



Trinity Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD, THE FATHER

Sermon for Easter 7, May 8, 2016

Readings: Acts 16:16-34; Ps 97; Rev 22:12-21; John 17:20-26

Sermon text: As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
John 17:21

This is the first of three sermons on the Trinity and the Creeds.

Today is Mother's Day—so first of all, many blessings, many thanks to all you mothers of children, and for that matter all you who mother—care for, nurture, love—children. And if that doesn't cover the bases, blessings to all who have mothers.

It is wonderful that this morning we also have a baptism, Lisa Jager. So not only do we remember mothers but also godmothers—and godfathers.

Family. A great idea. I'm glad someone came up with it. Or perhaps it was built into the very essence of creation—note, not the *universe*, not just the physical material aspect of things that sometimes we call nature—but *creation*, the universe as an intentional and purposeful subject of a creator. We believe creation was made to be in relation with its creator—and not just any relation but one of love. And this creator, whose shorthand name is God, is essentially and eternally relational—familial. As we Christians put it, God is a Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Or, as we may say with a special nod this morning, Mother, Child, Union.

There are many ways to speak of the Trinity—and I will touch on several over the course of these three Sundays. But this morning I would like to begin with the Beginning, the Father/Mother who begets the Son/Child, from whom the Spirit processes as if in overflowing love, and who is the source and ground of being.

We make a couple of claims about God the Father in our creeds. The main one is that we believe **there is a God the Creator**, maker of heaven and earth. We will affirm this claim together later in the service in a question and answer version of the Apostles Creed, embedded in a slightly longer set of questions and answers that together we call the Baptismal Covenant. In summary form it spells out the basic tenets of our beliefs about God the Three-in-One, and about what it means to a follower or disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is the touchstone text of our Christian Faith and Way.

For this reason, I think it is worth taking some time to unpack the Trinitarian creed over the course of several Sundays—for much that we routinely say on a Sunday morning we may find difficult to believe or understand; this leads to “cognitive dissonance” (as if science and faith are clashing in our mind), if not outright feelings of hypocrisy (as if we are merely mouthing claims we do not in any sense truly believe). But it may be that we find ourselves straining to believe because we haven’t yet understood the deep meaning and truth claims of the creeds and the moral and ethical claims of the Covenant. So let us take some time and really reflect on this subject. We should not only know the creeds by memory—a task I am asking the confirmands to undertake—but by heart.

Let us start with the first article of the Apostles Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”

This is the first and most fundamental question to answer: Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe that there is a God who created this universe we live in? Or is all this universe just a roll of the cosmic dice, one of an infinite number of possible universes? Is it *creation*, or (mere) *nature*?

For most of history the existence of divinity was unquestionable. Of course there were gods—how else explain the mysterious workings of the world? And, the practical question, how could humans influence this spiritual world of deities good and evil, benign and threatening? The fears and hopes and just-so stories of humanity were projected onto human-like deities.

But things changed with the dawn of modern science and critical history. An option for atheism, or at least agnostic skepticism, is open, the case for it persuasively made by popular authors, and in the western world there is little or no social stigma attached (it is now somewhat on the other foot: it can be awkward to publicly state and defend one’s Christian faith). Scientists do not need “the hypothesis of god” to unlock the causes behind the phenomena we encounter—phenomena we used to attribute to God or gods when no other cause could be found. Critical history and the comparative study of world religions has also shown the structure and variability of religious traditions. Which of the many world religious traditions has a claim supported in any way that the others are not? Is there any proof, any evidence? Theories stemming from Darwin explain human religion as an evolutionary adaptation useful for social cohesion and metaphysical explanation—creating a “sacred canopy,” as Peter Berger called it—but religion can also be dangerous and used for motivating and deepening tribal clashes. Do we really need a mythical story to explain where we came from, why we are here and where we are going? Many say no.

But I think we have to pause and make a distinction between religions whose gods work within nature and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition of a single transcendent God (monotheism). We neither need nor ought to take stories of creation, such as we find in Genesis (and other traditions), literally. They are not scientific or historical explanations. But they do make a claim. And the claim of the Jews (and Christians and Muslims), embodied in the Genesis story, is that there is but one God, capital G, the sole creator of all that is, seen

and unseen. A God who is the source and ground of all that is, Being itself (Exodus 3:14), outside the universe of space and time and matter—creating all of it from nothing, or from the formless and void *prima materia* (depending on how you read Genesis 1).

The question then is this: is it reasonable, if not necessary, to believe in the existence of God the Creator? Do you believe this universe is self-generated, and that stars in the galaxies, life on earth and conscious minds are purely the result of matter and energy working out through time and space the laws (and odd quirks and quarks and random mutations) of physics and chemistry? Do you believe there is no plan, no purpose, no progress toward an end? Or do you believe this universe was created on purpose with a plan and an end to which it is drawn by a Creator we will call the Father?

God or no God? Purpose or accident? Going somewhere or ending in nullity? This is your choice. “Lift the curtain. You try in vain. Yet you must either believe, or deny, or doubt. Is there then no rule? We judge that animals do well what they do. Is there no rule whereby to judge men? To deny, to believe, and to doubt well, are to a man what the race is to a horse” (Pascal, *Pensee* 260).

How then to decide *well*. One choice is to say (or singalong with Iris Dement): “Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from/ Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done./ But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me/ I think I'll just let the mystery be.”

But I think it makes a difference whether we believe in God or not. If there is God, then certain challenges and opportunities present themselves. The big challenge is the problem of evil and innocent suffering. I will hold on that one this morning—but believe me, it is a problem I faced when coming to faith. The big opportunity (and also challenge) is to live in a world full of meaning and “charged with grandeur” (Gerard Manley Hopkins); giving one hope in a life beyond this one, challenging one to live in this life up to the example and teaching of Christ (or, for others, Moses and Mohammed, Buddha or Confucius). And this is the choice I made—to follow Jesus—which I will talk about in the third of these sermons. You may make a different choice—and if there is no God, the path you take is up to you—both a liberating challenge and a deeply troubling prospect, considering the devices and desires of the human heart.

I think belief in God is a truly rational decision. It is not based on proof but there are grounds for making the choice to believe in God the Creator. Consider two aspects of this universe: cosmic evolution and the brain/mind.

For much of my life the scientific story of the birth and development of the universe has been told in a pretty comprehensible way: it started with a Big Bang some 14.6 billion years ago (what came before? big question; put that aside). The first second and years were full of strange physics but then things settled down, gravity gather stars and galaxies, stars exploded creating heavier elements, planets coalesced in orbits around stars, including this planet around the sun, somehow self-replicating matter strung up, the rest is a story told by Darwin, not needing God's hand for special creation. It will either end with a bang (as gravity pulls the whole kit back together) or a whimper (silence and dispersal into space).

The story got weird in 1998 when the newly launched Hubble telescope discovered that the universe was expanding at an accelerating speed. What causes that? You would think a “big bang” would start fast and slow over time. It is picking up speed. How? All sorts of explanations have come up involving dark energy and dark matter. Between the two of them they make up for over 95% on all the

“stuff” in the universe; so the observable data suggests. Somehow space has energy—so as the universe expands it creates more energy. Not sure how this squares with the first law of thermodynamics but I am way past my depth here. The point is just that there is so much unknown and puzzling (we haven’t even touched on quarks at a distance) that it is not even close to fair for anyone to claim the case against God as Creator is closed.

For one thing the history of the universe displays a set of emergent properties, all of which are built on the prior level(s), but which are not predictable from or reducible to them: physics to chemistry to biology to zoology to psychology. Another puzzling feature is the brain: the most complex and densely ordered matter in the observable universe: 100 billion neurons in an average adult brain; pretty much matching the number of observable stars in the Milky Way. Add a thousand synapses per neuron and you get into some really large numbers. And somehow this dense stuff gives rise to mind. What is that and how is that related to matter? Nobody really knows (check out Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*.) Is what we think—awareness, truth, beauty—a genuine feature of the universe, like all others, or some sort of fantastic anomaly? Don’t jump to conclusions. Check to see if your assumptions are truly warranted and your beliefs are justifiable.

I think that I have reasonable beliefs and a justified faith; I am making warranted assertions based on my own experience correlating with that of millions of others. But that does not mean they are compelling to everyone; there are no proofs of God.

But this is sure: the universe is contingent, not necessary. And the question of why there is something rather than nothing is not as easily brushed aside as some would claim. Theists have an answer. Science doesn’t. Maybe this is a random event—one of trillions of possible universes. Maybe it is a bubble in a multiverse glass of champagne. Or maybe the universe is the body of God—who has made it for the joy and glory—and we who are emerging into consciousness of God are partaking in mind of the Father.

Are you there, we can ask to the heavens. You will not hear an answer. That does not mean there is no one there. It could mean you have not turned your receiver to the right frequency.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. It makes sense to me. But the rubber hits the road when we walk with Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Tune in for more next week. In the name of Christ, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY