

# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Does God Exist?*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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The word "God" may be the strangest word in the English language. It's got three letters but it means all power, it means infinity, it means eternity. This little bitty word refers to whatever's the largest thing there is. And each of us understands it in a unique way. When people get together in church and you say the word, "God", everybody nods like a bobble head, but we all mean something different by it. And even if we memorize creeds to try to synchronize it, we still don't know what it means in the heart of another person, so we're just synchronizing our nods.

Today, we are going to look at a question that I think is much more important than the church has taken the time to look at, and that's the question, "Does God exist?"

Now, if you are a visitor, you may want to strap in a little bit here. *(laughter)* Because the assumption is - it *is* a Presbyterian Church - does God exist? Okay, finish it - Yes, and let's leave. *(laughter)* There probably aren't that many churches where I would have a job after I do this sermon. *(laughter)* May not be. I could be surprised today. *(laughter)* I think traditionally, of course, you'd say, "Of course, yes!" Of course there's a God in traditional theology. But I think in mystical theology, the answer's just the opposite. Of course not, of course, the source of existence cannot exist as an object in the Universe. Whatever source that gives reality being cannot be a being within reality. There is a huge problem when we come to believe in the symbol God as a person, or as an object within the Universe - huge problem. We are going to talk about that a little bit. Breathe. Breathe. *(laughter)*

Let's look at a symbol like the peace sign. I should have taken the time to draw the peace symbol, but let's just [use this]. (Holds up 2-finger "V") This isn't victory, this is peace. Now if I ask you if you believe in the peace symbol, you'd instantly think there's something wrong with that question. You don't believe in a symbol; I believe in peace; I believe in what the symbol stands for, but I don't believe in the peace symbol itself. Well, theologically, we come to believe in our symbols so that they don't really refer to anything outside themselves. That's a huge problem.

If you go back - and you don't have to take my word for it - you can "Google" in "divine name" - God's name, and you go through the Hebrew Bible, what you will see is a little word that goes all through it [the Bible] that's the divine name, and most Christians have no idea what that is. Most people think God's name is God, that somewhere there is a mailbox in the Universe with G-O-D on it and there is somebody [at that address] who gets the letters. But in the Hebrew Bible, there's a word for the verb "to be". It wasn't actually even a word. You can't tell if it means "I am". You can't tell if it means "I will be", "what I will be", "I cause to be", "what will become". It is the verb

“to be” in every sense that it can possibly be. This radiant little word that’s shining there and then these little symbols that say what other words you use to refer to that...and they weren’t put in until the Middle Ages.

So you would see the divine name and you’d say something else because you can’t say that. But whatever image that you used for the sacred referred to the heart of being itself. It’s a mystical experience that Moses has at the burning bush. At the burning bush, Moses sees a fire. Now there are two things that can mean. One is that it was a freakish miracle and it was really on fire, or it could mean that Moses realized that all life is this radiant flame coming from who knows where - that Moses had a mystical experience recognizing that that bush was a part of the Tree of Life that connects to every other living being. It’s strange but it’s a lot closer to the symbol that’s there in the text than what it has become. In fact in Hebrew, you have the divine names first; first commandment in Hebrew reckoning. Second is don’t make an image of it.

If I’d been asked to be the translator for the Ten Commandments - which I wasn’t...and won’t be, (*laughter*) I would translate the second commandment as *don’t worship your image of God*. I don’t care what it is. I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what your religion is; *never come to think that your symbol of the sacred is the sacred itself*, because you will go crazy, and you will hurt somebody. Now I realize that’s not true of you, but true for every other being on the planet. (*laughter*) We look, we see anybody else that thinks their ideas are somehow absolute. It’s a problem. They don’t just have a problem; they are a problem for other beings, other persons.

When you think the symbol of God is the actual sacred, you can prove any theory. How did the world come into being? *God made it - in five - in seven days*. How do you know that? *Because God told me*. Well, that’s a pretty tight circle, isn’t it? If that’s true, you don’t really need that much of a brain, right? You could get by just fine on the brain stem, maybe like some of the limbic system or something, but you don’t need most of your brain if that’s how you’re going to approach reality. The actual symbol should cause you to use all of yourself to respond completely to the Universe. If you think, if you worship your symbol of God, you can justify any cause. Why are you attacking that country? *Because God told us to*. But who hasn’t done that? Who hasn’t had that happen to them? Why are you attacking us? *Because God told us to. We’re the chosen ones; you’re on our land*. How do you know that? *Because our God told us so*. Why didn’t God mention that to us? *Well, it’s just that these things happen*. Everybody has done it; everybody has had it happen to them. If your religion lasts long enough, you’ve done the atrocity; you’ve had it happen to you.

So, you understand why some people look at the symbol God and say let’s just get rid of it. Can’t you understand that - why an Atheist would look at what we’ve done as a religion and say let’s just forget it? Diderot put it like this: Diderot said - this is about the time of the French Revolution – “Humankind will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest.” (*laughter*) I don’t agree with that. (*lots of laughter*) I kind of like my entrails where they are, but I understand it. I understand where somebody could see the insanity that is radiated out of people who worship their own symbols, and don’t have the humility to realize that if your symbol is a symbol of Mystery, then you can’t clarify that. If your symbol is a symbol of Mystery, you can’t put it in a creed. Right? You can do songs; you can do symbols; you can do all that kind of stuff. But you can’t clarify a Mystery, by definition.

And not only does it make it dangerous, it disappoints. When your symbol of the sacred is just a big Person, and you’re waiting for that Person to help you in some way shape or form your life, it gets disappointing, doesn’t it? If you found an Aladdin’s lamp, and you had a Genie in there and

somebody said, “if you rub it, it probably won’t help you; it’ll help you; not give you what you ask for, but give you what you need, and it happens at the speed that it wants to do it.” Will it at least talk to me? *No, but it will listen.* See, if you had an Aladdin’s lamp that was as inert as our symbol God has become, I’m guessing you probably wouldn’t bother to carry the lamp around.

Another example of a symbol that’s become very (just in case there’s anybody who still doesn’t hate me yet) - another symbol, an example of a broken symbol is the American flag. This is a symbol of freedom, right? “Oh say can you see”. Are we free from the British? The next thing somebody does is write a pledge of allegiance that you are supposed to say when you see the flag. So all of a sudden when somebody waves the flag, you’re supposed to stand up and say what they tell you to say. So the symbol of freedom has made you *less* free. Now, if somebody waves the flag, you’ve got to follow. That’s what happens to a symbol that’s lost its reference point. I’m not attacking God; I’m not attacking the flag; You’d probably get more in trouble in America for attacking the flag than you would [attacking] God anyway, so... (*laughter*) I pledge allegiance to the piece of cloth, OK. But the answer is not to throw the symbols away, because you are just going to have to come up with new ones. *The point is to get back to what the symbol means.* If the flag’s the symbol of freedom, then let’s be free. Let’s not throw freedom overboard every time something looks threatening to us. And if the symbol, God, refers to an experience of the Mystery, then let’s not prohibit that experience in the church, right? Let’s not see if anybody actually thinks for themselves or feels something that shows they’re a heretic.

Now why do we keep the symbol? That’s kind of important. Realize in the human condition - we [previously] talked about this in the sermon series - but a human being can be a very frightened animal. When we’re afraid, we do some predictable things. One is [that] our world gets very small, everything shrinks. So it’s helpful to have a symbol of the universal parent that likes that person you’re afraid of, even if you don’t [like them]. There’s something helpful about a symbol of a universal parent that wants to be fair to everyone, even when you don’t want to do that. That’s a helpful thing when we want to polarize everything into either/or and that’s what we do when we get afraid; we have the symbol of the spirit that breathes in between the opposites. So the ambiguity does not terrify us. Instead, we’re able to relax and absorb it and respond to it. What’s real is the experience that we have as a result of the symbol, not the symbol itself.

If you lift up the symbol God, and you do not have the experience that Moses had at the burning bush, you’ve missed the point. The symbol should call you deeply into your own life; should help you recognize life in every being you see; should help you see that every person you meet is your relative; every animal you meet matters, their suffering matters.

So while I don’t believe - I think the answer to the question, does God exist? – the traditional answer is *yes*; the reverent answer is *no*. *No*. The source of the Universe cannot become an object in the Universe, not even [become] a human being, as important as that may seem to us. Not a king, not a queen, none of the things we think are so important would flatter the Source of us all. You can’t find it, but you can live it. It will come through you when you live it, and when you love.

The symbol God should call us to that web of life that unites us all. That’s the reality to which we must say *yes*. The symbol God should call us to that intelligence behind mathematics, that reality to which we must say *yes*. The symbol God should call us to that force, whatever it is, that drives the stars and pushes the grass up through the soil, whatever that is. *To that reality, we should say yes.* And the symbol God should tell us that every bush is aflame with the Source of life in it’s being, and to that reality, we should say *yes*.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
  - believers and agnostics,
  - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
  - women and men,
  - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
  - those of all races and cultures,
  - those of all classes and abilities,
  - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,

- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
  - striving for peace and justice among all people,
  - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God’s creation, and
  - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

*(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)*



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