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FOOLS SAY THERE IS NO GOD

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Pastor, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on July 27, 2003
Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

My sermon is prompted by a terrifying experience I had in the hospital. I don't know if it was the morphine dripping into my veins or the Prince of Darkness tempting me but for two nights, unable to sleep, I wrestled with unbelief about God. Maybe *there is no God!* Maybe we live in a meaningless universe and my life and ministry have been a waste. I told myself, "Stop it! You're being a fool." Like autumn yellow jackets that swarm around us at the Apple Festival when we're eating I couldn't get rid of these thoughts that stung me. But when the sun arose in the morning faith and belief returned like the tide of "an invisible ocean"¹ coming in.

"Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" What is a fool? The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament says quite a lot about fools. "The one who utters slander is a fool"² "Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to advice. Fools show their anger at once, but the prudent ignore an insult."³ Jesus spoke of a successful businessman who tore down his buildings and built new and larger ones without giving a thought to God or his own mortality. One night God said to him, "You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"⁴

A fool may be very intelligent, well educated and sophisticated. What makes a fool are the decisions he or she makes. I tell my sons, "You're foolish if you go out to cut the grass without wearing sunscreen." But smart, well-educated people ignore the warnings and go out without sunscreen. We're warned, "Don't drink and drive." But well educated adults will say, "I haven't really had that much" and then go out on the roads. Fools are not wicked people. They're not stupid. They're no more or less sinful than others. And if we're honest we can all

remember foolish stunts we've performed even as adults. All of us make foolish and sometimes tragic mistakes.

"The fool says, 'There is no God.'" Yet in the late 19th century something happened in Western Europe and North America, that caused atheism to increase among some of the most well educated men and women of their times. Previously nearly every scientist and philosopher in the Western world was a Christian. In fact, many scholars argue that the Christian belief in an absolute distinction between God and the universe was the impetus that gave rise to experimental science. Nevertheless in the 19th century God retreated further and further into the distant past, as science explained more and more without any reference to God. For the first time in history, some people became atheists. T.S. Eliot wrote,

... It seems that something has happened that has never
Happened before...
Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no
God; and this has never happened before⁵

In earlier ages people exchanged one god for another god – for example, Jesus for Jupiter - atheism wasn't really a viable option. But in the twentieth century people increasingly rejected God for no God.

But something more troubling than *philosophical atheism* is *practical atheism*. Practical atheists are people who say they believe but in their hearts they deny God has any authority over them. For example, Jesus once asked, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you."⁶ When we don't do what Jesus tells us, it's like saying, "God doesn't matter." It's foolish to say we believe *with our lips* when we ignore God *in our heart*.

Practical atheism -- saying we believe but failing to obey is a virus that has infected the church from it's very beginning. Jesus sometimes called his own disciples unbelievers. For example, his disciples once asked Jesus why they couldn't cast out a demon from a boy. Jesus

said, "Because of your unbelief."⁷ Another time, Jesus beckoned Peter to step out of the boat and walk on the water. Peter started out well, but when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"⁸ On the first Easter the Risen Christ joined two unnamed disciples on the road to Emmaus who didn't recognize him. The two disciples suffered from a deep depression. They had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah but he'd been crucified, dead and buried. They were disciples but they didn't believe in a suffering Messiah. So Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared... that the Messiah should suffer."⁹

When you read the Gospels you get the impression that the disciples of Jesus were among the last to believe who he was, and that it isn't unusual for Christians to suffer at times from doubt and unbelief. Sometimes we have difficulty believing the good news that God exists, that God loves us and that he's come to us in Jesus Christ. When the sea of faith leaves us like the tide going out I find the advice of F. W. Robertson extremely helpful. He said, "There are hours, and they come to us all at some period of life or other, when the hand of Mystery seems to be heavy on the soul. Well in such moments you doubt all - whether Christianity be true: whether Christ was a man or God or a beautiful fable. You ask bitterly, like Pontius Pilate, What is Truth? In such an hour what remains? I reply, Obedience. Leave those thoughts for the present. Act - be merciful and gentle - honest; force yourself to abound in little services; try to do good to others; be true to the duty that you know. That must be right, whatever else is uncertain, and by all the laws of the human heart, by the word of God, you shall not be left in doubt. Do that much of the will of God which is plain to you, and 'You shall know the doctrine, whether it be of God.'¹⁰

Like Robertson, there were moments in the hospital when I doubted all. I asked myself, "How on earth can I be a minister of the Gospel? They'd fire me if they knew the doubts I'm having." When I experienced that dark night of doubt and unbelief in the hospital, I prayed. I prayed like I've never prayed before. I prayed to the One I doubted. I prayed and poured out my heart to the One who found me when I was lost. "O God, at this moment, I cannot believe in you. I'm filled with doubt and fear. Forgive me. I recognize I'm a fool. Thank you, Gracious God, that you found me when I was lost, and will never let anyone or any thought snatch me from your hand."

What about you? If you or a loved one have lost your faith in Christ or, perhaps, have never really believed in the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, I'm confident that, according to the Word of God, God has found you. When I talk to people who don't believe in God, who are thoroughly agnostic, or who simply ignore God I don't lose hope for them. I'm confident that God has found them. It's not we who find God. The Psalmist plainly says, "The LORD looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray."¹¹ None of us really seek God, until God finds us. God is not lost. God has never been lost. God doesn't need to be found. It is we who are lost. Dante, midway through life found himself in a dark wood. He didn't know how he got there. And he didn't know what direction to go to find his way out of the woods. Dante was lost. But God found him and led him up to heaven.¹² If you can say, not only with your lips but also in your heart, "I believe in God the Father Almighty... I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord... I believe in the Holy Spirit" it's not because you found God. It's because God has found you. And when we're able to say that with our lips and in our hearts, then will come the

deliverance spoken of by the Psalmist, when the Lord restores the fortunes of faith we will rejoice and be glad.¹³

O God our defender, storms rage about us and cause us to be afraid. Rescue your people from despair, deliver your sons and daughters from fear, and preserve us all from unbelief; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

¹ Flannery O'Connor as quoted in Walking 'Away from Faith: Unraveling the Mystery of Belief and Unbelief, by Ruth A. Tucker, p27.

² Proverbs 10:18.

³ Proverbs 12:15, 16.

⁴ Luke 12:13-21.

⁵ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *From 'The Rock'* as found in the Oxford Book of Christian Verse, p. 532.

⁶ Luke 6:46.

⁷ Matthew 17:20.

⁸ Matthew 14:29

⁹ Luke 24:25.

¹⁰ F.W. Robertson, Sermons, cited in Kelly James Clark, When Faith Is Not Enough, pp. 94-95.

¹¹ Psalm 14:2, 3.

¹² Dante, The Divine Comedy: Hell, Canto 1, lines 1-18.

¹³ Psalm 14:7.