledge it. A lot of these questions are big ones and impossible to address adequately in a twenty minute sermon! I look at this series as a bit of a

conversation starter or a way to provide a few tools for thinking better about hard faith questions

2. I have had to combine some questions into one theme; others I have not had space for (I do apologize for this).
3. I have tried to keep in mind the fact that these questions are going to be addressed in the context of *worship*. They are not primarily information sessions or lectures or workshops although they might seem more like that than “usual.” They are sermons, and I believe that God meets us when his Word is proclaimed

Today we begin with what is perhaps the biggest question of all.

Is God real? How do we know?

Throughout this series, I will not be identifying who asked the question of the day. But today is an exception. This one came from eight-year-old Leah Schmidt. (Don’t worry, I asked permission!)

This is the biggest question of all. It’s one that we have all probably asked at some point in our faith journey, even if we don’t say so out loud. Perhaps it’s one that we’ve just pushed to the background of our consciousness but we still wonder about from time to time.

I chose to begin with this question because it is the ground beneath all the others.

If we can’t answer this one in the affirmative (or at least have compelling reasons for keeping the questions alive in our minds!), the other faith questions kinds of fade into irrelevance.

Where to begin?

We should start by acknowledging the obvious. The answer to this question is by no means as self-evident as it may have seemed fifty, a hundred, five hundred years ago.

It won’t come as much of a surprise to you when I say that many people in our culture would say that God *isn’t* real.

Depending on which surveys you look at, roughly a quarter of Canadians claim no religious affiliation. Not all of these would say that they don't believe in God—many people believe in a higher power or in “spirituality” or all kinds of other things.

But the overall picture in twenty-first century Canada is that people find it harder to believe in God than at other points in history.

Why?

Well, we can't see God. I suspect that many kids have a really tactile and common sense approach to the question of God. They can't see God, so they wonder if God is real. I remember when Nicholas was younger, he asked me a question, “How do we know that God is real and zombies aren't?” You can't see either, right?

Also, we don't need God to explain as much stuff any more. Our understanding of the cause of diseases and how weather patterns work has increased exponentially. Stuff that people used to attribute to God's judgment or blessing, we now have more accurate understandings of.

Sometimes disbelief in God isn't the result of any breakthrough in human knowledge or philosophical advances. Sometimes it's just because we don't *want* there to be a God because that would demand something of us. Dostoevsky famously said that without God, everything is permissible. Many people like it that way (for themselves, mainly—they're not usually as eager for others to do whatever is permissible!).

By far the biggest reason that it's hard to believe in God, in my experience—personally and pastorally—is the existence of evil and suffering.

If God is good and powerful, why do bad things happen? If I'm praying for something I'm convinced is part of God's will, why doesn't God answer? How do we contend with the silence of heaven?

So, in our context, to affirm or to even consider an answer of “yes” to the question of whether or not God is real is to do so in the context of a lot of “no's.”

Are there still good reasons to believe in God? Well, yes, I think so.

Probably the most well-known argument for the existence of God historically has been the cosmological argument. Why is there something rather than nothing? Where did something come from? It is an argument that points to the majesty of the created world as evidence of God's existence. We see this in our passage from Hebrews:

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

We encounter something that gives the impression of order and design, whether it's a computer or a banner hanging from the wall, and we tend to assume that someone *made* it. Same goes for the world.

There are other arguments, too, but I don't have time to look at them all. Mostly, all approaches circle in some way back to the question of, "Do we believe that there is a creative being behind the cosmos or not?"

This really is the rock-bottom question behind it all.

Do we believe that there is a meaning and intention behind all this? Or that the universe and us as a part of it are accidents?

Is the world that we encounter with our five senses a "closed system" or is it possible that there is something (or someone) outside of it? Something (or someone) who calls to us, who has left clues, signposts, markers to follow?

N.T. Wright refers to this idea that the world points beyond itself as "echoes of a voice"

1. **Justice:** all human beings and cultures have a sense of right and wrong, fairness; we may not always act according to it or even agree about the parameters, but every society has always proceeded according to some version of social order
2. **Spirituality:** virtually every human culture throughout history has had some sense of a transcendent realm that human beings can connect with
3. **Community:** we have a desire to love and to be loved; we have a sense, even if we don't always act according to it, that we were made to need each other
4. **Beauty:** all human beings have expressions of art and culture and music which go far beyond just meeting the needs of daily life and survival

According to Wright, these universal human experiences all point beyond themselves, to the existence of a God who is creative, who is powerful, and who has a purpose to creation that encompasses morality, community, and beauty.

But do these echoes *prove* the existence of God? The second part of Leah's question was, "How do we know?"

The short answer is, "We don't." At least not if by "know" we mean, "I have 100% certainty and proof that cannot be disputed."

Each of Wright's four "echoes" could be interpreted differently.

Our hunger for justice and community could be interpreted as elaborate survival instincts that enhance group cohesion. Our spiritual instincts and longing for beauty could be weird evolutionary anomalies.

When it comes to ultimate questions, nobody is operating in the realm of proof.

There is a common misconception that "science" has somehow disproven religion or God, but this is fundamentally a category mistake.

Science examines what can be observed in the physical world. Any conclusions about what, if anything, the world revealed by science might *mean* operate in the realm of philosophy and theology and metaphysics.

I once heard someone compare it to reading a book. Science can analyze the chemical composition of the ink, can describe the texture of the paper, can measure the book's weight and width and all kinds of other things.

You could come up with a precise and perfectly accurate description of the physical properties of the book, *yet not be one step closer to the most important questions: What does the book mean? What story is it trying to tell? What was the reason it was written? Who wrote it?*

We need different tools for those kinds of questions.

The same is true for life in general. We can prove many things in this world, but when it comes to the important stuff, proof is off the table."

I once made a list of all the important things that I can't prove (I am fond of making lists ☺):

I can't prove that my understanding of goodness is true.

My moral convictions are among the most important aspects of who I am and understand myself to be... But they could be nothing more than the result of my cultural upbringing or some kind of biological imperative toward reciprocal altruism on overdrive.

I can't prove that beauty is real.

I know how a beautiful sunset over the ocean or a majestic mountain view or a visually stunning piece of art or a breathtaking piece of music makes me feel—that such experiences can reduce me to tears or stunned silence or take-my-shoes-off reverence.... But these could just be fleeting impressions and responses that are encoded in my genes to trick me into thinking life is more tolerable than it is.

I can't prove that my love for my wife and my kids is real.

I can't prove that the whole range of love and longing and desire and connection and joy and fulfillment is anything more than the elaborate outworkings of primal lust and the an instinct to pass along my genetic material.

I can't prove that the kingdom of God exists.

I can't prove that there is a deep undercurrent to all of history that looks and sounds a lot like Jesus and his way of being in the world. I can't prove that this kingdom is always advancing and that, despite at times overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it will one day be fully realized. I can't prove that this isn't all just one interpretation of the evidence among many. I can't prove that this isn't just "stuff Christians tell each other to justify our existence."

I can't prove that the church is the body of Christ on earth.

I am convinced that, despite all of our collective sin and stupidity, the church is the bride of Christ, the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world... But I can't prove this. It could just be a glorified social club.

I can't prove that my deep sense that a hopeful future awaits us is true.

I believe right down in my bones that new creation is possible and that it is promised... But it could just be that I am afraid of dying and will countenance any fanciful tale to make this reality more palatable.

And, I can't prove that there is a God.

I can't prove that there is a source and consummation for all of this joy and hope and longing and desire, that there is a balm for the wounds of our world, that there is forgiveness of sin, salvation, and new life. I can't prove that all of this isn't just one enormous exercise in wish projection.

Each of these things matters deeply to me. And I can't prove that my experience of a single one of them is objectively true or that it makes contact with anything beyond, well, me.

And, increasingly, I'm ok with this.

The thing is, it's theologically interesting and significant that God has left us in this situation.

It's almost as if God has said, "you know what, I'll let you play around in the sandbox of certainty and proof for as long as you like, and you'll probably come to think that the rules that apply there work everywhere else too.

But the truth is, once you leave the sandbox, once you decide you want to explore the rest of the park or the garden or the forest, you're going to have to use different tools.

You're going to have to learn that there is more than one way to know something.

You're going to have to rely on things like relationship, intuition, humility, and, above all, faith and trust.

This is what the ancients were commended for, it says in Hebrews.

You're going to have to realize that you're not in control any more, that life is not just about your poking and prodding and evaluating and making demands of 'the evidence' but of you answering a few questions and demands of your own.

Our passage this morning concludes with these words:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

He rewards those who earnestly seek him. What might those rewards be?

Alex Rosenberg, professor of philosophy at Duke university and atheist, once said,

There is . . . in us all the hankering for a satisfactory narrative to make "life, the universe and everything" (in Douglas Adams's words) hang together in a meaningful way. When people disbelieve in God and see no alternative, they often find themselves wishing they could believe, since now they have an itch and no way to scratch it.¹

I think that one of the reward of faith, of taking the risk and committing ourselves to the belief that God exists means that we can believe that we have this itch because it was made to be scratched.

Or, perhaps another way of saying it would be, that one of the rewards of faith is that of having a coherent view of the very things that matter most to us. These are not just cosmic accidents that happen to make us feel good.

Who we are and what we love and what matters to us and what moves us and what we hunger for are itches that we need to scratch *because it reflects the nature of the God that we believe in and that we are convinced created us and the world.*

We can't prove it. But we don't need to.

¹ <https://harpers.org/blog/2012/07/the-literary-response-to-radical-atheism/>

We are invited to a relationship of trust.

So, to wrap things up, I want to return to where it began. The question of a little girl wondering if God is real.

I would say—to her and to all of us—yes, God is real. I can't prove it to you. But I can encourage you to pay attention to the world and to yourself and to the deepest and most important things that make life worth living.

Music, art, justice, beauty, hope, desire, love.

None of these things can be proved in the way that we can prove that $1+1=2$. But these are the very things that make life worth living, the very things that we believe we were made for.

To believe that God is real means to believe that God has made the world and you and me to pursue these things, to respond to them, to be moved by them.

It means that we itch in these ways because the itch was meant to be scratched.

This is good news because it means that human beings really do reflect God's image in countless ways.

Amen.

