

"FOUND OF GOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
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INTRODUCTION

Science fiction writer, Isaac Asimov, was an atheist. A man of great wit and intelligence, Isaac Asimov was brought up in the Jewish faith, but like many modern Jews maintained some of the trappings of his faith while rejecting its central focus on God. Once on national television, Asimov was asked point blank by television interviewer, David Frost, about his views on God. Asimov was reluctant to admit his atheism to a large television audience and so he stalled and hedged a bit by saying,

"Whose God?" David Frost would not be put off and he said, "I mean the Judeo - Christian God of western tradition...civilization....you know that very well, Dr. Asimov."

Asimov stalled again, saying, "I haven't given it much thought." Whereupon Frost said, "Oh, I don't believe that....I'm sure a person of your wide knowledge and achievements would have sought to find God". With that, Asimov saw his chance and seized it, saying...."God is smarter than I am. Let him try to find me".

And in the laughter that followed, the subject of God was dropped, but that isn't the end of the story...

Asimov was quite certain that God...even if He existed...would not really mind an honest atheist. However, he might grow irritated over a "wise-guy" atheist. His talk with David Frost had only been a taping. What would happen on the day that it was really to appear? Asimov wondered and then one day he found out.

For twenty-one years Asimov had suffered occasionally from the fearful pain of kidney stones and the day on which he appeared on television with his "wise-guy crack" about God finding him, he had his worst and his last attack. Later on he was to write:

"There's no use trying to describe the bitter unrelenting pain one experiences in such an attack. All I could do was clutch my abdomen...stagger about....and gasp, 'All right, God...you've found me....now let me go, please...'"

DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the man we've come to know as "Doubting Thomas" prayed that same prayer, "All right, God....you've found me. Now.....please let me go". After all, tradition tells us that Thomas was martyred for his faith. Those early "saints" paid a terrible price for their faithfulness. But we're getting ahead of our story.

We really don't know a great deal about Thomas. He was one of the original twelve. We also know that he had a second name. According to John's Gospel, he was also known as "Didymus". And another thing that we know about him is that he was no coward. That little tidbit of information comes along earlier in the Gospel of John in the story of the raising of Lazarus.

When word came to Jesus that Lazarus was ill, a dilemma presented itself. The home of Lazarus was in Bethany which was in Judea. The religious authorities in Judea were already threatening the life of Jesus. There was some risk involved for Jesus and the twelve in traveling back there. Jesus, however, was determined to make the journey and it was Thomas who spoke up and said to the other disciples, "Let us also go that we may die with Him". One senses that he was not lukewarm in his commitment to Christ, nothing of the coward comes through. We wonder...

A SENSE OF HONESTY AT WORK

Has Thomas been unfairly maligned? Perhaps. Or maybe his brutal honesty has had something to do with tarnishing his reputation. But press the "fast forward" button and come with me to the Last Supper where we find Jesus speaking some of the most beautiful words ever recorded,

"Let not your heart be troubled" says Jesus to the twelve.
"Believe in God.....believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto Myself....that where I am, there you may also be. And you know the way where I am going."

Now remember it was Thomas who spoke up and said to Him,

"Lord, we do not know where You are going and how do we know the way."

Thomas was not uncommitted. He was simply intellectually honest. He knew that many people have been misled by false religious teachers and I see him as being determined not to make the same mistake. His reply to Jesus is:

"Lord....we do not know where You are going....and how do we know the way?"

It's no wonder then that when the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord that Thomas blurted out:

"Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Thomas was not being difficult. He was being consistent with his own character. He was a cautious man....a man of integrity, a man who did not plunge in without all the facts. However, he was a man who when he did plunge in, gave his all and it was a high and a holy moment when Christ did appear to him.

"Reach here your finger and see My hands" said the Risen Christ to Thomas, "and reach here your hand, and put it into My side and be not unbelieving, but believing!"

I can imagine Thomas kneeling in the face of convincing evidence and declaring with a strong and solemn voice, "My Lord and My God!" It's an exciting ending to a gripping story for I see this story of Thomas as your story and mine. It has to do with that moment of decision that confronts each of us: is Christ Who He says He is....or not?

NO ABSOLUTE PROOF

There's something of Thomas in most people...the desire and the demand for absolute proof and we have to admit and acknowledge, first of all, that there is no such thing as absolute proof of the reality of the Gospel. We all would like to have such proof, but unfortunately it does not exist. Our relationship with Christ is a matter of faith and not absolute scientific knowledge.

Let's suppose for a moment that you have one of those near death experiences. We've all read about them. Let's suppose that during the course of a serious operation your heart stops beating. You feel your spirit leaving your body and hovering about the operating room. You hear the doctor say, "We've lost him. He's gone". You see a bright light and a long tunnel and hear the voices of loved ones and you see Jesus in all of His glory....but wait, it starts to fade. And the next thing you know the doctor is leaning over you and resuscitating you, and you are awake and alive and you say,

"I'll never fear death again. I know there is life on the other side....I've been there and I've seen it for myself."

And as soon as you share your experience with others, there's going to be that "some one" who will say....

"Oh....that's just a chemical reaction of the brain, it's a defense mechanism....that was just a dream, no matter how realistic".

It makes no difference that they have no more proof than you.....and they will try to convince you that what you experienced was not real.

Or, suppose you have made a miraculous recovery from cancer. The doctors had sewn you up and sent you home and said there's nothing more we can do for you. Six weeks....maybe six months at the outside....but don't make any long term plans. But your friends begin to pray for you.....(incidentally, there are scientific studies that indicate that prayer can make a difference)....anyway, your friends begin to pray for you, and your spouse begins to pray for you, and people at church begin to pray for you and six months later you return to the doctor's office and there's no sign of cancer. The doctor shakes his head and says,

"Well....sometimes this happens....we know that a certain number of cancer patients are going to experience spontaneous remission.....we don't really know 'WHY'"

In your own mind and heart, you know why - but proof? No....none that will convince a skeptical scientific community. There is no such thing as absolute evidence of the existence of God. Many pointers, but if you are looking for and require such absolute evidence, you will be disappointed.

I think that every serious believer confronts this truth sooner or later. In other words, faith in Christ is not a "given". Faith in Christ is a choice. I think that this needs to be lifted up and underscored and reflected upon. Put this down as a second point of today's message.

FAITH IN CHRIST IS A CHOICE

In our hearts, many of us at one time or another in our lives have cried out with

Thomas,

"Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nail, and put my hand into His side, 'I will not believe!'"

And sooner or later we're confronted with the fact that we will never experience such direct confrontation and we are left with a choice. Is this faith real or not? And to me that is the most important choice a person will ever make!

I read a story recently....a true story....about a young man who grew up in Alabama. About fifteen years ago, a seventh grade bully picked a fight with this young man, punched him in the nose and knocked him out. When the boy came to and regained his consciousness, he vowed he would get revenge and kill the bully. He went home, grabbed his mother's .22 and set out to find his target. In a matter of moments, his destiny hung in the balance. With the bully in his gun sight, he could simply fire and his adversary would be "history". But at that very instant, he asked himself a question:

"What will happen to me if I pull the trigger?"

And another image came into focus, a picture as painful as any imaginable. In that split second which would take the boy's life in one of two very different directions, he visualized, with chilling clarity, what it would be like to go to jail. He pictured having to stay up all night to keep the other prisoners from attacking him. And that potential pain was greater than the anticipation of gaining his personal revenge. He re-aimed his gun. He shot a tree.

This boy was Bo Jackson. You've heard of him, I'm sure. As he describes the scene in his biography, there is absolutely no question that this was a pivotal point in his life. This single choice probably made the difference between a kid with no future and one of great athletic success.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

The power of choice.....it's the most powerful gift God has given us. Think for a moment of all the people who have fouled up their lives because of poor choices. Some one once asked, "How big will a tree grow?" And the answer is that a tree will grow to be as big as it can be. It will put down as many roots as it can. It will grow as many branches as it can. It will put out as many leaves as it can. It will produce as much fruit as it possibly can. In fact, everything in nature grows to its maximum potential. That is....everything except for people!

WHY? Because only people have the ability to choose. Sadly, they can choose to be less than they have the ability to be. However, there is some great news in this powerful truth. Here it is:

If people have the ability to choose to be less than they can be, they also have the ability to choose to be all they can be. Everything begins with a choice!

So, let me take this a step further and close on a positive note....

SOME CLOSING THOUGHTS AND REFLECTIONS

Most of us came to our Christian faith because our parents were Christians. But sooner or later in order to claim for ourselves a mature faith....a faith that will reassure us in times of crisis....a faith that will motivate us to be all we are capable of becoming....a faith that will allow us to lay down our lives for others....we must make the choice for ourselves.

Is this Gospel true or not? If we could test it in the laboratory or prove it with our math tables, no decision would be necessary. But that is not the privilege that God has given us. God, it seems to me, has asked us to stake our lives on that which we cannot hold in our hands and on that which we cannot see with our eyes. Remember how the story of Thomas ends? Jesus says to him,

"Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see...and yet believed!"

He's talking about us. He's calling us blessed, and He's right. Thank you, Jesus...thank you! For when we make our choice for Christ we are blessed. And having made that choice, we are then able to put our priorities in order. We are able to face life with a quiet confidence that is not shaken by life's storms. We are able to make other hard and tough decisions with the knowledge that however they come out, they will turn out all right. We may never have the absolute knowledge that Thomas had, but we will have something more precious: we will have a mature faith that grows as it is tested under fire in the laboratory of life. It will not be easy, but it will be real.

REAL FAITH

A college student, home from school, stopped by to see his pastor. As he sat down in the minister's study, he said:

"I've lost my faith". The pastor said, "That's good". The student answered, "You didn't hear me...you weren't listening.....I said that I've discovered things at the university that have taken away my faith."

And his pastor said,

"If your faith can be lost that easily....it's not the faith you need. Now you can replace it with some real faith."

I'd like to think his pastor was right on target. There is no absolute proof in this world of the reality of the Gospel claims regarding Christ. Mature faith in Christ is a choice and to me it's the most important choice a person will ever make. But once we make that choice all the rest of life falls in place! And of that you can be absolutely certain!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God....for once again we feel your spirit at work in our lives....wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love. Confirm within us the decisions and intentions and resolutions of this hour. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.

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"Whose God?" Frost would not be put off. He said, "I mean the Judeo-Christian God of western tradition. You know that very well, Dr. Asimov." Asimov stalled again, saying, "I haven't given it much thought."

Said Frost, "I don't believe that. I'm sure a person of your wide knowledge and attainments would have sought to find God". Whereupon Asimov saw his chance and seized it. He said, "God is smarter than I am. Let him try to find me".

And in the laughter that followed, the subject was dropped. But that isn't the end of the story, however.

Asimov was quite certain that God, even if he existed, would not mind an honest atheist. He might, however, grow irritated over a wiseguy atheist. His talk with Frost had only been a taping. What would happen on the day it was really to appear? Asimov wondered. He found out. For twenty-one years Asimov had suffered occasionally from the fearful pain of kidney stones and the day on which he appeared on television with his wiseguy crack about God finding him, he had his worst and his last attack. He was to write later on,

"There's no use trying to describe the bitter unrelenting pain one experiences in such an attack. All I could do was clutch my abdomen, stagger about, and gasp, 'All right, God....you've found me. Now let me go.'"

DEVELOPMENT

Perhaps the man we've come to know as "Doubting Thomas" prayed that same prayer, "All right, God. You've found me". "Now...let me go, please". After all, tradition tells us that Thomas was martyred for his faith. The early saints payed a terrible price for their faithfulness. But we're getting ahead of our story.

We don't know a lot about Thomas. He was one of the original twelve. We know that. We also know that he had a second name. According to John's Gospel, he was also known as Didymus. Didymus. And we know one thing more about him. We know that he was not a coward.

That little tidbit of information comes earlier in John's Gospel in the story of the raising of Lazarus. When word came to Jesus that Lazarus was quite sick, a dilemma presented itself. Lazarus' home was in Bethany which was in

Judea. The religious authorities in Judea were already threatening the life of Jesus. It was risky for Jesus and the twelve to travel back there. Jesus, however, was determined to make the journey. It was Thomas who spoke up and said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go that we may die with Him". Perhaps we have maligned Thomas. Certainly he was not halfhearted in his commitment to Christ and certainly he was no coward.

BRUTAL HONESTY AT WORK

Perhaps it was his brutal honesty that has tarnished Thomas' reputation. Fast-forward with me to the Last Supper. Jesus speaking some of the most beautiful words ever recorded. Hear them,

"Let not your heart be troubled" He says to the twelve.
"Believe in God. Believe also in Me. In My Father's House are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going".

Remember it was Thomas who spoke up and said to Him,

"Lord, we do not know where You are going and how do we know the way."

Thomas was not uncommitted. He was simply intellectually honest. He knew that many people have been misled by false religious teachers but he was determined that he would not make the mistake himself.

"Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how do we know the way?"

No wonder that when the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen the risen Lord, Thomas blurted out,

"Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

Thomas was not being difficult. He was being consistent with his own character. He was a cautious man, a man of integrity, a man who did not plunge in without all the facts. He was a man, however, who when he did plunge in, gave his all, and it was a high and a holy moment when Christ did appear to Thomas.

"Reach here your finger and see My hands" said the Risen Christ to Thomas, "and reach here your hand, and put it into my side and be not unbelieving, but believing."

We can imagine Thomas kneeling in the face of incontrovertible evidence and declaring with a strong and solemn voice, "My Lord and My God". What an exciting ending to a gripping story. For you see the story of Thomas - it's your story and mine. It concerns that moment of decision that confronts each of us. Is Christ who He says He is or not?

NO ABSOLUTE PROOF

Let's admit, first of all, that there is no such thing as absolute proof of the reality of the Gospel. Many people would like to have such proof, but unfortunately it does not exist. Our relationship with Christ is a matter of faith - and not absolute scientific knowledge.

Let's suppose for a moment that you have one of those near death experiences. You've read about them, haven't you. Let's suppose that during the course of a serious operation, your heart quits beating. You feel your spirit leaving your body and hovering above the operating room. You hear the doctor say, "He's gone." You see a bright light and a long tunnel and hear the voices of loved ones and you see Jesus in all His glory - but wait, it starts to fade. And the next thing you know the doctor is leaning over you and resuscitating you, and you are awake and alive and you say, "I'll never fear death again. I know there is life on the other side....I've been there and I've seen it for myself." As soon as you share your experience with others, there's going to be that someone who will say,

"Oh, that's just a chemical reaction of the brain, it's a defense mechanism...that was just a dream, no matter how realistic".

It makes no difference that they have no more proof than you, they will try to convince you that what you experienced was not real.

Or suppose you have made a miraculous recovery from cancer. The doctors had sewn you up and sent you home and said there's nothing more we can do for you. Six weeks....maybe six months at the outside, but don't make any long term plans. But your friends begin to pray for you.....by the way there are scientific studies that indicate that prayer can make a difference....your friends begin to pray for you, your spouse begins to pray for you, people at church begin to pray for you and six months later you return to the doctor's office and there's no sign of cancer. And the doctor shakes his head and says,

"Some times this happens....we know that a certain number of cancer patients are going to experience spontaneous remission. We don't know why".

In your own mind and heart, you know why - but proof? No, none that will convince a skeptical scientific community. There is no such thing as absolute evidence of the existence of God. If you require such evidence, you will be disappointed.

FAITH IN CHRIST IS A CHOICE

Every serious believer confronts this truth sooner or later. Faith in Christ is not a given. Faith in Christ is a choice. That's the second thing we need to see. Faith is a choice.

In our hearts many of us cry out with Thomas,

"Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nail, and put my hand into His side, I WILL NOT BELIEVE!"

But sooner or later we are confronted with the fact that we will never experience such direct confrontation. And we are left with a choice - is this faith real or not? And that is the most important choice we will ever make.

Let me tell you a story about a young man who grew up in Alabama. About fifteen years ago, a seventh-grade bully picked a fight with this young man, punched him in the nose and knocked him out. When the boy regained consciousness, he vowed to get revenge and kill the bully. He went home, grabbed his mother's .22 and set out to find his target. In a matter of moments, his destiny hung in the balance. With the bully in his gun sight, he could simply fire and his schoolmate would be history. But at that very instant, he asked himself a question,

"What will happen to me if I pull the trigger?"

And another image came into focus, a picture as painful as any imaginable. In that split second which would take the boy's life in one of two very different directions, he visualized, with chilling clarity, what it would be like to go to jail. He pictured having to stay up all night to keep the other prisoners from attacking him. That potential pain was greater than the anticipation of revenge. He reaimed his gun and shot a tree.

This boy was Bo Jackson. As he describes the scene in his biography, there's no question this was a pivotal point in his life. This single choice probably made the difference between a kid with no future and one of great athletic success.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

The power of choice is the most powerful gift that God has given us. Think of all the people who have fouled up their lives because of poor choices. In his seminars, Jim Rohn, a speaker and success philosopher, asks the question:

"How big will a tree grow?"

The answer is that a tree will grow to be as big as it can. It will put down as many roots as it can; it will grow as many branches as it can; it will put out as many leaves as it can and will produce as much fruit as it possibly can. In fact, everything in nature grows to its maximum potential. That is, everything except for people. Why? Because only people have the ability to choose. Sadly, they can choose to be less than they have the ability to be. However, there is great news in this powerful truth. If people have the ability to choose to be less than they can be, they also have the ability to choose to be all they can be.

Everything begins with a choice.

Most of us came to Christian faith because our parents were Christians. But sooner or later to claim for ourselves a mature faith - a faith that will reassure us in time of crisis - a faith that will motivate us to be all we are capable of becoming - a faith that will allow us to lay down our lives for others - we must make the choice for ourselves. Is this Gospel true or not? If we could test it in the laboratory or prove it with our math tables, no decision would be necessary. But that is not the privilege that God has given us. God has asked us to stake our lives on that which we cannot hold in our hands and on that which we cannot see with our eyes. Remember how the story of Thomas ends. Jesus said to him,

"Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed!"

He's talking about us. He's calling us blessed, and He's right! When we make our choice for Christ we are blessed. And having made that choice, we are able to put our priorities in order. We are able to face life with a quiet confidence that is not shaken by life's storms. We are able to make other hard decisions with the knowledge that however they come out, they will turn out all right. We may never have the absolute knowledge that Thomas had, but we will have something more precious: we will have a mature faith that grows as it is tested under fire in the laboratory of life. It will not be easy, but it will be real.

A college student, who was home from school, came to his pastor for counselling. As he sat down in the minister's office, he said,

"I have lost my faith". The pastor said, "That's good". The student answered, "You weren't listening....I said I have discovered things at the university that have taken away my faith."

And the pastor said,

"If your faith can be lost that easily, it's not the faith you need. Now you can replace it with some real faith."

That pastor was right. There is no absolute proof in this world of reality of the Gospel claims. Mature faith in Christ is a choice. To me it's the most important choice we will ever make. But once we make that choice all the rest of life falls in place!