

# How do we know? (The way God reveals himself to us)

Psalm 19:11-6, 14 and Romans 1:18-23

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Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Today, in case you missed last week, we are continuing a sermon series which will take us all the way to Easter (or pretty close to Easter). The series is about what we believe, and it is based loosely on the Apostles' Creed.

In other words, we will spend some time on God the Father, God the Son, and God the holy Spirit.

My colleague in ministry, Sam Gyorfí, will be joining me. On those Sunday mornings when he is scheduled to preach, he will be taking the next piece in the logical progression of ideas.

Last week, we spent some time on the way faith leads us to ask questions – in other words, how right and natural and appropriate, maybe even expected, it is to ask questions about what we believe, because the purpose of those questions is to lead us to a better understanding of God.

You can always ask questions to keep God at a distance, but when we're doing it right, I said, we get closer to the heart of God. That's faith seeking understanding, to quote Augustine, the fourth century theologian from north Africa.

This week, I think it's important for us to ask "how do we know?" In other words, how do we come to an understanding of God? Where do we get our information? Is it the Internet, the source of all knowledge? Or ... is it something else? (Let's hope it's something else.)

And so, this week we'll talk about what is known as "**general revelation**" – how God reveals himself to us in **nature** and **history** and **human life**. And next week we'll talk about what is known as "**special revelation**," the Bible. We are known as people of the book, after all, and we will talk together about that book.

I want to repeat something I said last week – and I will probably do a fair amount of repeating as the weeks go by, because it's important for us to see how all of this fits together. I asked the question, "**Isn't this series going to be a dry and intellectual exercise, something better suited to a seminary classroom than a morning worship service?**"

And to answer that question, I quoted from Soren Kierkegaard, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Danish philosopher and theologian who once said that a believer is someone in love, which to me explains a great deal. People who are in love – maybe you have observed this too – can be scary people. People who are in love are moving toward the object of their love at the speed of light, and it's usually best not to get in the way.

This series will not be a dry and intellectual exercise for the simple reason that we are a people in love. Many of us have built our lives on faith. We have built our identities around Christian faith. I don't see how this can be for us just an intellectual exercise.

If you find yourself having strong feelings about any of this, I want you to know that I know those feelings. I share them. What we are talking about today and in the weeks to come gets at the very center or core of who we are.

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Let's turn now to Paul's Letter to the Romans, the first chapter, to our second scripture reading today. Paul, as many of you know, does not know the Christians in Rome, he has never met them because at this point he has not been to Rome, and partly for that reason he doesn't spend much time with pleasantries. He gets to the purpose of his letter very quickly.

And what I want you to see is his argument here – namely, that there are things we all know or should know. Paul's argument seems to be that you can know God's design or intention just by looking. It's so obvious, he says, that there are no excuses for missing it.

Let's listen to the way he puts it. Let's listen to God's word to us this morning.

**<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Let me ask you something. And I don't mean this to be an upsetting question. And if it is an upsetting question for you, I hope the feeling goes away quickly. The question is, **“How do you know? How do you know what you believe? What are you basing your beliefs on?”**

If you were to ask me that question, I would say that it was my mom and dad who first told me about God. I believed long ago because they believed. It was clear to me, even as a very young child, that their faith was very important to them, so I grew up in a household where faith was accepted and where it was at the center of everything we did.

And then, when I was five years old, I had a Sunday school teacher whom I will never forget. Her name was Alice Peterson. I think I have mentioned her in sermons before. She was very old. She had white hair. She might have been in her mid 50s. That's my guess.

And Mrs. Peterson was the first person outside my family to tell me about Jesus and about Jesus' love for me. It was from her that I learned to sing **“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”** I didn't even know what the Bible was at that point, but I began to sing about it. And to me it sounded wonderful – that Jesus would love me.

After Mrs. Peterson I had a whole series of Sunday school teachers who told me stories about Jesus and also stories from the Old Testament about Abraham and Moses and David and Daniel and many more.

So, my knowledge of God came first from *other people*, people I loved and trusted, people who loved me and thought they were giving me something precious. I think that's the way it is for many of us – even if we didn't grow up in a Christian family. We hear about faith from other people, and they tell us what they have found to be true.

Timothy Keller has called this the “sociology of knowledge.” We find ourselves with people who believe, and so we are introduced to faith through them.

But then – and I don't pretend to know exactly how this works – faith begins to make sense to us, OR NOT, we internalize it and put it together for ourselves, and eventually we make it our own.

OR NOT. It's also possible that we would simply reject what others have said to us.

In either case, if you are taking notes today, maybe the first point to be made is that faith more than anything is a gift. It is given to us. We need to accept it, of course, and we need to make a decision to believe it, of course, but **it always begins as a gift.**

Down through the centuries, theologians have said that receiving this gift is never easy. Human beings are very nearly incapable of receiving a gift as precious as this. It is in our nature to resist it, if you can believe that, although maybe we always resist what is best for us. Even as children there are certain things we don't want to do. Often the first word we learn is **“no!”**

So, theologians have described a specific kind of grace that goes to work in us. Many years later I came to learn the term **“prevenient grace”** – it's not necessary for you to remember that term, but it's a grace that goes to work in us, and it cultivates within us a receptive spirit, and it makes us ready to receive the gift of faith.

John Calvin was a name I learned very early in my life – not the same day I learned the name of Jesus, but soon after. Eventually, I even attended a college named after him. John Calvin – way back in the sixteenth century, in Geneva – wrote that all of us were born with what he called *sensus divinitatis*, a “sense of the divine” or “a seed of religion.”

We human beings, he said, were born with the capacity to know God. I don't know if you've ever thought about this, but I think it's an extraordinary insight. It is almost as though we human beings were wired up for this conversation.

**Scholars who study cave paintings** in western Europe or ancient archeological sites in the near east say that very early in human development there was a surprisingly sophisticated knowledge or awareness of God. Think about that. Human beings – from the beginning – were capable of imagining God, not just in a primitive way, but in quite a sophisticated way.

**Neuroscientists** have done a fair amount of work in recent years on the brain, and at least some of them have been intrigued by the connection between the brain and religious faith.

Maybe you have read studies about Carmelite nuns at prayer. There are apparently places in the prefrontal cortex that light up when a person is in prayer. I should mention that Buddhist monks demonstrate this same capability, as well as other religious people, and I don't know exactly where the research will lead, but it seems clear to scientists that our brains have been wired for the spiritual life.

We were born, as Calvin said, with a capacity to know God, or to comprehend the existence of something greater than ourselves, and human beings have been demonstrating this capacity since the first human beings walked the planet.

I think that is extraordinary. You may not think of yourself as a deeply spiritual person, but however you think of yourself there is within in you a capacity to know God. You may do nothing to cultivate it. You may live your life as though it's not there, but there is something inside you that could, if you let it, feel and experience what we like to call the presence of God.

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Here's something we don't talk about much, but I think we should talk about it more than we do.

Christians have maintained down through the centuries that it's possible to know something about God just by looking around – in other words, not by meditation, and not by looking inward, but by looking at nature, and at history, and at human life in general.

Christians have made the surprising claim that we can know something about God and God's intentions for us just by keeping our eyes open, just by being alert.

And I wonder what you think about that.

Most Christians I know are very pleased with themselves when they see a beautiful sunset and then make the connection to God's majesty. I do that too. Beautiful sunsets – or sunrises, for that matter – never cease to have that effect on me. I hope they never cease to have that effect on me!

But Christians over the centuries – I think you should know this – have gone way beyond beautiful sunsets.

Sunsets, I would say, are an entry level experience of the Christian life. If you've seen a beautiful sunset and then thought of God, well, good for you. But you could (and perhaps you should) go deeper than that. You have within you the capability of going deeper than that.

Christians have said that we can even know something about the character of God, for example, by examining creation. So, a sunset is beautiful, but what about molecular life under a microscope? What about the deepest reaches of the universe that we can now see through telescopes? Is it possible to know something about God because of the discoveries we are making every day in science?

And at this point, of course, I want to say yes!, and I know many of you would like to say yes! as well. It seems so clear, doesn't it, that God has a preference or bias for order, for laws that govern the behavior of objects and planets and stars and so on?

John Calvin – to mention him again – said at one point that if you look at the universe with the spectacles of faith, then you begin to see clues everywhere as to the nature and character of God. The world around us comes alive when we see it through the eyes – or the spectacles – of faith.

And this is why Paul, in our second reading for today (it's quite a well-known reading), says everyone is responsible for at least that much. If you can't see it, he writes, you have no excuses. You're not paying attention. And that may sound harsh, but I don't think it is. And he doesn't intend it to be. We should all be looking around and paying attention, in order to see what God is up to in the world.

And then, from this point, Paul lays out the rest of his argument for the Christian faith.

But I want to pause here and say that there are always going to be limits to what we can know. We can know some things, but not everything. Some of what we see is clear, but a great deal remains hidden.

In fact, sometimes we like to see truths in creation that God never intended. We think we see truths in history that must be of God but that turned out to be our own wishful thinking or even deluded thinking.

Let me give you an example or two.

I am ashamed of this example, but I am going to repeat it anyway because it is a warning to every preacher who has ever lived.

For decades American preachers defended the practice of slavery and the African slave trade, not just with appeals to scripture, which is horrifying enough, but with appeals to general revelation and how God intended the races to get along with each other

And so, for decades American preachers defended the indefensible. Christians, it's true, also took the lead in the movement to abolish slavery and the slave trade – people like William Wilberforce deserve to be honored for their courage – but this sin has been a source of shame for Christianity.

In the twentieth century, German Christians – not all of them, but certainly enough of them – gave their full support to a political ideology that today we find shameful. It’s hard to believe that this ideology took hold and won so many adherents within the Christian church.

But at the time, you see, we were all too quick to see God’s intent where God’s intent did not exist.

Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian and one of the most important theologians of the last century, was so upset by what some Christians wanted to say on God’s behalf that he famously said “nein!” to all general revelation, this entire area of belief that we’re talking about today.

Only Christ, he said, only the clear teaching of scripture, but never again arguments from nature and history. Too dangerous. And maybe you agree.

But it’s enough to say that what I have called “general revelation” this morning is always going to be second to, and inferior to, what God says to us in scripture.

If you are looking through a microscope or a telescope – or even if you are looking at an especially beautiful sunset – and you find yourself wanting to make strong statements about God, maybe you should come back to scripture first and find support there.

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So, let me come back to the question I asked at the beginning. **How do you know? How can we be sure?**

And what I want you to leave with today is the confidence that you can know, that you can trust what you have been told, and that the foundation of your faith is strong.

One summer I went to see a movie with my younger daughter. I think it was a rainy day, and there wasn’t much to do, so we went to see a movie called *Contact*. It’s not a great movie, but it was entertaining. It stars Jodie Foster and Matthew McConaughey.

And at one point – the question is just beneath the surface throughout the movie – but at one point the Jodie Foster character – she’s the scientist in the movie and therefore of course the religious skeptic – the Jodie Foster character said to the Matthew McConaughey character who was the religious person in the movie:

**“So what’s more likely? That an all-powerful, mysterious God created the Universe, and decided not to give any proof of his existence? Or, that he simply doesn’t exist at all, and that we created him, so that we wouldn’t feel so small and so alone.”**

And I remember sitting there that day – that rainy Saturday afternoon in the darkened theater – and I wanted more than anything to stand up and give an answer.

I wanted to say that day what I believe is true. I think it was my younger daughter who kept a tight grip on me and was afraid that I might embarrass her by starting to shout like a crazy person.

But what I wanted to say was this: **“No proof of his existence? Really. How is it possible to look at the universe and not see his fingerprints everywhere?”**

When you look at the sun and the planets in their orbits, do you really see randomness and chance and nothingness, a universe that came into existence for no reason, for no purpose, and with no meaning?

I look at the universe through my spectacles of faith – the faith that was given to me by my parents and by Mrs. Peterson and by a lot of other faithful people over the years to whom I am deeply indebted – and I see God’s fingerprints everywhere. I see meaning and purpose. I see a world that is indescribably beautiful, one that I am permitted and encouraged to enjoy each day, one that I can’t wait to see anew every single day.

I am more grateful than I can say for the gift of faith that was given to me. And I am determined to pass this gift along to my own children and grandchildren and to all of you...so that you can see what I have seen, so that you can appreciate the wonder and beauty and mystery of God’s creation.