

3rd Sunday after Trinity: July 7, 2019
“I believe in God—What does this Mean?”

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Our text this morning is our Old Testament lesson, Micah 7.

I recently read that just over 80% of the world believes in God. When you start to think about it, it is actually an alarming statistic. Not so much the number, but the question itself presents a problem. Language is fluid and flexible. For example, I grew up learning, “ain’t ain’t a word, because it ain’t in the dictionary;” however, that is no longer the case. While it was used for many years, it has only been recently added to the dictionary.

One most readily comes across this when reading through Shakespeare or the King James translation of the Bible. There are English words used that have either changed meaning, or ones that we just do not use much, if at all, anymore. Not many of us daily use hearken, coxcomb, or grandsire.

Language, especially, religious language, has lost its meaning for many people. Not that justification or redemption have changed meaning, but not many know what they mean. When you look around our society, it is abundantly clear that nowhere near 80% know God; not to mention live in faith. Whatever they call belief is significantly different than what the Scriptures call belief. Faith in what or whom is an important question, as is what is meant by the word “god.”

The Large Catechism defines a god as “*that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need.*”¹ In Islam, this is “Allah.” Hindu’s have 33 gods of various classes; the most prominent being Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Ganapati, also known as Ganesha. Buddhists don’t generally believe in a deity of any sort, more general forces of good and evil. The Jews, while still making some use of the Old Testament, do not worship the Trinity. Jehovah’s Witnesses worship “Jehovah-God” who is also not Trinitarian. Pastafarians worship the Flying Spaghetti Monster. The Native Sioux have Wakan Tanka and mother earth.

The word “god”, in fact, is generally used to refer to any one of a number of deities, and by some to refer to a metaphysically superior being of indeterminate nature and origin and power – meaning that they do not know who or what they refer to when they say “God”, it is just a word that refers to “something”.

¹ Luther’s Large Catechism, First Part, First Commandment, p. 2

In such a diverse context, we need to be careful to be clear about what we mean when we use this language. Yes. Definitions are important. We need to be clear about precisely who we mean by the word “God.” We need to be clear about what is true and what is not. Theology is properly the task of making distinctions and definitions to help be clear, and communicate clearly. Part of the question that needs to be answered in our culture today is addressed in our text. On Trinity Sunday, we speak on whom God is, today we reflect more on what does it mean to have a God.

Hear the text again, *“Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old.”*²

What is Micah’s driving point? What is His focus when describing God? God’s forgiveness and unchanging love. Commonly translated as steadfast love. It is a word that means unchanging, steadfast, immovable, always faithful without exception, without wavering.

What distinguishes our God from all the other so-called God’s? What distinguishes the Trinity from all others? Forgiveness and love. Unchanging, unfettered, immutable faithfulness and love towards you. How does that make God unique? He is a God whose attitude toward His children is love and compassion, and whose will is to bless. He is the Merciful Father who while we are yet far off, girds His loins and runs. He becomes scorn and bears the shame that you deserve because of sin.

The other Gods are terrifying. Whether it the god of Planned Parenthood and sexual freedom, Baal, Asherah, Allah, Molech, Odin, or the god of political parties aimed at satisfying whatever perversion of self I wish to bully you into, men, women, and children are sacrificed to them. People are terrified of them. All they want to do is satisfy them and avoid their gaze. Thursday began a weekend long celebration of what? Freedom? Freedom of speech? Not so much anymore. It is growing in America where the only speech acceptable is the speech that is against religion and for perversion of self. The truth is criticized. Those who speak it are bullied and ridiculed. Conversation is not being had, fear-mongering and bullying instead run rampant.

² Micah 7:18–20

Of course not just in the political world does this happen. Look at Islam. The women are strictly controlled, covered and fearful, with good reason. Their religion gives the men the authority to kill them for any infraction of the will of Allah. Children are chained to dungeon walls and beaten and forced to memorize the Koran word for word under the threat of brutality or death. Even the men live in fear of being found to be “not quite zealous enough.” Islam is so rigorous and inhibiting that the people who worship Allah can easily strap bombs to their bodies and die rather than continue life in this world. This behavior isn’t an aberration in Islam. It is not a war based in political factions. Sadly, this is the nature of Islam wherever it is practiced.

Other religions are no better. Hindus are terrified of Siva. Siva is the god - or goddess of destruction. Hindus believe they are caught up in a cruel and nearly endless cycle of re-incarnation, always seeking Nirvana - the state of perfection which allows them to merge into the great cosmic unity and lose their individuality and consciousness. They long to cease to exist, and they live in terror and in the depressing certainty that life is empty, painful, and meaningless.

Modern Jews feel like perpetual victims, and their religion no longer looks forward to a real Messiah. God is awesome and angry, in their religion, and many of them believe He is no longer paying attention. The book, “*When Bad Things Happen to Good People*,” was written by a Rabbi, and says that God doesn’t want bad things to happen, but He doesn’t have the power to stop them. Every other religion has a god that is angry and punishing, or distracted and unconcerned. Salvation, to most of them, is just unconsciousness. No more fear, and no more pain, and no more thinking!

This is not your God! Your God is good, “*a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.*”³ He, “*desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.*”⁴

This God is not merely the God of modern America. God is not an American. He is not simply the God of the rich and comfortable. In fact, the rich and the comfortable usually reject Him and walk in their own futility. The Trinity is the God from the beginning. He is the God who always was, is, and ever shall be, for all people and all times. He has a Name. It is not Allah, or Karma, or Confucius, or feel-goodery.

³ Isaiah 42:3

⁴ 1 Timothy 2:4–6

He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, Solomon, Peter, Paul, Luther, and Walther. He is the God who is over all and through all. He is in all times in human history no matter how difficult or dangerous. This is the God whose people rejoice in His goodness and delight in His blessings. Because of their faith in Him, Christians have established (by His blessing) what we call modern science and developed all the technology we find so convenient and pleasant today.

What does it mean to have a God? Luther said that it meant to look to Him for every good and blessing and only for good and blessing. That is why Micah celebrates God's forgiveness. When our sins are forgiven, nothing stands in the way of God pouring out His abundant blessings on His people. Forgiveness means good things, good times, great blessings. It means that God's favor and love are focused on us. By faith, when we believe we are forgiven, we expect God to be good. We expect God to be on our side, fighting every battle for us. We expect life to be good and God not be angry. We believe that He does not wish to see us suffer or be hurt. He has no ill will or evil thoughts toward us at all. That's what it means to have a God.

Of course, also by faith, we see from a heavenly perspective. There are eternal gifts, which we get a glimpse of here on earth. We bear our daily crosses with the knowledge that the eternal weight of them is only for us eternal glory. What can man do to me? God has given me forgiveness, life and eternal salvation!

Sadly, even some who call themselves "*Christians*" don't really have a god. They have an academic appreciation of the contents of Scriptures. They have a faith in the history. They have a hesitant agreement to beat the Vegas betting odds. In other words, "It makes more sense to believe in a God, even if there isn't one, than to not believe in a God if there is one." They have a god, but not our God. They fear tomorrow. They expect failure. They worry about having enough or getting by, as though they must tiptoe past misfortune for fear that it might awaken and wreak havoc on us. They await the dropping of the other shoe. They speak in terms of "God is going to punish me." Wealth, health, and happiness are unnatural gods and conditions they have enjoyed far too long, and now they are uneasily certain that their run of good "luck" is about to end and the roof will cave in on them and God will deal with them just as they deserve.

That is not what it means to have a God! "*A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart.*"⁵

⁵ Luther's Large Catechism, First Part, First Commandment, p. 2

It means that we expect life to be more a delight than a problem – although, for reason of sin, we know that life will have its pains and troubles. But our sins have been forgiven because of Jesus and the cross, and so we expect God to be good – and when we need something, some good or blessing, the first and only place we look for it is God. That is what it means to have a God.

And we have good reason to expect these wonderful things! It is just as Micah said. God pardons iniquity. He passes over transgression. He treads our iniquities underfoot. As Satan used your sin to crush Jesus’s heel, Jesus used His heel to crush Satan’s head.

God sent His only Son into the flesh. He came for one purpose and one purpose only, to give His life as a ransom for many, ***“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned.”***⁶

There is no other “god” who forgives. For the other so-called gods, you must earn it. You must settle the debt. You must make things right before you go. The burden falls on you. The Trinity, The One True and only God, has born the burden for you. He died on your behalf. He takes your sin, your death, and He gives you His life.

The anger of God, the wrath of God, against sin was appeased on the cross through the death of Jesus. His love is steadfast and unchanging. He delights in you, as you are in His Son. This is how you can rightly pray Psalm 116, ***“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.”***⁷ Through the waters of Holy Baptism, dead, transgressful, iniquitous, sinners are reborn. There your sins are cast into the depths of the sea. They are plunged to the depths, and drowned. Through baptism, you are made a precious saint. He calls you by name. He adopts you as one of His own, into His own family. You can search the literature of the world’s religions and not find a God who makes His people His family, and claims them as His own children! They only have titles for their gods like lord, or master. You have God’s personal name, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You get to call Him Father, and Brother.

As His child, He nurtures you with His Word, and He feeds you with heavenly food. Here in this holy supper He fills you with Himself - the very body given for you, and the very blood shed for you. He veils them beneath the form of bread and wine, to be sure, but they are there. Faith takes God at His Word and knows what good things it receives in this Sacrament.

⁶ John 3:17–18

⁷ Psalm 116:15

But make no mistake about it, whoever eats at this altar eats the body of the Lord and drinks His blood. It does not require faith to do so at this altar – all it requires is participation.

Faith *IS* required, however, to lay hold of the blessings of this holy meal. Unbelief receives the precious gifts of Christ's body and blood, but it receives them to the individual's own harm. It profanes God's Name to receive them without understanding. It is detrimental to receive them without proper faith. That is why we practice closed communion. We do not wish to see anyone receive from our holy table the judgment of God in their ignorance where there should be blessing and health, see 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. As we have established, to say one believes in God, is not really a clear confession. Acts 2 teaches fellowship is driven by the Apostles' Teaching, which is a specific set of doctrine and confession.

It is all part of what it means to have a God. It means to look to Him for every blessing, and to expect from Him only blessing. When we have a God, we have peace, and confidence, and hope. It means to take Him at His Word, and to trust Him to do precisely what He says that He will do, and to give us all that He has promised to give. To have a God means to listen to Him, and not try to put our words into His mouth. It means to trust Him no matter what it looks like or feels like. It means that even death is not the final answer, for we, too, shall rise with Jesus Christ into everlasting life in glory! It means that we don't necessarily have to understand the moment, but we are to be confident that God does, and that He is in control for our blessing and with the ultimate aim that His will be done for the glory of His Name and the good of His people, you, eternally.

“His wisdom never plans in vain Nor falters nor mistakes.

All that His counsels may ordain A blessed ending makes.”⁸ Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

⁸ Rejoice, My Heart, Be Glad and Sing *LSB* 737:6

Prayer of the Church

Third Sunday after Trinity: 7 July 2019

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. For the eyes of all the baptized to be ever turned toward the Lord, that their sins would be forgiven, their souls guarded and their shame covered as they take refuge in Jesus Christ, who comes to them in His Holy Word and Sacraments, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into His vineyard, and for all pastors in Christ, that the trustworthy saying that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners would be proclaimed in all places for the salvation of all sinners who hear and believe, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the Holy Church throughout the world, that she would be kept safe from all harm and danger, be brought to true unity in the faith, and speak with one voice in confessing Jesus Christ as her Savior and Bridegroom, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who have strayed from the faith, that their Good Shepherd would seek them out and bring them back into the fold, prompting the holy angels to rejoice over their repentance, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our country as we celebrate Independence Day, that we would cherish the freedoms we have and always stand ready to defend them; and for all those who have been placed in authority over us, that they would serve with an eye toward sustaining the freedoms enjoyed in our nation, especially our religious liberty, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who are ill or suffering in any way, [*especially Dennis, Greg, Marvin (Honold), Larry, Marvin (Amber's uncle) and those we name in our hearts,*] that they would be given strength and endurance in the midst of all difficulty and, according to the Lord's will, be relieved of their afflictions, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those whom God has granted another year of earthly life, especially His servants **William, Robin, Richard, Dustin, Macey, Kathy, and Pastor Berg**; that they may grow in wisdom and grace, and that God would strengthen their trust in His goodness all the days of their life; let us pray to the Lord; **Lord have mercy.**

For the joy and blessings that God has granted **Tim & Sherry, and Harold & Susan** during the years of their marriage; that God would assist them always by His grace that with true fidelity and steadfast love they may ever honor and keep their marriage vows, grow in love towards Him and for each other, and come at last to the eternal joys that He have promised; let us pray to the Lord; **Lord have mercy.**

For all who come to the holy altar this day, that they would come in repentance and faith, recognizing that their Lord Jesus Christ not only receives sinners, but feeds them upon His very body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins and the strengthening of their faith, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all the saints who have gone before us and have fallen asleep in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life in Christ, let us give thanks to the Lord; that we would be kept in that same faith and hope until we are called from this vale of tears, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

To the King of ages, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. **Amen.**