

“I Believe”
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Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

What do we mean when we say we believe in something?

Often, I think we use it as an intellectual assertion that something is true.

For example, “I believe in climate change” means that I think certain things are true about what’s happening with the earth’s climate, whereas “I don’t believe in climate change” asserts that those things aren’t true.

“I believe in God” means that I think God exists. “I don’t believe in God,” would then mean that I don’t think God exists.

Another meaning of the word *believe*, is, “to be confident of” or “put one’s trust in” something. And this is the meaning of believe used in our passage from John this morning. When Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who *believes* in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” what he means is “everyone who puts their whole trust in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It’s not an intellectual assertion about who Jesus is; it’s about our relationship with him.

One commentator says, “no one is saved by intellectual agreement with a ‘belief.’ Salvation is all about the restoration of broken relationships. Being ‘saved’ means being restored to the proper bond and trust of true kinship with God.”¹

¹ David Ewart, Holy Textures, <https://www.holytextures.com/2012/02/john-3-14-21-year-b-lent-4-sermon.html>.

So, when we say we believe in God, when we say we believe in Jesus Christ, what do we mean? Are we putting our entire trust in God? Or are we simply affirming God's existence? Simply affirming that we think Jesus is the Son of God?

It matters how we answer that question.

What do we mean when we say we believe?

In 12-step programs, the 3rd step says that "we made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God." Our will and our lives. Everything. We decided to turn everything over to God.

Whether we're part of a 12-step group or not, the people of God are not very good at turning our wills and lives over to the care of God. We may do it for a short time, but then we tend to take it back. This has been true since Adam and Eve.

Our story from the Book of Numbers is another example. Over and over, God has provided for the ancient Hebrew people. God heard them when they cried out for deliverance from slavery in Egypt and sent Moses to lead them to freedom. They danced and rejoiced for a short time and then began complaining. Freedom was much harder than they expected. When there was no food or water, they complained. So God provided for them. Just prior to today's story, the people had begged God to give them victory over the Canaanites in the land they were passing through, and God did. Now they're complaining again about the food.

I'm sure any parent who has driven with young passengers on a long road trip can identify with God's frustration in this story. "You want something to complain about? I'll give you something to complain about!" Here come the biting snakes.

The real issue for the Hebrew people is not their complaining – we all understand that. Change is hard, and God’s people go through a lot in the desert, so much so, that it makes slavery in Egypt begin to look good, at least it was familiar, and the food tasted better than manna in the wilderness. No, the real problem is that the people don’t trust God. No matter how many times God rescues them, opens a way where there is no way, defeats enemies, provides what they need, they still turn away and put their trust in something else. We hear it over and over and over throughout the Old Testament. The people cry out to God. God saves them. They rejoice. Things get difficult. They turn away from God. They seek help elsewhere. Bad things happen to them. They cry out to God. God saves them.

Even in this story of biting snakes. Once people start dying, the people immediately repent and turn back, begging Moses to intercede for them so that God will protect them. And God does. Every single time. Moses puts the bronze snake on a stick, and the people look on it and live.

Even that will get distorted, though. It’s not the snake on a stick that heals them. It’s the power of God working through it. Some years down the road, Hezekiah will have to destroy the bronze snake because the people have grown to worship it.

What is wrong with us? It seems that we just can’t help it. When Jesus comes to be with us, when the light comes into the world, we still can’t turn away from the things we do in the dark and so we attempt to snuff out that light by killing the one who came into the world not to condemn the world but to save it.

Why is it so hard to put our whole trust in God?

Why do we keep looking to people and things who are not God to save us?

Perhaps it's because we want what we want when we want it. And God doesn't respond as quickly as we wish God would. Perhaps it's because we think we know what the best outcome would be and are unwilling to set our own egos aside in order to pay attention to what God's will is. Perhaps it's just who we are – from the beginning, choosing our will over God's – we call that sin.

Perhaps it's just too hard for us to trust.

But when we do set aside our egos, when we do admit that we can't do it by ourselves, when we do put our whole trust in God, then we bask in the light of that relationship, and we know what it is to be saved.

A year ago, we shut our doors because of the dangers of a global pandemic. Now we see the glimmering of hope, as we start to regather. We've had a chance to hit pause on everything, a global time out. We've had a chance to test out how much we trust God. As things start to open up and we're able to return to things we've been missing, we have an opportunity to start again, turning our lives and will over to the care of God. Trusting God. Being in relationship with God.

In just a moment, we will say the words of the Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.

As you say those words, think about what they mean for you.

Are you affirming the idea of God?

Are you putting your whole trust in God?

How you answer will make all the difference.