

# “The Hard Questions of Lent: 1) How Do We Know There is a God?”

a sermon by

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**Text: “No one has ever seen God: if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfect in us” (I John 4:12).**

This Friday’s *Wall Street Journal* contains a remarkable review by Charlotte Allen on the recently released film “Amazing Grace,” which is the story of William Wilberforce (1759-1833), the great British parliamentarian and abolitionist. William Wilberforce lived with two driving ambitions that shaped his entire life: 1) the abolition of the slave trade and 2) the reformation of society.

Abolishing the slave trade was not an easy chore. The slave trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was an enormous boon to England’s economy, hundreds of members of parliament were in the pockets of slavers, and the public was indifferent to the plight of slaves in the distant Caribbean.

The prospect of reforming society was not an easy task either. Public drunkenness and crime were rampant, clergymen routinely took mistresses, and the elites of Wilberforce’s day (like those of our own) were contemptuous of morality and serious religion.

Every year, Wilberforce introduced bills into the English Parliament to abolish the slave trade, and for twenty years, Parliament voted down all but the mildest reforms. Yet Wilberforce persisted year after year and in 1807, Parliament finally abolished the slave trade by an

overwhelming vote. In 1833, as Wilberforce lay dying, slavery was abolished throughout the Empire—forty-six years after the battle was joined.

As Charlotte Allen points out, the movie presents William Wilberforce as though he were a secular humanitarian, whose main passion was not the Christian faith, but rather politics and social justice. But that was not the case. Wilberforce was a man of faith whose belief in God and devotion to Jesus Christ led him to a life of deep devotion that combined a passion for faith with a commitment to change society for the better.

Over the next five weeks we will look at some of “The Hard Questions of Lent,” questions about Jesus, the Bible, the presence of suffering in our world, and the question of the Christian life.

This morning we begin with the question: “How do we know there is a God?”

## I.

There is something inescapable for human beings about the question of God. There is something profound in the question: Why is there something instead of nothing? There is something profound in the child’s question, “Who made God?” It is raised by the universal human experiences of love, loyalty, devotion and meaning.

The writer of I John certainly understands this. Often we think of I Corinthians 13 as the great chapter on “Love” in the Bible, but in some ways I John speaks of love in a more profound way. “God is love,” writes I John. “If we love one another, God’s love abounds in us and we abound in each other.”

To speak of God is always a difficult thing to do. God is the mystery that encounters us, but God is also a mystery that we cannot grasp, a mystery who is beyond our knowing unless he makes himself known to us. God is not the greatest being in a series of beings. Nor can God be objectified.

Through the years philosophers and theologians have argued the notion of whether the existence of God can be proved or not. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians the church has produced, argued in his *Summa Theologia* five proofs for the existence of God: 1) motion 2) efficient cause 3) contingency 4) greatness and goodness and 5) design. While these arguments are impressive they do not prove God’s existence any more than we can prove that we love a person or that a person loves us. Faith in God is a very personal act, of which reason is simply one factor. In every area of life, no argument is conclusive to a person who does not wish to believe.

But while we cannot prove that God exists, we can point people to some of the reasons that we find compelling for our faith in God.

## II.

The first has to do with the created order and human existence. Psalm 8 certainly speaks to this. As the Psalmist contemplates the glory of creation around him, he is moved to say, “When I look at your heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him” (Psalm 8:3)?

Certainly there are experiences in our lives which point to such a wonder and beauty that we cannot help but conclude that the earth around is not simply a series of accidental atoms coming together, but that it points us to the God who created the heavens and the earth.

That is true as well in human experience. One of the books that has made a profound impression on me is Norman MacLean’s *A River Runs Through It*. I was first drawn to it because it is a book about one of my great loves in life, fly-fishing. MacLean’s story is a story about his father who was a Presbyterian minister and who taught his two sons how to fly-fish the Big Blackfoot River in Montana. As MacLean put it, “In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly-fishing. We lived at the junction of great trout rivers in western Montana, and our father was a Presbyterian minister and a fly fisherman who tied his own flies and taught others. He told us about Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry fly fisherman.”

But there is another reason that MacLean’s book has touched my life. It is the story of two brothers and the tragedy that engulfed their lives. Norman MacLean left Montana, married and eventually taught English at the University of Chicago. His younger brother, Paul, would not leave Montana or the beautiful waters of the Big Blackfoot River. He was a writer for a local newspaper, but he also was a heavy drinker and gambler. One night Paul MacLean was beaten to death over a series of unpaid gambling debts, leaving a mother, father, and a brother heartbroken to understand how such a beautiful life and person could suffer such a terrible ending.

Faith in God grows out of the deep experiences of life. To be sure, sometimes these experiences drive people to the conclusion there is no God. But for many of us we do not come to know God by reading a book or taking a course at a university, but we come to know God in the deep experiences of life.

## III.

A second way we experience God is in human history. The Christian faith has always insisted that God not only created the world that is, but that God also is active in the world in which we live. Or to put it another way, the Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal but as, as Reinhold Niebuhr says, “God’s providential working in history, by which he makes the wrath of man praise him and transmutes good out of evil.”

For many today it is hard to understand how God works in human history. But we ought to be sure of one thing. As a historian Herbert Butterfield put it, “Let us make sure of one

thing—in the long run, there are only two alternative views about life or about history. Here is a fact which was realized thousands of years ago and it is still as true as ever. Either you trace everything back in the long run to sheer blind chance, or you trace everything to God.”

Paul Tillich once shared an experience of talking with a group of Christian and Jewish refugees who had survived the ravages of the Second World War. One of the refugees in this group, a Jew from Western Germany, spoke of a cablegram he had received from southern France informing him of a horrible story of a sudden evacuation from Germany of 10,000 elderly people—all over ninety—who were taken out of nursing homes and moved to a concentration camp. Most of them died along the way. This Jewish refugee said that he found it impossible to believe in a loving God who would allow something so terrible to happen.

I think that the Apostle Paul understood these forces. He knew the horror of death and the anxiety of life. He knew the powers of darkness and the terrible destruction that we find in our world today.

But he knew something more. He knew the “love of God in Jesus Christ, from which nothing can separate us.” That is what we mean when we speak of the Providence of God. It is not the vague hope that with the help of God everything will come to a good end. There are some things that come to a very bad end. It does not mean that everything in our life is predetermined, as in an efficient machine.

Rather, Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation that cannot be destroyed. Providence means that the demonic and destructive forces within our world and ourselves can never have an unbreakable grasp on us, and that the bond that connects us to God through Jesus Christ cannot be broken.

#### IV.

So, in the final analysis, we must say that we believe in God primarily because we have encountered God in Jesus Christ. The Christian faith stands or falls on its conviction that in Jesus Christ we have encountered God himself.

The witness of the New Testament is clear:  
“He who has seen me has seen the father.”  
“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.”  
“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”  
“The Word became Flesh, full of Grace and Truth.”

There is a movement in the church today, which ought to give us great comfort and hope. It is movement that is called “radical orthodoxy” and it is the church’s assertion that it will not submit to those whose goal is to deconstruct the faith, but insists that the creeds of the church, particularly the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Affirmation are still binding to the church. Or to put the matter in a somewhat different way, it is our affirmation that insofar as any of us can know God, we know God in Jesus Christ.

The movie about William Wilberforce, “Amazing Grace,” takes its name from the familiar hymn written by John Newton, who was a friend of Wilberforce. John Newton spent his early years as a slave ship captain. He was a crude and violent man who was especially cruel to the slaves on his ship. But something happened to John Newton. He began to read the Bible and Thomas a Kempis’ book, *Imitation of Christ*. He also came under the influence of John Wesley and later joined the antislavery crusade.

The hymn that he wrote reflects his life:  
“I once was lost, but now am found  
Was blind, but now I see.”

There is no more powerful witness to our belief in God than our faith in Jesus Christ. In him we see the witness of God’s love. It is the love of God that creates, guides us, and redeems us. It is God’s love that finds us and gives us the sight to see him.

Amen.