

Jeremiah 23:23-29
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Jeremiah 23:23-39

²³Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? ²⁴Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD. ²⁵I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" ²⁶How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back—those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart? ²⁷They plan to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, just as their ancestors forgot my name for Baal. ²⁸Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat? says the LORD. ²⁹Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

It may be that people *arguing* is the closest we will ever come to having objective proof of the existence of God. Listen to people argue - anyone. Children, adults, any religion, any part of society - arguments are always the same. Things will be said like, "You did that out of turn." "You didn't contribute your share of the work." "You changed what you said before." and the other person will either deny it or say why, in this case, there was a good reason for him to act in such a bad way. But both of the arguers appeal to some commonly held standards. Neither of them argues that it is a good thing to go out of turn - or not doing your share of work is all right - or it doesn't make any difference if a person changes what he says everytime he speaks.

Arguments are always about whether or not the standards of behavior have been violated...Arguments are *not* about whether those standards exist. Both people in the argument appeal to the same standards.

Why do people agree on those standards? Why do humans agree on what is good? I think this may say something about all people having the same creator.

Wherever you go in this world, no matter what the civilization, there are certain standards. Some things are *always* bad - foolishness, cowardice, laziness, selfishness. Some things are *always* good - kindness, courage, loyalty, wisdom. (That doesn't mean people do them, it just means people recognize them as good.) Where do people get these standards of right and wrong?

When people do what is wrong, they don't just accept it. They deny it or they excuse it.

People say, "I spoke irresponsibly because I was tired." "I never did what I said I would, but if I had known how busy I was going to be I never would have promised in the first place." "I know what I did to him - but he'll get over it."

And the more anxious we are with denials and excuses - the stronger the proof that we know right from wrong. (If we didn't know it was wrong, we wouldn't need to make excuses.)

We believe so strongly in the rules of right and wrong we feel them pressing on us in all that we do. We can't face the fact that we are breaking those rules.

Rules that are that powerful, rules that everyone agrees on, speak of an absolute standard of right and wrong. Absolute rules speak of a universe ruled by God.

When I hear people say they don't believe in God - the most common reason offered is sin. "How can there be a God when there is so much sin and evil in the world?" (Which is a good question. People have been wondering about it for thousands of years.) But here is another question. How do people know there is sin? Where did we get our idea of good and evil? Why do all people agree on the existence of sin and evil in the world? Why do we all have **one** standard? Maybe the universal agreement that there is sin in the world is proof that God exists – rather than proof that he doesn't.

When people argue they appeal to *one* standard.

We know about good and evil because God is absolute good. All people appeal to ideas of good and evil because all people are creatures of God who is absolutely good. (That doesn't mean we all live up to those standards.) There are some good people and some people who are very bad...But God comes to us with the standards - and that makes the standards universal and absolute.

In this morning's first lesson from the book of Jeremiah the prophet talks about standards - God's standards. God tells the people to listen to his word. Other prophets have other things to say. They are less than the word of God. God calls them..."those who prophecy lies, and who

prophesy the deceit of their own heart". Those lies have nothing to do with the word of God. The scripture continues, "What has straw in common with wheat? says the Lord. Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"

God talks about sin. And he talks about the goodness that does not put up with sin.

God's anger at our bad behavior is written here as a word of grace.

There is hope here. We are sinners - and God is angry about it. That's good news. God has not abandoned us. God has become Jesus Christ and brought his absolute goodness into our lives - right here where we live in a sinful world.

Our lives have a unifying principle. We are not left to make up our own standards. We are not wandering through life blown this way and that by every wind that happens to come our way. We have an anchor. We have a guiding principle of God who gives meaning to our lives. The same God with the same standards, year after year, generation after generation.

When we sin and God is angry about it - we know that we have not been abandoned. We are children of God.

God is absolute good. He is the standard of good that all people know. There is hope in that.

The dominant values in our society do not offer that hope. The culture we try to build celebrates individualism and self-sufficiency. The stability of an absolute goodness, is replaced with "what works for me". Right and wrong become a matter of taste. Goodness is only an opinion. People make themselves the standard of truth.

That is an easier way to live, but there is no joy in it. It's a lonely thought to imagine life where no one shares your values unless they choose to, not because the values themselves are good.

The contributions you make, the values you stand for, are only accepted if they meet the whims of some people who may change their minds, instead of contributions that are valued because they are right and they are good.

A God who hates sin is more demanding than a God who doesn't care. But there is order to life. There is purpose. There is joy in God's unshakable holiness.

When we disagree with God, when we know what we want to do - and we know what God wants us to do, there is a great comfort in the underlying principle of all creation. God is right and we are wrong. When we want things different than what God wants, we should change *our* minds – not ask God to change his.

God does not want us to be wrong. God is holy and good and he cannot stand for the children he loves to wander away from his goodness. That sounds frightening. It is not an easy thought to consider that the all powerful creator of the universe is angry about our behavior.

Would we wish it any other way?

When we make our excuses, when we tell God that we may have just dismissed someone who disagreed with us - but considering we knew we were right, we thought it was justified. And we may not have known for sure what we said was true, but we didn't know for sure it wasn't. Or we've done more than our share already. Or those people don't deserve any more, or any of the other excuses.

When we make our excuses - would we want God to shrug and say, "Well, I'd better get used to your way of living."? Or "I've been expecting too much of you people. From now on - however you decide to act, whatever you decide to do, I won't care."

Those are our choices: God who is absolutely holy and grieves when his children sin...or God who doesn't really care if his children sin or not.

We are the children of God who is absolutely good and he will teach us the rules that any parent would demand for his children. God does not think so little of you that he supposes you are as good as you can possibly be. He wants better for you.

Every time we sin – the pride, the laziness, the selfishness – God is right there saying, "That's not for you."

Are we afraid that God may be unhappy with some parts of our lives? Of course he is! Are you happy with every aspect of your life? Didn't we begin this service with a confession of our sins?

We get confused, frustrated. We have trouble with each other. God loves you too much to abandon you to sin for the rest of eternity.

We are members of the household of God. God will raise his children to learn his ways.

An angry God is a frightening thought. Let's be afraid. Proverbs tells us "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom". The fear of God is not being intimidated, it is a vision of reality. It is an understanding of the way things really are, the way God created his universe. It is knowledge of right and wrong. It goes far beyond our opinions and our set of standards. That is why it gives us such stability. It is God's doing, not our own.

Understanding God is not "being intimidated". It is understanding what God wants for us. It is freedom and energy to live in the world God made – understanding that God's world offers a unified, coherent order for our lives.

Listening to God is a courageous ability to insist that all life has a moral standard.

Life has principles, purpose, and meaning.

God's holiness is good news and a cause for celebration. God does hate sinfulness. Jesus Christ has come to live with us and do something about sinfulness.

God's perfection is the one thing that will never change.

He has created you for the perfection of heaven. Don't settle for anything less.