

"Am The LORD"—Do you believe it?

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

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There was a time when America was built on the belief in God. God was at the foundation of life. We put on our coins the phrase, "In God we trust." And we pledge allegiance to "one nation under God." (Though as recently as last March, those words were questioned in a US Court of Appeals: the wording "under God" was upheld 2-1, with the argument that the words were ceremonial and did not constitute the establishment of a religion.)

There is disagreement about God. This house we all live in—in this society—no longer has a firm foundation in God. All around the house, the garden is polluted. The walls are falling down—literally, from extremist attack, as on 9/11. Is it that we are functioning too much as individual people and individual nations, out to meet our individualistic needs and materialistic goals? Is it that we cannot seem to work together? Groups are fighting against one another: Republicans against Democrats in Congress, Muslims against Christians in Egypt and Iraq. Any sense of sharing and harmonious living is hard to find in this so-called global village. The roof that should provide shelter and protection is caving in. The rooms of the house that should be welcoming rooms seem to be closed off, at least to certain people. The door is boarded up, and at the threshold, where one might go out into the world, the mission is unclear, and hopes for the world are undefined. When we leave the house, we cannot even agree where we are going.

For a few weeks here at St. John's, we'll be talking about our beliefs, how they are the same and how they are different from other groups'. Today we are looking at the belief in God—theism, as opposed to atheism. Next week we will look at the three Abrahamic religions—all monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The following week we will talk about Christianity, and then finally we will conclude and land back home again on United Methodist ground.

In the United States, somewhere between 6 and 9% say they do not believe there is a God. This statistic is difficult to quantify exactly because—who or what *is* God? Some say God is a "personal God," others say God is a "life force." And non-believers often do not identify themselves as atheists because, until quite recently, "atheist" was considered a bad word. But today in a world influenced by the rise of science and technology, a history of Communism, and a declining identification with organized religion, more people claim openly to be atheists. The past 20 years have seen a fall in religious identity in the United States. 13% belong to no religious group. Only 32% attend a religious service weekly (Gallup).

The reasons atheists give for not believing in God are ones I think we can understand. Atheists don't see any proof for the existence of God. (And I have to agree; there is no scientific proof.) Atheists can't make sense of a God who would allow evil and suffering in

the world. (And I have to agree that this is a tough theological question to come to terms with. But I have to say, that we have come to terms with it in our denomination.) Atheists say they don't need religion; they can choose to live ethically without it. (Yes, I agree one can so choose; however, my belief in God is a big help to me in ethical living.) And then there are atheists who say they don't believe in God because they don't believe in an afterlife. (Actually many people who believe in God do not believe in a physical afterlife.) Some atheists look at God through the lens of fundamentalist Christianity, and don't want any part of it. Finally, many atheists admit that they just didn't grow up with a belief in God, and why should they develop such a belief now?

I have respect for thoughtful people who have decided not to believe in God. I believe it is a good thing that our Constitution divides church and state. Our freedom to practice our faith is based on the same freedom for others to choose not to practice any faith. Atheists, on the average, are well informed about world religions. They are intelligent and, typically, law-abiding citizens.

So why *do we* believe in God?

Many of us grew up in the church. We have positive experience of the church and personal experience of God in our lives. Some of us have been looking for a spiritual connection and somehow we ended up here—perhaps due to an invitation, or a personal yearning, or maybe it was a life crisis that brought us here. Buy why here, to a place where people believe in God?

What is it that makes us want to believe in God? Here's what you have said:

"I believe in God, not because someone said God exists, but because in my personal journey through life, through sorrow and joy, I continue to feel a powerful, loving, guiding force, much greater than myself." Louise Graves

"I believe in God because God is ever present in my self and works through me -- unless my free will overrides God's will." Gail Claus

[Why do we believe in God?] "Because we have felt his presence and his answer to prayer many times in our lives." Ron & Gyann Malone

"My parents taught me about God. My heart and soul feel God's presence. My eyes see the beauty and perfection He created. How could I not believe in God?"
Becky Jackson

"I believe in God, to give meaning and relevance to my life, and to give me hope."
Sandra Exelby

"I believe in God because I believe in love, because I've seen the beauty of a rainbow and heard the roaring of the ocean, because something deep within me is incomplete without seeking a Divine Presence in my life." Shirley Spina

"If there were no God there would be no reason to have an individual soul or spirit and to feel profound love, both of which I think most of us possess." Wendy Horton

"To me it is abundantly clear that this amazingly intricate web of life is not random in any way; there is intelligent design in every corner of the universe." Leslie Cozad

"Because: Our bodies do not require Love to survive, and yet Love abounds everywhere—how could this be true without God?" Allan Webb

"Because I see God in beautiful nature all around us." Margot Godolphin

"I believe in God because I have felt Him; another power guiding me through my life, helping me along my way, and in my heart I know that guidance is provided by the Being known as God." Sara Ford

"I was fortunate to have parents who taught me about God when I was a small child and Life's experiences over my lifetime [ninety years] have reinforced His existence enumerable times." Kay Talbott

"I believe in God because He's always been there for me when I needed Him." Patricia Pall

"I believe in God because when I ask for guidance, and listen, He is there for me." Helen Gilstrap

"Because there is so much beauty in nature and the world,... butterflies, roses, sunsets, witnessing the miracle of new life, how could I not believe in God? Also being brought up in a Christian home started me off on the right track." Sharon Stoneburner

"Even at the worst times of my childhood there was always a feeling of love and hope in my heart that whispered to me my life could be amazing and I would make it what I wanted one way or the other. Who I am today is an example of breaking the cycle of abuse, proving statistics wrong and always having faith."

Jackie Whitright

"I believe in God because at some point, I knew there was something more than what meets the eye, something bigger, a loving and caring God that loves me, watches over me, listens to my prayers--that someone is my Heavenly Father." Trudy Nye

"To believe in God is to hold a newborn baby, look at a sunset, feel the wind on your face and hear a beautiful piece of music." Darlene Bradley

And from people who prefer to remain anonymous:

"All I have to do is pray with all my heart and his calming presence is felt."

"Wow, my belief is such an inner spiritual thing, I just trust the path is always led by my higher power. Can't tell you why, except it is a strong gut thing."

"Faith in God, a power that surpasses human understanding, gives meaning to my existence."

There you have it—from the experts.

The bottom line is WE CHOOSE to believe in God. We want to have a relationship with the sacred in our lives.

The Book of Isaiah gives us a look at what God has to offer. The book is, in part, a story of doom and disaster. But it is also a story of hope and restoration. God says, "I am the LORD." You are "my chosen." "I have called you ...I have taken you by the hand and kept you." Through you, I have given a covenant, which is to be a "light to the nations to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Is. 42:6-7). Even though you have sinned, even though you have taken other gods and ignored me, you are still my people! And I give you the promise of hope that life will be good.

I think this is really what we all want—hope, hope that life will be good. When relationships break down, when death disrupts our lives, when illness threatens, and jobs and life circumstances are in jeopardy, ...We want to know in our hearts, there is still hope. And when there is nothing else, there is still God, something beyond ourselves to rely on. Someone to talk to in prayer. Some foundation on which to build our lives.

We can't prove there is a God, but we can speak to God. We can't see God, but we can feel God's presence. We can't spell out exactly the attributes of God, but we can live with an assurance that a force greater than ourselves matters in the world. We can't always believe that God can fix everything, but we can believe that God wants goodness for us, because we call ourselves God's children, after all. We can't know exactly what God can do, but we can guess pretty clearly what God would have us do about making a better world for all of God's creation.

Rebecca Ann Parker and John Buehrens have written a book called *A House for Hope*. The idea is that progressive religion offers hope for the 21st century.

The picture starts with a garden—God's holy ground, and the challenge for us is to care for the garden. We need the beauty of nature to experience God—we need pure water, living water; we need mountaintop experiences of God—last weekend our family took in a sunset over Bodega Bay—amazing!

Then the "house of hope" must have sheltering walls. We need to gather together with people of other faiths and denominations to build strong walls—the church needs to be that kind of coming together to support community values and to work for the common good.

The "house of hope" has to have a sound roof to protect the marginalized in our society. We need to provide a sanctuary for those who experience prejudice for their life style or ethnicity or social class, or whatever separates them.

The "house of hope" needs to have a foundation that is the basis of trust—in our tradition, we call our foundation God. A progressive doctrine of God is inclusive, liberating, and creative.

And in the "house of hope" are welcoming rooms that offer a sense of the holy. Gandhi said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave."

And finally the threshold of the "house of hope" must lead to a new way of being. We need to enter into dialogue with factions and groups with whom we disagree. We need to respond to God's call to create a just society and a community of world peace.

I believe in a God with whom we can be in relationship. This is a living, changing God. I understand God through the teachings of Jesus, the Christ, who believed deeply in God. Peter in his sermon to the early followers of Christ said, "God shows no partiality." God is available to all. We just have to choose to believe and then to follow.

As for me, I believe there is a God at the foundation of this "house of hope." I know *I want* to believe in God; I know *I need* to believe in God. And I invite others to find the freedom and the joy that I have found in having a relationship with God in my life. If God means something to you that matters deeply in your life, I invite you to say, "Amen."