

**November 10, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [Luke 20:20–26](#)**

**TITLE: The Rationale of Faith**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

About a month ago, I was interviewed by a college student—a journalism student sent to me by a mutual friend. She asked about my call to ministry and what led me to become a pastor. I didn't know anything about her faith, about whether she was a Christian, a churchgoer or not. But since she asked, I talked for a while about what I believe. I then realized I should share this same speech with you. Because you will occasionally be asked about what you believe and it is good to have an answer ready—to be able to answer the question: Why do you believe in God?

My faith rationale doesn't start with dramatic religious experiences—no St. Paul being blinded on the road to Damascus; no crucifix speaking to me like St. Francis or ecstatic vision like Julian of Norwich. For me it all starts with a straightforward question: Is the world trustworthy? We know that the world is an immense place of oceans, mountains and starry skies of humbling grandeur. But is it trustworthy? Is it a good place or a bad place?

The old King James Bible says, “In this world you will have tribulations,” which is true. There is much that is hard and harsh in this world—cancers and tsunamis and violent wars. But we know them to be bad because we can imagine their opposites. We can imagine good health and peace on earth. Despite trials and tribulations, we have known good things in this life. And on some fundamental level within us, we believe that goodness is part of the foundation of this world; and so, yes, we believe the world is trustworthy.

Next question: Is the goodness around us accidental or is it part of a larger purpose? Is there a direction, an intentionality to life? The most disturbing part of the work of Charles Darwin was not that he proposed human beings descended from apes. The most disturbing part was that he considered all evolution to be just a byproduct of survival of the fittest. Giraffes with long necks survive better than ones with short necks. Apes who come down from trees and learn to use tools, learn to stand erect, communicate and work together as a group are more fit to survive. For some biologists, that's all there is to life's story. There is no larger purpose except that we exist to master enough skills to live as long as possible and hopefully pass on some of that wisdom to our children.

But Darwin fails to take into consideration things like beauty, imagination and wonder. How do Beethoven, Mozart and the “Hallelujah Chorus” make us more fit to survive? Is art and poetry, humor and love, just some of the same instincts as finding food and shelter so we'll survive one more day? No. Creativity, goodness and beauty point to something beyond us and which we are driven to pursue. There is definitely more to life than just survival of the fittest, and I believe all things are guided by a vast, motivating spirit of intentionality.

Third question: Is there a personal being directing this spirit of intentionality? Here is where many people step off the religion train. Some will say, yes, there's a guiding hand in the progress of life but it is the blind law of nature and physics. Everything from tiny molecules to the largest supernovas abides by the same rules, but it is an impersonal, mechanical interplay that makes the universe hold together, including each of us. That answer gives us a life without a heart. Sure, sound waves from a piano can vibrate in ways that are pleasing to our ears, but that doesn't give us Chopin. Light can be refracted to let us see blues and greens, but that doesn't give us Van Gogh's "Starry Night."

Both science and faith call out to the universe that life is a wonder bigger than we can imagine. But only faith allows the universe to answer back. Only belief in God lets us hear the response, saying "*You may be small in the universe, but worth is not determined by size. You are a beloved part of what has been, what is, and what will be.*" The move from atheism to theism gives a voice to creation, to the beauty and spirit of this universe. Instead of telling us to be content with a textbook and calculator, faith gives us a universe with a heart.

Now, once you move into the realm of theism, the conclusions come faster. Is this Creator God impersonal and distant? Perhaps. Some Eastern religions have come to that conclusion. But that seems contrary to things we call core values in life, like compassion, mercy and love. So if God is personal, that would require some sort of accommodation in order for God to move from God's reality to our reality. Some faith traditions see this accommodation happening through sacred texts, like the Islamic Qu'ran or Jewish Torah. But are sacred writings enough?

Once you move from a vast, impersonal universe to believe there is a loving God of the universe, it is not such a huge step to imagine that this same God desires to be in relationship with us in ways that involve not just our minds, but also our consciousness, hearts and souls. The best way for this to happen is through God providing a reflection of Godself in human form - a living being just as we are living beings. As a church, we assign titles for this re-presentation of God. We call him Christ; we identify it with Jesus of Nazareth, and we profess that this Savior not only lived, but also died and rose again. Why this story of incarnation and resurrection? Because in that good news, the big story we've been telling comes full circle. Step 1: We live in a world that is much larger than us, but it is trustworthy. Step 2: It is progressing toward a horizon. Step 3: This progress is shaped by God who is Lord of all, including us. Step 4: As a sign that our life's short horizons are not the ultimate reality, the resurrected Christ stepped over that horizon so we might see further. To paraphrase a prayer from William Penn, a horizon is nothing except the limit of our sight. So we are lifted up, raised up by Christ, the Son of God, that we may see further, believe more deeply, and ever be at peace.

I shared this faith rationale because it is the backdrop you need to understand the answer Jesus offered long ago when spies and skeptics tried to trap him with a trick question. Two thousand years ago, Jesus lived in a Jewish Palestinian world governed by the Roman foreign leaders, patrolled by foreign soldiers, and maintained by an

economy built around foreign currency bearing the likeness of false emperor gods. Accusers came to Jesus and asked, "How are we to survive in this world of oppressive Roman authority? Would you have us accept the Romans' power and pay taxes with Caesars' coins or should we defy them by withholding our wealth from their corrupt treasuries?"

Was Darwin right? Is this solitary life all there is and is it ruled by the survival of the fittest? Is scientific atheism right and this universe contains no larger meaning, no purpose or direction as we perpetually rotate around the sun? Or is there something else active in our world - something that knows the hairs on our heads and raises us up so we can see farther and hope for a life that extends beyond this time on earth? In that moment of questioning, Jesus had the men before him show him a denarius. With their hands, they extended a coin stamped with the image of Caesar. By carrying that coin, the questioners had already shown their allegiance, their complicity with the ways of this world. So Jesus told them, "You've made your bargain with the world—whether necessary for your survival or as a means to sinful gain, I know not. Nor do I judge you. Give to Caesar what is Caesar's."

But as the men stood before him, they also bore in their very being the image of God. They were human beings and thus part of a human race capable of miraculous things: Plato's philosophy and Homer's Odyssey, wisdom from Confucius and the Bhagavad Gita, mathematics arising from ancient Africa. They bore the image of God and the image of all humanity who would follow them: Galileo, Da Vinci, Madame Curie; St. Paul, St. Francis, Julian of Norwich. On that day, Christ didn't dismiss them; he gave them a second task. "You, made in the image of God, give to God that which is God's. Choose this day whom you will serve. Choose whom you will trust for matters of life and death. Choose which horizon of life you will focus on. For the answer to those questions are not Caesar things, but God things."

This may seem like an odd story for Stewardship Sunday, but the same words spoken by Christ to his questioners long ago are still being said to us today. We move through a world of great mystery, one that our minds cannot understand and our actions can never earn. And yet we are here. We are alive. We are part of a larger plan formed within the heart of a Creator God, embodied and made real in the example of Jesus Christ, and through our acceptance of this story of faith, we are raised up to see so much further—to love, serve, work and pray so much more deeply. Inevitably there will be time when we give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But far more often, we will find ourselves giving to God what is God's: walking by faith not sight, believing that with God all things are possible, returning a portion of what we have to the one who gives us so much.

Why do you believe in God? Practice telling your answer to yourself so you can share it when someone else asks you about this. And most importantly: Live and love as God's own beloved child, for such is who you are. That's how you give to God what is God's.

AMEN