



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

## **“Keeping Alive the Rumor”**

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*“The fool says in his heart,  
“There is no God”  
(Psalm 14:1)*

**August 26, 2012**

### **Collect of the Day**

Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in Your good gifts of life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Does God exist? One time a reporter asked Billy Graham how he knew there was a God, and Graham famously answered, "I know God exists because I talked to him this morning." Someone else said for proof of God, just go ahead and Google the word "God." I did, and there were almost 2 trillion sites. If there is no God, then God is surely the greatest single creation of the human imagination. 2 trillion sites. Just for kicks I Googled Satan who only scored 20 million sites, which is less than a third of what Britney Spears scored, which suggests we probably underestimate the reality and threat of the devil and overestimate the reality and blessings of Britney Spears. Does God exist? It's an important question, perhaps the most important question.

The atheist says no, God doesn't exist, and atheists can be as simple and irrational and unquestioning in their beliefs as any other religious fundamentalist. Real atheists say if you can't see it, weigh it, look at it through a microscope or telescope, then it doesn't exist. But for every true and militant atheist, there are a million others who would never call themselves atheists, but for all practical purposes live like atheists. They live as if there were no God who mattered much. They live as if they were completely on their own, not responsible to anyone or for anyone. Militant atheists or indifferent atheists, they are still atheists. They are two sides of the same coin. Both would deny God. Both inevitably lead to moral decay. No atheist group ever built a hospital or an orphanage. I don't know of any atheist group running a food bank, or trying to wipe out malaria. Yet, for a whole host of reasons, atheism has become increasingly accepted, even fashionable, so much so that someone said that the job of the church in the 21st century is to keep alive the rumor that there is a God. For a number of reasons, it's not always easy, keeping that rumor alive.

We live in the midst of a new and radical secularism, a world which seems to have no time or space for God, or a world that insists that God stay in the spaces and times we assign him. He is not to be let out. He is not to be part of public dialogue or discourse. William F. Buckley said if you mention God at a New York dinner party, you will be met with stony silence. Mention God a second time and you will not be invited back.

Part of the difficulty is intellectual. Historically, science and religion have been rivals and frequently foes. Science often contradicted the church's world view, what the church thought it knew about the universe. And the church wasn't very tolerant of divergent views, refused even to hear them. The church persecuted early scientists and later, as soon as they could, scientists returned the favor. Sometimes it has seemed as if science was out to eliminate God and mock his people. The result was a widening gap between religion and science. More on that in a bit.

Another part of the problem to keep alive the rumor is religion itself. Some of you grew up fearing God much more than loving him. It had something to do, perhaps, with that big man in a black robe in the pulpit. Maybe he was a finger shaker, and therefore you learned to think of your God as a finger-shaker, a law-giver, an angry judge in a black robe who disapproved of most everything you were doing or thinking. You understood God's Law, but not his Gospel. You understood God's disappointment and anger; you didn't understand his love for you and for the world, and his forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

It's not easy to keep alive the rumor. There's also human nature working against the existence of God. Psalm 10:4 says, "In his pride the wicked does not seek the Lord; in all his thoughts, "There is no God" because remember, we want to be like God (Gen. 3). So Paul wrote, "The sinful mind is hostile to God." There are reasons for this hostility. That is, there are fringe benefits to being an atheist. If there is no God, then you don't have to stand up under God's scrutiny. If there is no God, then you have no responsibilities before God. If there is no God, you can do whatever you want. If there is no God then *everything* is permitted. So you can see how the

human heart might be tempted to dethrone God. The toughest hurdle of all then may be the human heart.

Novelist Dana Tierney wrote an essay about envying her four-year-old son's faith. Tierney and her husband are not believers. Nevertheless, they had their son, Luke, baptized and never mentioned religion again. Then her husband, Luke's father, went off to the war in Iraq. Luke and his mother were watching television news one evening when a difficult report about the fighting in Iraq came on. She writes, "Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Luke steeple his fingers and bow his head for a split second. Surprised, I said, 'Sweetheart, what are you doing?' He wouldn't tell me, but a few minutes later he did it again. I said, 'You don't have to tell me, but if you want to, I'm listening.' Finally, he confessed, 'I was saying a little prayer for Daddy.'"

"That's wonderful, Luke" I murmured, abashed that we, or our modern world, somehow made him embarrassed to pray for his father in his own home. It was if the mustard seed of faith found its way into our son. I was envious." Later, she asked Luke when he started to believe in God. 'I don't know,' he said, 'I just always have.' (Makes me think of the boy's Baptism.) In any event, Luke's daddy did come home safely. His mother reflects, "But if something did happen to his father, Luke would have known Dad was in heaven waiting for us . . . For Luke all things are possible . . . Luke's prayers can stretch to infinity and beyond, but I am limited to one: Help thou my unbelief" (*New York Times Magazine*, 11 January 2004).

It's not easy to keep alive the rumor. The Psalmist writes, "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." Interesting enough, the Bible doesn't spend any time arguing for the existence of God. In the Bible the existence of God is self-evident, and surprisingly today, it's the scientists who are coming around to saying the same thing.

One of the hottest topics has become the conversation between science and religion. Some are thinking today that science and religion are no longer the adversaries they used to be. John Polkinghorne was a mathematical physicist at Cambridge University until he left his post, went to the seminary and became an Anglican priest. His move from science to religion, he says, has given him binocular vision, two lenses rather than one, although people look on him with the

same suspicion, he says, that they would look on a vegetarian butcher. In any event, he writes, "Recent science has shattered the modern secular world view . . . It leaves us with a choice. Either the universe was created by God, or it is a massive and incredible coincidence the likes of which we can hardly imagine." It makes me think of the words of Albert Einstein, "Either everything is a miracle . . . or nothing is." "The more I examine the universe" Polkinghorne continues, "in the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe . . . must have known we were coming." That is, "the universe is an expression of a Creator who has endowed it with the *finely tuned* potentiality for life."

Allan Sandage who won the Nobel prize in part for figuring out how fast the universe is expanding says it was his science that led him back to the faith. "Physicists have stumbled on signs that the cosmos is custom-made for life. It turns out if the constants of nature -- unchanging numbers . . . like the strength of gravity, for instance, or the charge of an electron and the mass of a proton, if any of these were the tiniest bit different, then atoms would not hold together, stars would not burn, and life would never have made an appearance" (*Newsweek*, July 20, 1998, "Science Finds God.") It reminds me of Johann Kepler who wrote, "Science thinks God's thoughts after him."

Our old adversaries, the scientists, are sounding more and more like theologians and are calling us to deeper and more profound faith. It's an exciting, provocative time we live in!

I don't understand all those arguments from physics, but it doesn't take a genius to see the finger prints of God all around us. At some point every summer I take a refresher course in Theology 101. On a clear night I lay down on the grass in the back yard and I look up and see all those stars. Thanks to the work of astronomers I know that for each one of them that I can see there are literally billions more that I cannot. And I think of Psalm 8, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him?" Who are we that God even thinks of us? But think of us he has, giving us our eyes and ears and all our senses, a feat of brilliant engineering. Think of us he has, blessing us with a good earth

that is so willing to produce for us. Think of us he has, creating extravagantly, not simply functionally, but with more color and beauty than is really necessary for survival or propagation.

Does God exist? It's an important question. Maybe there is one question that is more important still. "Can you trust in the God who does exist?" Can you trust him with whatever remains of your life? Can you trust him with your death? Can you trust him with the lives of those you love most? The answer comes not from intellect alone. It comes not from the field of physics or biology. The answer comes not from our hearts nor from instinct. The answer comes with his promise and in his Word.

That is, God is not some impersonal force out there who created things and then retired, no longer interested in his creation. No, God remains passionately interested. He is a God who created and sustains his creation out of love. He is a God who gets angry, who is offended, who rages and has every right to do so; a God who also relents and has mercy.

He didn't create and then just retire, which would make him mostly irrelevant today because he has nothing else to do. No, he is our Shepherd who cares deeply for his flock. Often we think of ourselves as followers of God. But mostly it is God who follows us, graciously follows us down the labyrinthine ways of our years; a God who will go to the ends of the earth to rescue us.

Psalm 103, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (v. 13). He is a God whose compassion he cannot ignore, whose compassion moves him to action. So he is the God who revealed himself in the life of a man who once lived among us. We know him as God's only Son, God's incarnation, God's enfleshment. We know him as Jesus. He is the one who lived and died and rose again for us, and he is the one the Bible invites us to trust so we can join our voices and our hearts and our confession with believers of all generations, with the ancients and with our contemporaries from every tribe and nation, we join our voices with theirs in praise of him.

It seems faith often begins with praise, for the 1<sup>st</sup> Article stuff, for the good earth, for the moon and stars and swirling galaxies. Faith often begins with praise for the 1<sup>st</sup>

Article stuff: snowflakes under the microscope, fresh bread with real butter and honey straight from the comb. But then, by Word and Spirit, faith grows to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article stuff, for hope and redemption and forgiveness, for purchase from sin and death by his blood.

The life of faith often begins with praise, a Te Deum Laudamus – You God, we praise. And it ends in trust: “In you, O Lord, do I trust” (Ps. 31:1). In You, O Lord, I trust with my life, in you I will trust with all the days ahead. In you, Lord, I will trust with the lives of my spouse, my children; In You, Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in you do I trust. Amen.

**GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH**

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