

## “The Fool Says, Part I”

Liturgical Date: Proper 16 B

Primary Text: Psalm 14

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, is the Psalm of the day, Psalm 14. The title of today’s sermon is “The Fool Says”. Psalm 14 is almost identical to Psalm 53 and they both start out by saying, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Over the next two Sundays we will examine the foolishness of rejecting God by denying His existence and the implications this has our world, our witness, and its reflection on the depth of human sinfulness and the great love that Jesus has for us. **THE LORD DECLARES THAT THOSE WHO REJECT HIM ARE FOOLS BUT HE PROVIDES DELIVERENCE FROM THE FOLLY OF REJECTION AND SIN.**

The word “fool” is a strong word. In fact, Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“whoever says ‘you fool’ will be liable to the fire of hell.”* So we should not be throw around this label casually. However, we see that God Himself labels those who don’t acknowledge His existence “fools”. To refuse to acknowledge the existence of God is foolish and damning. This not only applies to outright atheists, but those who may say they believe in God but by their actions live as though He does not exist.

Based on our text there were people in the Biblical times that denied God’s existence as well, but atheism has only recently risen in prominence on a large scale. During the Enlightenment time period around the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, some moved from a skepticism of traditional Christian teachings to an outright denial of God’s existence. Two of the “founding fathers” of

modern atheism are Denis Diderot and Baron d'Holbach who was so radical that the famous skeptic Voltaire even opposed him in some areas. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Karl Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* which envisioned not only a classless society, but one based on atheism. In 1917 the first nation to embrace atheism as an official tenant, the Soviet Union, was born and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century communism advanced in many areas around the globe.

While the communist world system is in decline today, atheism seems to be gaining ground in the West-especially in many of the northern European nations. What do Americans believe, or not believe? Pew research just released a new study this Spring (2018) about religious beliefs in America. In the United States about 90% of the population claims to believe in some type of god or higher power. Only about 3% of the American population identifies as atheist and 4% as agnostics-meaning those who is doubtful in the existence of god but will not rule out the possibility completely. So on the surface, some of that data is encouraging.

However, the long-term trajectory of the numbers is not positive. In 2003 only 12% of Americans survey answered "none" when asked what religion they adhered to. By 2007 this was 16% and in 2018 it is 23%, almost 1 in 4 Americans. Do remember that not identifying with a religion does not in itself make one an atheist or agnostic. Of that 23% that claims no religious affiliation, about 72% of them in fact, do believe in god or a higher power. But you don't have to be a professional researcher to see that Americans commitment to anything that resembles the true God of the Bible is on the decline. The younger an American is, the less likely they are to claim a religion and more likely they are to be atheists with a majority of self-professed atheists being under the age of 35.

There are numerous well-known atheists in the entertainment and philosophical world. Most people know of the militant atheism of people like Bill Maher and of course the “pope” of atheism-British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. So while atheists are still a rather small sliver of the population overall, they have great means of influence as many philosophical and cultural elites use their platforms to make atheism seem hip, attractive, and the choice for educated, higher-thinking type people. But do atheists have all the answers? Are they really smarter than the rest of us? (Airplane story)

How does God prove His existence to a skeptical world? Well, when you read through the Bible you won't really find a passage that goes neatly through a 3 point argument to prove God's existence. God, being God, is under no obligation to rationally prove Himself. The Bible begins not with an explanation of why God is real, but with these words, “In the beginning God....” God exists because He says so. It is self-evident. Furthermore He told us in our Psalm for today that only a fool would think otherwise. Why? I will give two brief points as to how we can know God exists. Theologians call these things the “natural knowledge of God”. The Bible proclaims the truth of both of them, but one does not even need to actually crack open a Bible to show that they are true. So both of these can be good conversation starters in dialoging with people who claim to neither believe in God or the Bible.

First of all the fact that the world and all that is in it is here is proof of God. You can't have a creation without a creator. How do we know that this church building that we sit in today had a builder? Did anyone know him? Did you watch this building go up? We know the building had a builder because the building itself is proof that someone built it. And so on

with other examples. Some may object the building example, and say but we could research the records and have some proof of the “builder” or talk to people who helped construct this building or saw it go up. Well, how about this? We have discovered paintings in caves that are thousands of years old. There are no written records left by the people who made them nor do we of course have photo or video evidence of people painting them. But I doubt any serious person would look at them and believe that they just appeared there by natural forces. Creation shows that there is a creator. No wonder Psalm 19:1 says, *“The heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.”* This is why the author of our hymn of the day, *How Great Thou Art* looked at the natural wonders and beauty of the world-as have countless others and determined that there is something that is much greater than us that exists.

Secondly, we have the evidence of conscience. Romans 2:15 states, *“They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.”* But wait, I thought you said this could be proved without quoting a Bible verse. It can because people have a universal general sense of right and wrong. Conscience is from the Latin words “con” meaning “with” and “science” meaning “knowledge”. When people do certain things, they do them with a knowledge that they are doing wrong. Something inside of them tells them it is wrong. This is the conscience. God has programmed something into us that says, “this just doesn’t seem right.” We can see from a secular standpoint that anthropology has shown that almost every culture around the world through different eras of history has had certain things that are universally considered wrong: things like a disrespect of elders, murder, adultery, lying, stealing, etc. These things are

considered wrong by societies that never had or never read the Bible. Why? Because God has given each person a conscience. If there are universal moral laws, there must be a universal law giver.

Another thing that you see universally is that societies develop religious systems. They many not know the true God that is revealed in Scripture, but they come up with some set of religious belief and ritual. As I mentioned earlier, until fairly recently atheism had very little political clout. We don't discover any ancient civilizations that were atheistic.

It is no surprise that these two points are under heavy attack in today's society. Evolution seeks to explain how we got here without the necessity of a god. Moral relativism spreads like a cancer with its destructive message that there is no absolute truth and that it is wrong to say certain activities are immoral.

This gets us closer to the root as to why atheism is an attractive philosophy for some. It feeds into some of the most basic sinful desires of mankind. We want to put ourselves in the center. Have you ever thought things like this? "It is my life. I will do what I want, when I want. No one is going to tell me what to do. Who is anyone to say what I'm doing is wrong? It's my life and I will live it the way that I want to." You see, when someone denies God's existence then they also deny their accountability to Him. If there is no lawgiver then there is no absolute standard of morality. If we got here by a cosmic accident, by random chance, then we are just highly evolved animals that clawed our way to the top of the food chain rather than individuals created by God in His image. If one believes these things to be true, then there is no need to live in thanksgiving to God for His blessings and love your neighbor as yourself. What are some consequences of this type of thinking? (tell "Christian bear" story)

In all seriousness, Psalm 14:3 puts it well, *“They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”* As I mentioned before the only officially atheist societies have been communist regimes. And what is their record? The deaths of about 100 million people in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century alone: 65 million in China, 20 million in the Soviet Union, 2 million each in North Korea and Cambodia, a million more in Vietnam. Now wait a second some may say, are you saying that all atheists are mass murders? No, there are atheists who have been and are “good citizens” in the civil realm in that they pay their taxes, obey the laws, give to charity, etc. However, the large-scale the logical application of the philosophy has only lead to destruction. Ultimately, it is a question of who makes the rules, God or man? If God makes the rules then there are certain things that are morally unacceptable because He says so. If we make the rules, then morals are constantly shifting with time. Was enslaving an entire race of people just because a majority at the time supported it? Certainly not. But you argue that there is no objective standard of morality and what is good and bad varies from society to society and time to time how could you be consistent in arguing as such.

When someone denies God’s existence they are essentially attempting to make themselves God. In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 29 in verse 16 this is compared to the clay (us, the creation) trying to tell the potter (God) what to do. In Exodus the people of Israel made an idol in the form of a golden calf and worshipped it. I don’t see many literal golden calves being constructed today, but the cult of self is alive and well.

When you think about it, to make the categorical claim that God does not exist is to claim to have all knowledge. Even the most convinced atheists would likely admit that they don’t have all the knowledge in the

world. Is it possible that somewhere in all of the things that they do not know or have not experienced that God exists? So the only way to honestly claim with absolute certainty that God does not exist would be to claim that you have all knowledge-thus making yourself into an all-knowing god. That is why if you really press them, most atheists would have to admit that they are really agnostics, doubting God but not knowing for sure that their belief is correct. At the root of atheism is idolatry, a violation of the First Commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”

There is more. Much more than can even be covered in two weeks. We have heard today some of the history of atheism and its application as well as how even the natural world proclaims the existence of God. We will continue next week in seeing how to address, in a broad sense, some of the questions and objections to faith, and most importantly how we as Christians approach witnessing especially as it relates to those skeptical and rejecting of the existence of God. Because it is not about winning an argument or padding statistics of believers to feel good about ourselves. It is about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God Emmanuel, God with us. God who became flesh, in a very real way, to be the redeemer of His sinful creation. It is not just that God exists, but that there is one true God. A great God worthy of worship. The Triune God who creates, sustains, and saves His creation.

Amen.

## **“The Fool Says, Part II”**

Liturgical Date: Proper 16 B

Primary Text: Psalm 14 (references Ephesians 6:10-20 and briefly St. Mark 9:17-29).

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today is Psalm 14 as this is the second part of the sermon, “The Fool Says.” THE LORD DECLARES THAT THOSE WHO REJECT HIM ARE FOOLS BUT HE PROVIDES DELIVERENCE FROM THE FOLLY OF REJECTION AND SIN.

This is a bit different than most sermons that I preach as it has delved into a good bit of philosophy and apologetics. I don't spend much time preaching on atheism, as the Bible does not either. It simply states that God exists. However, as we heard last Sunday this is a growing movement and especially the young people in the congregation will face these challenges to their faith from both well-known people that they may look up to and from their peers.

Last Sunday we examined some of the history of atheism and its application, that we know God exists relating to the natural knowledge of God, and what is at the root of unbelief. This Sunday I want you to know how to respond to some of the basic objections to faith and important things to remember when engaging atheists, agnostic, and skeptics. So how do we, as believers in Jesus Christ, respond? That word “fool” is a strong one. And first of all we know that God even loves fools. He desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. When we engage the skeptic we do not primarily view them as debate sparring partner whom we want to outwit

to win an argument for the sake of winning. We do so with the goal of them being brought into right relationship with God.

It is helpful, though to be able to give some good, concise responses to the common objections that non-believers will bring forward. In the context of a sermon I am not able to give an in-depth response to all of these, but can briefly touch of some of the objections. Of course the age-old objection is that one says they cannot see God nor scientifically verify His existence in a lab therefore he doesn't exist. But as I pointed out in the children's sermon last week, people believe in many things they cannot see such as love and the wind-but we see the effects of these things.

Objections often relate to bad things that people of faith have done and the occurrence of bad things in the world. Here are some that you probably have heard: Religion has caused more wars and death than anything in history. People of religious faith, including Christians, have done horrible things in the name of religion like terrorism, the Inquisition, and the Salem Witch Trials. There are so many bad things that happen in the world like famine, natural disasters, children dying of cancer that this shows that god does not exist because a god would end those things. When you read the holy books of many religions we see god sanctioning things we don't like. Richard Dawkins infamously wrote in his book *The God Delusion*, "*The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction*" and then he goes on to list "horrible" things god has done in his view calling him a "*capriciously malevolent bully.*"

Now I could take one of these on in detail, but I will cut to the chase in undercutting this argument. When these accusations are made by someone who claims they don't believe in God, I find it useful to begin with addressing the broad issue at hand. When you hear these objections you can

actually answer, “So what? How does any of this prove that God doesn’t exist?” One who says they don’t believe that God exists because of people of faith doing bad things or bad things happening in the world is essentially arguing that God doesn’t exist because they don’t like how he acts. God doesn’t exist because “he is mean” is basically this argument. Perhaps you don’t like what our current President, Donald Trump says or does. Perhaps you didn’t like what our former President Barack Obama did or said. But this does not make them non-existent.

Now of course there are ways to answer all of these objections individually with a Christian worldview. Briefly, we can acknowledge that religion has caused many wars, people claiming faith have done horrendous things, there are certainly many bad things that happen in the world, and that God does and allows many things that we can’t fully understand. However, most wars are not exclusively religious in nature. Just because some does something in the name of religion does not make it right or good. As Christians we look to Jesus Christ as our Savior and teacher, not other Christians. And we can’t suppose to explain everything that happens as to why because we are not God.

And remember that Pew study that I shared with you last week that said 90% of Americans believe in some type of god or higher power? In a way that is encouraging, but the same survey says that only a little more than half of the population believes in the true God, the God of the Bible. Most people still believe in some type of spiritual force due to the natural knowledge of God. Even the atheistic communist societies were not able to eradicate belief after decades of persecution and false indoctrination.

We also must remember that the natural knowledge of God does not, in itself, save anyone. For this people must have faith in the true God, who

reveals Himself and His plan of salvation in the Bible. This is where faithful Gospel preaching and administration of the Sacraments come in as they are the means in which God creates knowledge of Him, and ultimately saving faith. So yes, we employ good apologetic strategies with doubters, skeptics, and non-believers but our ultimate aim is not just convince them God exists but proclaim who the true God is, that He loves them, and desires them to be in a right relationship with Him.

We should boldly speak the Law and proclaim the saving Gospel to all unbelievers, atheists and agnostics included. From my experience, we can argue with an atheist all day but the thing that will bring about conviction of sin is not straying too far from a clear presentation of the Law and Gospel (my grocery manager story). Even if you answered a question or objection to the satisfaction of a skeptic, they will probably just then ask another. We have to attempt to discern if these questions are sincere or just attempts to try to trip you up (as Jesus answered different people in different ways).

We also speak the truth in love. We don't shun non-believers and not engage with them at all (my failure as a young army private). We are called to be salt and light. We must realize that none of us can be perfect. But we also must realize that how we live and treat others is an important part of our witness. If we are not modeling love, forgiveness, humility, and right living we undercut the words that we speak. With the aid of the Holy Spirit we strive, "for our walk to match our talk."

Do remember that there is often a reason why someone is hostile to faith. Perhaps there is something in their upbringing which left a bitter taste in their mouth towards religion and faith. Perhaps a prayer that they viewed as "unanswered". Perhaps a very difficult life situation. Perhaps bad

theological teaching which imploded on itself. Perhaps a sinful action taken against them by a faith leader. We have heard of the wicked abuse of thousands of children, almost all boys, at the hands of a significant number of Roman Catholic Priests. And the response of the church hierarchy was to cover it up. If one has been victimized by something like this, is it surprising that they could question or lose faith? In the Gospel Lesson the father of the boy who was demon possessed responded to Jesus by saying, “I believe; help my unbelief.” Even some who say they no longer believe may have a spark of faith left deep within. Don’t extinguish it, but fan it to flame.

We do well to read and take to heart the words of the Epistle Lesson. Put on the “whole armor of God.” At its core, witnessing is not intellectual sparring. It is spiritual warfare. As Ephesians 6:12 says, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”* We pray for the souls of the lost and for the strength of the Holy Spirit in being a witness. Prayer is key to this spiritual battle against unbelief. The devil is a defeated foe, but he seeks to shake, shatter, and destroy faith in people in order to drag as many souls down to hell with him as he can. And no amount of oratorical skill, academic knowledge, or “salesmanship” will save a soul. As we sang in our hymn of the day, *“Our reason cannot fathom the truth of God profound; Who trusts in human wisdom relies on shifting ground. God’s Word is sufficient, It makes divinely sure: And trusting in its wisdom, My faith shall rest secure.”* Saving Faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, not human reason nor worldly wisdom. Don’t forget that.

Finally, know to apply the message of the Word to all people, because all people are sinners including us. Really anyone who lives as if there is not a God is the fool that verse 1 speaks of. What does our text say? *“There is none that does good. They have all turned aside.”* St. Paul quotes from Psalm 14 in Romans 3:10-12 as he proclaims under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, *“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way (astray), they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”* We do not want to become self-righteous and forget our own sinful failings. We were once dead in our trespasses, but the loving Father God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ to die in our place and forgive our sins thus bringing us to the light of life. Without the gift of faith we would be just as lost.

In closing, It is important to note that Psalm 14 ends on a positive as it looks forward to the day that salvation would come to Israel. The Messiah would be sent. The fortunes of the people would be restored. And we are to be glad.

God is real. God loves and desires to save even those who foolishly deny Him. He saves us and uses us to spread His true and powerful Word.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.