

Series: "Core Christianity"
Part 1: "What About God"

I'm beginning a series of messages called "Core Christianity" – "*Basic Beliefs That Have Stood the Test of Time*". In these messages we will look at the core beliefs of the Christian faith that have endured for 2,000 years, and are still giving meaning and purpose to millions of people today. At times I will refer to how *United Methodists* have interpreted these beliefs. I realize this can be a drawback, since most people today couldn't care less about denominations. But since we are a United Methodist congregation, it might be informative if we can get a United Methodist's spin on these historic beliefs of Christianity.

Perhaps the best place to begin is to think about *what Christians believe about God*. Any religion starts with a belief in some kind of god or deity.

Of course, there are people who don't believe there is a God: atheists. A study by the Pew Research group in 2014 found that 3.1% of Americans claim to be atheists. This is almost double from the 1.6% of Americans who claimed to be atheists in 2007.

An atheist was spending a quiet day fishing when suddenly his boat was attacked by the Loch Ness monster. In one easy flip, the beast tossed him and his boat high into the air, then opened its mouth to swallow both the man and the boat. As the man sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh God, help me!" At once, the scene froze into place, and as the atheist hung in mid-air, a booming voice came down from the clouds, "I thought you didn't believe in Me." "Come on, God, give me a break!" the frightened man responded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either!"

Some people are atheists. ***But there are also agnostics: people who may believe in a God if somebody could prove it, but are just skeptical and say they don't know that there is a God.*** According to the same Pew study in 2014, 4% of people in the U.S. say they are agnostics - up from the 2.4% seven years earlier (2007) who claimed they were agnostics.

So, just as the percent of Americans who claim no religious affiliation is on the rise, so apparently is the percent of Americans who either doubt or deny the existence of any God.

But, still, most people believe in some kind of a God. And, the God Christians believe in is the God described in the pages of the Bible. The Bible doesn't try to prove the existence of God. Rather, the Bible just *assumes* God exists, and is *involved* in the world and in human life.

What is this Christian God like, the God revealed in the Bible? How do you

describe “God” in a 20-25 minute sermon? If I had 20 hours, 20 days, 20 years to describe what the Christian God is like, I couldn’t do it! Because *no one* can fully describe or understand God! God is beyond our human comprehension. God is that “mysterious Other” – separate and different from all created things. This is part of what the Bible means when it says God is “holy”. Holy means “separate” – God is the “Wholly Other” one!

Because of this, no one can fully understand the Almighty! In the Old Testament, the Book of Job asks this: “Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7). It is assumed here that the answer is “no”! No sermon, no book, no creed, no teaching says all there is to say about the Eternal One. No person, no group, no church has the Almighty in their hip pocket. Although, I’ve met some Christians who give the impression that they’ve got God in their corner, they’ve got God all figured out. A young woman related to a family in a church I served died suddenly. I visited with her grief-stricken husband and children. A relative was there who sang in a gospel quartet. During a time of prayer this man prayed something like this: “O Lord, we can understand why You have this...we understand your ways...”. I felt like screaming, “Well I don’t!” (as I thought of this young lady’s untimely death).

Listen to what God says in Isaiah 55:8-9: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

But while nobody can completely understand God or God's ways, Scripture tells us that **God longs to make Himself known to us humans**. How does that happen? How can we begin to experience the reality of God?

Well, we can’t know or understand God through our own human efforts.

1 Corinthians 1:21 says bluntly, “The world did not know God through wisdom.” No matter how smart I am, no matter if I get an “A” in a philosophy class, no matter how much time I spend out in nature thinking about God, no matter how much I get involved in religion – I can’t know or understand God through my own efforts.

We can only know God if God chooses to make Himself known to us! Let’s use an analogy here. Say you’re a teenage boy. A new girl moves into your school and is in some of your classes. She's pretty, and you’re interested! So, you can gather information about her: she's about 5’4” tall, has long brown hair, has an attractive face and a nice figure. She's in your English lit and algebra classes. She also plays on the field hockey team. You ask around and find out she moved from Ohio, and her family lives on Ridge Ave. Thus, you know some things *about her*, but you don’t *know her*. And whether or not you ever get to know her depends on whether or not she chooses to let that happen. You can try to strike up a friendship with her.

You can talk to her in class. She may or may not reciprocate. You can ask her out on a date. She might say no, or, she could go out with you, and maybe you start to date, and as you talk she begins to slowly reveal her inner thoughts and feelings, who she really is, what she's really like. But only if *she chooses that*.

This is the way it is with God, and us. **The good news is that God has taken steps to reveal Himself and His will to us.** He has done it through certain *people*. He has done it through certain *events in history!* And our *Bible* is the Book that tells the story of God: *the Bible is the written record of how God has revealed Himself in human life and history.* In the Old Testament, God made Himself known through a people called Hebrews, and especially through leaders and prophets such as Abraham, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Amos and the like. In the New Testament God revealed Himself supremely through a man named Jesus of Nazareth. God revealed His mind and heart to the fullest degree in this man Jesus. And it's when we *surrender ourselves to Jesus and put our faith in Him that we come to know and experience God!*

Well, if God has revealed Himself, especially in the person of Jesus, **what is this God like?** In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) and Methodist Church merged to form the United Methodist Church. Each had statements of belief: the Articles of Religion of the Methodists, and the Profession of Faith of the EUB Church. United Methodists simply carried both of those documents over when the merger took place. See what each says of "God":

The Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church

Article 1. Of Faith in the Holy Trinity. There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

The Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church

Article 1. God. We believe in the one true, holy and living God, Eternal Spirit, who is Creator, Sovereign and Preserver of all things visible and invisible. He is infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men, to the glory of his name. We believe the one God reveals himself as the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, distinct but inseparable, eternally one in essence and power.

Christians believe in the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). This is one of the great mysteries of God that we cannot fully explain. We worship *one God* (monotheism) – yet God expressed Himself in three ways: as *Father* – the Father in heaven; as *Son* - God's Son Jesus, God in human flesh and form; and as *Spirit* - the

Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God present and active in the world. We believe in one God – revealed in 3 forms.

Christians believe God is eternal. God wasn't part of the created order. God has no beginning, and no end. God always was, and always will be. One of the most thrilling things about our faith is that God invites us into a relationship with Himself that will never end! We'll talk more about this in the last message in this series.

Christians believe God is infinite in power. Psalm 147:5 says, "Great is our Lord and mighty in power". 1 Chronicles 29:11-12 tells of the awesome, unlimited power of God! "Yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all." The encouraging word here is that God's unlimited power is available to us when we desire the things that God desires!

When we talk about the unlimited power of God, we can also talk about **the sovereignty of God: we believe God is sovereign.** This can mean a number of things, but in the end, it means *God rules. God is in control!* Nothing can ultimately thwart or destroy God's purposes! No matter how awful things get in human history...how evil people become...how much sorrow and tragedy there is...nothing ultimately defeats the purposes of God. The Psalm writer summed it up: "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice!" (Psalm 97:1).

Also, we believe God is a God of justice. There are numerous verses in the Bible that talk about this quality of God. For instance, Psalm 9:7-8 reads: "The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice." Ultimately, God rewards goodness and punishes evil. God will balance the scales of justice. And every human being will face our Maker to be judged. *Our generation* tends to sweep this part of God's character aside. Many make God into a giant Mr. Softee who just sort of smiles and overlooks evil and wrong. It is incredible how flippant and casual some people can be about the Living God! But the God Christians believe in is continually working out His judgments in history, and will ultimately judge individuals and nations in a wise and fair way.

But the God Christians believe in is not just this sovereign, all-powerful God who is judge of all people. God is also a **God of love.** 1 John 4:8 says this as clearly and simply as it can be said, "God *is* love." Not just God loves, but God *is* love! I know, we've heard this so often, but do we get it? The awesome Creator, this holy God, is the embodiment of love. And God loves *us*.

The God of the Christian faith is not just some impersonal, distant deity, some “life force”, but a God who cherishes and cares for what He has made, and that includes us! 1 Peter 5:7 assures us, “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares for you.”

God’s loving nature expresses itself in a number of ways. For instance, **God is good.** “O taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). I like the response that some Christians use today: “God is good, all the time,” followed by, “And all the time, God is good.” God wants good things for us! God is moving creation towards His *good* purposes. As the EUB Confession of Faith has it: God is “infinite in power, wisdom, justice, goodness and love, and rules *with gracious regard for the well-being and salvation of men.*”

God’s love is also expressed in His mercy and forgiveness. Psalm 145:8-9 in a beautiful way describes this quality of God: “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” Over and over the Bible shows that when we humble ourselves before God and own up to our shortcomings, God extends mercy to us and forgives us! ***This forgiveness was bought and paid for by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross!*** I once saw a film in which a huge, brawny pro football player, a Christian, sang in a beautiful voice, “No one ever cared for me like Jesus; there’s no other friend so kind and true. No one else could take the sin and darkness from me; oh how much He cared for you.”

In closing, here's a question I'd like to ask: Do you know this God whom Christians worship? A lot of people know some things *about God*, but have not yet entered into a personal *relationship* with God, through which we really come to *know and experience God*. One of the most incredible things about the faith we proclaim is that you and I can have an intimate, close relationship with Creator of all things! Imagine that! It can happen, when we invite Jesus Christ into our life, and surrender ourselves, and our will, to Him!

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