

“Experience God in 3D”

Matthew 28:16-20

Series: Core Strengthening Week 3. I Believe in God

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hoglund

The Woodside Church

January 15, 2023

Virtual Reality, VR, takes videos and games to a whole new experiential level. Strap on these glasses and you enter 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. Once the headset is off, you can see what's really real.

Today, in our series on the Apostles' Creed - Core Strengthening - we look at the ultimate reality: “I believe in God.” Who is God? What is God like? The majority of people on the planet believe in God or gods. They will give you their views of God. Yet 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. The only way to know God's true nature is if God reveals Himself to us, if God takes off our virtual glasses so we can see the real God.

Why is seeing the real God the most important question in life? How you view God determines 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 which parts are an illusion and which are more dangerous than imagined.

Throughout history humans 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, win favors, even to control or manipulate God or the gods. Religions take three basic pathways. The first views God as **Transcendent**. That is a fancy theological way to say 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. In the same way Islam 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**. This term is the opposite of Transcendent. The gods live among us and in nature. Often, this pathway worships multiple gods. The Egyptians, Greeks and Romans took the forces of nature - the Sun, earth, fertility, the seas, good luck, 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 Indian Missionaries tell 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? The Apostles' Creed describes God as a Trinity. 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 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 in the Bible. Yet the Trinity is all over the Bible. 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 3D

First, the Trinity teaches us about **God Above Us**. While ancient people worshiped thousands of gods, the Israelites believe only one God creates and rules the world. Instead of worshiping the sun, moon, stars, and earth they worship the God who creates all these. Instead of offering sacrifices to so many gods, it is comforting to know you only need to

please one God. 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 appears to be an awesome, fearful, sometimes terrifying God. When Abraham, Moses and Isaiah meet Him, they are 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 completely remove sin. Since we are so stained with sin, He would have to wipe us out as well. The God Above Us refuses to take this step. He loves us as a Father loves His wayward children. God Above wants to destroy our sin without destroying us. To do so, He cannot stay in heaven. Our sin is so great, He must handle it in person.

This leads to the second truth of the Trinity: **God Beside Us**. Some folks in Galilee meet a man named Jesus. He is a construction worker, a rabbi and a miracle worker. He is a full-blooded human being and yet so much more. He controls the wind and the waves, heals the sick, casts out demons, and teaches wonderful truths. Now if all this 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, is to die. Jesus claims his death will wipe out all the sin of humanity. Then He proves 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 stand in the presence of Jesus, however, they know they are standing before God.

What kind of god is He? An angel? No, He was more than an angel. A half God, half human like Hercules from Greek mythology? No. To save us He must be fully God and fully human. Jesus is the bridge between heaven and earth, God and humanity, because He has one foot firmly on God’s side and the other firmly on our side. He does what only God can do. Only God can command nature. Only God can forgive sin. Only God can defeat sin, death, the devil and give eternal life. This is no mere human being. This man Jesus is also the Living God who made heaven and earth. This is why He is 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 is not the whole story. God wants to get closer still. God goes a step further.

The third truth of the Trinity is **God In Us**. Imagine how difficult it is for the disciples at the Last Supper. In Jesus, they meet God Himself and now He says He is going away. If you have 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 understands. So on that last night, He explains how He will 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. (John 14:15-17, 23, 25-26)

Fifty days later on Pentecost, Jesus keeps His promise. God the Holy Spirit comes 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 can live deep inside the hearts of the disciples through God the Holy Spirit. Wherever they go, God is with them. What's more, the people who did not meet Jesus in the flesh, people like you and me, can 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, 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: Look for God in your world. Write it down. Don't put down something easy like "I'll look for God in the sunset or nature." 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 has 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.