

“Experience God in 3D”

John 14:15-27

Series: Believe Week 1. God

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Some years ago we were shopping for a new TV and came home with a 3D plasma screen. My wife is a big fan of 3D movies. I didn't think we needed it but I went along with it because maybe it would help us have a better experience of PBS documentaries. She smiled at me and bought the Spiderman DVD. Now I have to admit – the effects are pretty awesome. We bought these special fashionable glasses which sync with the TV. Not only did I swoop with Spiderman down Fifth Avenue but after it was over I felt all these sticky webs around me.

Well they have taken the 3D experience to a whole new level. You can buy an Oculus Rift which surrounds you in virtual reality. It's like being in the video game. In one video a guy rides on a virtual roller coast. As it takes off he says, “You know I don't like roller coasters.” At first he's fascinated by the experience. Yet when the first plunge comes he screams, “Take it off! Take it off!” It is so real he can't take it. I understand the new Samsung Galaxy 7 Phones can be strapped into a headset to give you the same virtual 3D experience. But beware: if the phone blows up, that's not virtual, that's reality!

Virtual reality creates a 3-Dimensional world your brain believes is real. It can make viewers dizzy, fearful, and sick. Even when you know it's a game, you can't help feeling you're falling. Yet once the headset is off, you see what is truly real.

Today, as we begin the first chapter in BELIEVE, we look at the ultimate reality: God. Who is God? What is God like? The majority of people on the planet believe in God or gods. They will answer the question by giving you their favorite version of God. Yet, I say when it comes to knowing God, all of us on earth, even Christians, have virtual reality glasses on. We view God through our own limited perspective. Just because we see God a certain way or don't see God at all, does not mean God is really that way. We all have virtual gods. The only way to know God's true nature is if God reveals Himself to us, if God does for us what that guy's friends did for him – take off the virtual glasses so we can see the real God.

Why is finding out about the real God the most important question in life? How you view God will determine how you view the world. Let's face it, life is often a roller coaster – there are lots of spins and twirls, soaring highs, plunging drops and upside down loops. It can throw you into vertigo. As in that video, we need to know there is Someone right beside us. We need to know there is Someone holding us. We need to know some of it is only an illusion while other parts are more dangerous than imagined.

Throughout human history one thing is constant: all of us have been trying to know the God or gods on the other side of the glasses. This is why humans create religions: to have a relationship with God or the gods, to receive help from God or the gods, even to control or manipulate God or the gods. Among all the religions of the world there are three basic pathways. The first views God as **Transcendent**. That is a fancy theological word which means God is above us and beyond us. As Creator, God is the source of all creation, but He remains separate from creation. An excellent example of this is Judaism. As you know, Genesis begins with the words,

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:1-3).

God is the Creator of all things. He speaks to us through prophets, priests, kings, and angels but He remains outside the world. Judaism was one of the earliest faiths to believe in just one God. When it comes to God, Islam is similar. It is passionately monotheistic. Chapter 112 of the Qur'an states, "Say: He is God, the One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him" (112:1-4). His name is Allah. He is the Creator of all things and he speaks through prophets such as Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and, Islam's last and greatest prophet Muhammad.

The second religious pathway says God or the gods are **Immanent**. It's another fancy theological word which means the opposite of Transcendent. The gods live not far above us, but among us and in nature. Often, this pathway worships multiple gods. If you remember what you learned about Egyptian, Greek and Roman gods you will recall how the people took the forces of nature: the Sun, the earth, storms, fertility, the seas, good luck and even death and turned them into gods. The main gods of Hinduism are Brahma as creator, Vishnu as preserver or protector, and Shiva as destroyer or judge. Yet when Indian Missionary Gabriel Massey stayed at my house this summer he told me Hindus believe in 330 million gods. The gods are all around us. Hindus pray to and make offerings to these gods to receive their blessings and help for life.

The third pathway is **Inward**. It is said that Buddhism does not believe in a creator god. The gods or devas are stuck in the same cycle of suffering and reincarnation as people. Through meditation and enlightenment, the goal of Buddhism is liberation of the inward being from this cycle of birth and death so one can achieve nirvana or non-existence. In Buddhism, the focus is not above us or beside us but in us. It's popular for people today to talk about "mindfulness." That actually comes from Buddhism.

What do Christians believe about God? Our creeds says that God is a Trinity. God is three in one – One God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I believe in the Trinity. I love the Trinity. Yet I find the Trinity confusing. It seems like a math problem gone bad. How can one equal three and three one? To make it more confusing, you can't divide the One God into thirds. Father, Son and Spirit are each fully and equally God. Yet when you put them together you don't get three gods but One. It doesn't add up.

It is true the word “Trinity” does not appear anywhere in the Bible. Yet the Trinity appears all over the Bible. Before Jesus’ birth, the Father chooses Mary to be the mother of His Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. At Jesus’ baptism, we hear the voice of the Father saying, “This is my Beloved Son” and we see the Dove of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells His disciples, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). At the end of every worship service you hear me use the words of Paul to bless you saying, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Paul says, “There is...one Spirit...one Lord...One God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6) and that “Through (Christ) we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2:18).

The Trinity is a mystery. We will never explain it by a mathematical formula. That’s because God created math and He is bigger than math. The mystery of the Trinity tells me it’s true. We humans would not have come up with this on our own. We shouldn’t change God to make Him fit our minds. Instead, let God take the glasses off our eyes so we can understand the Trinity, so we can know Him better, so we can see where He is working in this roller coaster world. The best way to do this is to see how the first Christians experienced God in three dimensions, they experienced God in 3D

First, the Trinity teaches us about **God Above Us**. For thousands of years, ancient people worshiped thousands of gods. The Israelites, however, believed there is one God in heaven who created the world. Instead of worshiping the sun, moon, stars, earth and wind, they worshiped the God who created all these things. It was not necessary to burn incense and make sacrifices to so many gods. It was comforting to know you only had to please one God instead of many. After all, think how hard it is to please your boss, spouse, children and friends. Imagine adding ten, twenty or a million gods on top of that.

Yet this God Above Us was an awesome, fearful, sometimes terrifying God. When Abraham, Moses and Isaiah met Him, they were frightened to death. Why? God is opposed to sin. Whenever this Holy God meets sin, He wipes it out as Light casts out darkness. He wants to wipe out sin completely. Since we are so stained with sin, He would have to wipe us out as well. The whole Old Testament can be read as a choice: do you choose the other gods or the One True God? Moses, Joshua, Elijah and all the great prophets, priests and kings kept putting this choice before the Israelites? Why? Because they, like us, kept choosing false gods and idols. Yet the God Above Us also loves us as a Father loves His wayward children. God Above wanted to destroy our sin without destroying us. To do so, He could not stay high up in heaven. God needed to speak to us directly. Our sin was so great, He had to handle it in person.

This leads to the second truth of the Trinity: **God Beside Us**. Some folks in Galilee met a man named Jesus. He was a blue collar construction worker, a prophet, and a miracle worker. He was a full-blooded human being and yet so much more. He controlled the wind and the waves, healed the sick, cured the blind and lame, cast out demons, and taught wonderful truths. Now if all that happens in front of your eyes, it will

cause you to ask some questions. The disciples “were terrified and asked each other, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41).

His most important mission, however, was to die. Jesus claimed his death would wipe out all the sin of humanity. Then He proved it by dying and rising from the dead. When Jesus asks, “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15-16). This was hard for Jews to believe. All their lives they were taught there is only One God Above Us. No human being can claim to be God. When they stood in the presence of Jesus, however, they knew they were standing before God.

What kind of god was He? An angel? No, He was more than an angel. A half God, half human like one of those demigods from Greek mythology? No. To save us He must be fully God and fully human. Jesus was the bridge between heaven and earth, God and humanity, because He had one foot firmly on God’s side and the other firmly on our side. They realized only God can do what He did. Only God can command nature. Only God can forgive sin. Only God can defeat sin, death, and the devil and give eternal life. This was no mere human being. This man Jesus was also the Living God who made heaven and earth. This is why He was called “Immanuel” which means “God with us.” Jews and Muslims say God is Above Us. Hindus believe the gods are beside us and all around us. Christians believe God is Above Us and Beside Us. God even dies in our place so, instead of fearing God Above, we can call Him Father. Yet this was not enough. God wants to get closer still. God went a step further.

The third truth of the Trinity is **God In Us**. Imagine how difficult it was for the disciples at the Last Supper. In Jesus, they met God Himself and now He said He was going away. If you ever lost a loved one, you know the grief and pain when someone so special is taken from you. How will the disciples get along without Jesus? The Lord understood. On that last night, He promised He would be with them always.

If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. (John 14:15-17, 23, 25-27)

Fifty days later on Pentecost, Jesus kept His promise. God the Holy Spirit came to live in their lives. While Jesus walked the earth, He could only be in one place, at one time. Now, God the Father and God the Son could live deep inside the hearts of the disciples through God the Holy Spirit. Wherever they went, God was with them. What’s more, the people who never met Jesus in the flesh, people like you and me, could have God the Father and God the Son in their lives through God the Spirit.

There is an old Indian parable about a group of blind men who are led to an elephant and asked what they experience. Those who hold the tail think it is a rope. Those who grab the trunk think it is a snake. Those who grasp the legs believe they are tree trunks. I believe religions, which search for God, discover a piece of the truth. Jews and Muslims believe God is Above Us. He is. Hindus see God is Beside Us. He is. Buddhists sense God within Us. He is. The only way we may know the whole truth about God is if He removes the glasses that cover our eyes and shows Himself to us. God has shown Himself to be One God who is Above us, With us, and In us. The Trinity is not a dry theological doctrine. It is not a complex mathematical puzzle. The Trinity is the heart of the Gospel. Our God embraces us. He is all around us.

This means on the roller coaster you call life, God is not far away in heaven. When you face ups and downs, triumphs and troubles, soaring and sudden drops, God is watching over you, right beside you and deep within you. God is working all around you all the time. The challenge I give you for this week is: Where will you look for God in your world? Write it down on the post-it note. Don't put down something easy like "I'll look for God in the sunset, nature, a baby's smile." Look for what He is doing in the life of that difficult family member or coworker. Look for how He is working in your office, commute, the gym. Looking for how He is working where there is sickness, heartbreak, conflict, doubt and despair. And when you see Him working, lend Him a hand.

Agnes Collard was once asked the question, "Who is God?" At the time, she was 67-years-old and dying of leukemia. She was on the biggest roller coast plunge of her life. Yet somehow she came to see it differently.

I've always believed in God, and nothing has shaken that belief until now. I was shocked and angered. I didn't feel that my time has yet come. But over the past three or four months, my panic had calmed. I have begun to accept the fact that I will soon die. But more importantly, I no longer feel resentful of God. I have talked to my priest about all this. I must confess that I am even a little excited by what I may find after I die. I feel closer to God. I am sure He is there. I feel His presence, feel that He is close to me during the awful moments. And I feel love. I sometimes feel wrapped, cocooned in love.

The Father above us. The Son beside us. The Spirit within us. God surrounds us and wraps us in love. That's why we believe in one God who is three persons, blessed Trinity.