**Why.**

**Exploring the Answer to Everyone’s Question**

Message 2 – “Why We Believe”

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

June 14, 2020

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I remember it was a normal Sunday morning. I attended the small Sunday school class in the basement of Norwich Baptist Church. When Sunday School let out I ran up the stairs to the sanctuary where I claimed the seat next to Grandma Jessie. The service soon began and we sang hymns, we prayed, passed the offering plates, and read from the Bible. It was a normal Sunday morning.

As the pastor rose to the pulpit that morning, I remember my thoughts began to wander away from the church service. I zoned out for a moment—remember I was only nine. I remember looking carefully at the stained-glass windows, the deep red carpet and the dark wood pews. The heavy white ceiling hung over us and I traced the pressed plaster pattern from one end of the room to the next. This wasn’t a large sanctuary, but I imagined that at least two hundred people could be seated comfortably if two hundred people ever came to Norwich Baptist Church at the same time. That was rarely the case. Social distancing wasn’t too difficult to accomplish in that church at that time. We had plenty of space to spread out.

I remember surveying the room and looking at everyone dressed in their Sunday best—noticing that while we all lived in the same small town, we all looked very differently from one another. Yet, we were here for the same reason. We believed.

We shared a common belief that Jesus Christ was our Lord and Savior and, together, we came to the same place every week to sing songs, to pray and to hear the word of God proclaimed in our lives. But on this day, on this one specific day, as my mind wandered during the onset of the pastor’s sermon, I considered something that made my heart sink to my feet in an instant—what if all of this isn’t real? What if everything we believed about church was just a figment of our collective imaginations? It occurs to me, when I look back on this day that I had my first crisis of faith.

I think we’ve all had moments like this where our doubts become so strong that we are stopped dead in our tracks. I’ve certainly explored doubts that I’ve had in my faith and belief in God. And the reason I believe I can speak so openly about it to you today is that in each of those examples I’ve seen my faith grow deeper and more reliant on him in each episode of disbelief. In fact, it seems like *the bigger the doubt, the deeper my faith ultimately grows.*

If you have recently experienced doubt in who God is and how much he cares for you, I’d like to take a look at the beginning of John’s Gospel, and this is probably my most favorite passage of scripture, it says,

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* ***All things*** *came into being through him, and* ***without him not one thing came into being****. What has come into being in him was life, and* ***the life was the light of all people****.* ***The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it***(**John 1:1-5**).

As an English major, I’ve always held this passage of scripture in very high regard. It says, after all, in the beginning was the *Word*. English majors love words. In this case, “the Word” is a reference to Jesus—the eternal Word and expression of God himself. As the prologue to John’s gospel proclaims, Jesus was with God in the very beginning, before any of this that you and I call creation was formed.

John’s gospel says, “***all*** *things came into being through him*.” So, this is really quite interesting. Not only did all of creation, that is everything we can see and experience here on Earth, come into being through Christ, but I believe everything that forms our beliefs, feelings, anxieties, and pain came to be through Christ as well. And I think this can give us some sense of comfort to know that when we experience pain, when we feel depressed, when we have doubt, when our beliefs put us at odds with one another, Christ is in it with us. Nothing comes into being without Christ.

At the root of our belief in God, we know that He is the creator of all things. Through his son Jesus Christ we are redeemed, and when our belief in him is challenged, when doubt seems to grab a hold of us and not let us go, do not be afraid. God is with us even when we doubt.

Over the past few weeks I’ve been following a story in the Christian music industry. John Steingard, a guitar player and singer for the band Hawk Nelson, recently wrote a lengthy post on his Instagram feed that explained how, after being a Christian his entire life and leading a rather well-known Christian band, he no longer believes in God. Reading his words, I could easily sense the pain and frustration that he must have felt welling up for years. And, in one click of the “send” button, his disbelief or deconversion was set into motion.

You can find this well-publicized statement for yourself and read through the narrative John shares with his online followers. As you read, you might wonder how God is in this man’s life if he is choosing to no longer share a belief in Him. But, the most telling example of how God continues to work in John’s life can be seen in how his bandmates responded to his post and announcement.

In an interview with Fox News, bandmates Daniel Biro, David Niacaris and Micah Kuiper said in a joint statement, “We are called to love one another unconditionally, as God loves us, it’s our mission to inspire and encourage all people with the truth that God is for them and not against them, and now that mission is for one of our own."

I find that remarkable. In our culture that has become so diversified and vast, our first reaction to something like John Steingard’s statement would be to unfollow him on social media and cast him aside. We’d send him away with our best wishes and we might tell him that we are praying for him. Instead, the three guys that he’s perhaps most closely worked with for the last twenty years quite clearly signaled that John was still loved by God and they committed to walk alongside him. Through their response, I think we can clearly see that God is in all things, including our disbelief.

As I prepared the message for today on belief, I was captured by another deconversion story in the Bible—the story of Judas Iscariot. Dave Grey mentioned Judas last week. As I considered how Judas’s story might serve as an illustration in our message today, I couldn’t help but recognize that I didn’t know much about Judas beyond the fact that he was the one who led the officials to Jesus during his arrest.

In reading more about Judas, I learned that the Bible doesn’t talk about his conversion. We don’t know if he converted after hearing John the Baptist preach or if he began following Jesus very early in his ministry. But in the biblical text we see he is named with the disciples following Jesus almost immediately.

We know he was smart. He was the one in Jesus’s closest circle that managed the money. He was the treasurer of their organization, so he would have known the intricacies of money and finance management.

And, most of all, we know that Judas, being one of the twelve disciples, would have witnessed first-hand Jesus’s miracles and teachings. For three years this band of brothers would have traveled together, broke bread together and prayed together. They were close and they were the start of a remarkable movement that would shape the entire world.

So, why, after all of this, would Judas decide to betray Jesus? Why did he stop believing?

Judas obviously plays an important part in the death and resurrection of Christ. But if you are like me, you may wonder how Judas could make such a dramatic transformation. There are clues in the text about Judas and one that I found really surprising to me is in John 12, when Mary anoints Jesus’s feet with perfume.

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’s feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”*  (**John 12:1-5**)

On the surface this might seem like a reasonable question. 300 denarii after all was about a full year of wages for a common person in Jesus’s time. Adjusted for inflation, that would be like Mary breaking open a bottle of perfume that cost tens of thousands of dollars today. I think Mary’s actions in this moment would have captured the attention of everyone in the room, but it is Judas who speaks in the text and asks the hard question. “Why not sell this and give it to the poor?”

Now, this is part of the story that I’ve always known. I have seen television shows and passion plays act out this scene time and again. It symbolizes so much and serves as a remarkable metaphor for those present. Mary clearly believes Jesus is king of all kings--the Messiah. Her commitment to this belief is illustrated in an ancient ritual that was customary in preparing a king for burial. It is an illustration of worship and reverence.

Though I’ve known this story for years, I have always read right over this parenthetical aside John parks in the narrative in verse 6. It says,

*(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he*

*was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was*

*put into it.)* (**John 12:6**)

And in one verse, a great deal of Judas’s character is revealed. He asked the question above about selling perfume not because he particularly cared about the poor, but because he saw an opportunity to profit further in his position as treasurer. When I read this particular verse, I feel a punch in the chest, because I wonder how many times I’ve put my own interests ahead of God’s best interests for me.

On the one hand, in this scene, you have a picture of complete adoration. Jesus is literally receiving a royal treatment—affirmation yet again that he is the Son of God and the only one who can save us from sins. Mary, in this case is the one who is behaving in response to something she likely sensed through the Holy Spirit and seized the moment so the will of God could be fulfilled.

On the other hand, here stands Judas.

Betrayal is often surprising. It catches us off guard. Indeed, if you’ve ever experienced betrayal at any level it is so memorable because the shock and surprise of the betrayal are accompanied by a deep sense of pain. Someone went out of their way in a very unexpected manner to do something that hurts you directly. But it strikes me that Judas’s betrayal wasn’t a complete surprise to Jesus.

Remember our key phrase from earlier in this message. God created everything. Nothing comes into existence without Him. He is in everything, even in the times we suffer disbelief. Even in his disbelief, Judas followed through with the directions he received from Jesus in one of their final exchanges.

In John 13 Jesus is with his disciples, he had just washed their feet, and the Spirit falls on Jesus. Out of nowhere he says in verse 21,

*“Very truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.” His disciples look at one another unsure of what is happening. They ask, Who? Who would betray you, Lord?”* (**John 13:21**)

Jesus dips bread into a dish and hands it to Judas and says in verse 27,

*“Do quickly what you are going to do.”* (**John 13:27**)

And thus, a series of events are put into motion that would change the trajectory of the world forever.

Indeed, *all* things that have come into being come from God. This is at the very foundation of our beliefs and it is why we can rest assured in the ever-present, everlasting and ever-loving God we serve. Even at the waypoint of ultimate betrayal in the Jesus’s life, when disbelief seemed to drive one of Jesus’s closest friends to betray him, the very will of God is carried out.

I’ve imagined many times these past few months what the conversation would have been like between God and Jesus right before Jesus was sent to Earth. They could see everything together. Everything that happened before and everything that would happen after. They looked down and they saw 9/11, they saw COVID-19, they saw war, injustice, slavery and racism. They saw broken families, broken communities, poverty and natural disasters. They saw you and me. And yet, Jesus came. He lived a blameless life. And before he was raised from the dead, he died a most horrible and torturous death on a cross. Why? Because he believed in you. He believed in you and he believed in me. That is why we believe, because he first believed in us.

Some 300 years after Jesus’s birth The Apostles’ Creed was written as an affirmation of the foundations of the Christian Faith. Here in a moment we are going to recite this statement aloud together—joining the chorus of generations and generations of believers who have proclaimed a belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit--the Trinity that encompasses our belief and faith in the one true God. I invite you now to say the words of the Apostles’ Creed aloud wherever you may be.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;\*
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic\*\* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

If you are able to take elements at home in place of the bread and juice, we can celebrate the Lord’s Supper together (though separately!)

Communion provides us with the opportunity to reflect on who Jesus is and how much he sacrificed for us. The Bible gives many names to Christ in an effort to illustrate his love for us. One example comes from John 8:

*Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (**John 8:12**)

The light of life indeed. All of the light and joy that we see in one another comes from Christ. Another example comes from John 10:

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for*

*the sheep.* (**John 10:11**)

Christ is the good shepherd who laid down his life for us. On the night Jesus, like the good shepherd, gave up his life for us, he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and said,

*This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat. As you do, do so in remembrance of me* (**1 Corinthians 11:24**)

After the supper he took the cup, gave thanks and said,

*This is my blood of the new covenant, shed for the sins of all. Take and drink and as often as you do, do so in remembrance of me.* (**1 Corinthians 11:25**)

Lord, we are not worthy of this meal, but through your tremendous grace we have been redeemed and reconciled with Christ. Let your spirit fall now on these elements here and the elements before your children. Let them become for us the very body and blood of Christ. Amen.