

# Sermon Note: Doubt and the Existence of God

## First Sunday after the Epiphany

### Introduction

As we begin this five-week series based on Adam Hamilton's book *Wrestling with Doubt, Finding Faith*, we start with the question that grounds all the others: Does God exist? Most of us have carried this question at some point—when prayers seem unanswered, when tragedy strikes, when the world feels too broken. This series empowers us to bring our hard questions out into the open and to wrestle honestly with what we believe and why. This week, we explore the beauty and order of creation, the wonder that sometimes defies measurement, and the honest prayer of a father who said what many of us have felt: “I believe; help my unbelief.”

### Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3deNVM3EWIc>

In this clip from *Contact* (1997), Dr. Ellie Arroway experiences something beyond words as she travels through the cosmos.

### Why This Video?

This scene from *Contact* shows Dr. Ellie Arroway in the final moments of her journey through a wormhole—a trip made possible by following instructions from an extraterrestrial signal. Ellie is a scientist who has spent her career demanding evidence, yet when she encounters something vast and beautiful beyond her ability to describe, words fail her. The awe she feels—“they should have sent a poet”—points to a reality that transcends measurement. Her recording equipment captures only static, so her experience can't be replicated or verified by others, yet it transforms her. The moment invites us to consider how some of the most significant encounters in life aren't reducible to data, and how wonder itself can be a form of knowing.

### Video Discussion Questions

1. Ellie has built her life on evidence and scientific method. What happens to her certainty when she encounters something that defies her usual categories?
2. The phrase “they should have sent a poet” suggests that some experiences require different language. When have you struggled to put something profound into words?
3. Ellie's wonder is visible, even though she can't prove what she's experiencing. How does this scene help you think about the relationship between evidence and experience?
4. The beauty she describes—“so beautiful”—moves her to tears. What role does beauty play in pointing us toward something beyond ourselves?
5. Ellie is wearing a recording device throughout her journey, yet it captures only static. She knows what she experienced, even without proof. How does this tension between personal experience and external verification show up in conversations about faith?

6. Ellie's encounter changes her, even though she can't bring back evidence. When has an experience shaped your life in ways that others might not fully understand?
7. The scene portrays a moment of transcendence in the middle of a scientific mission. How does that pairing challenge assumptions about science and faith being in conflict?

### **Psalm 19:1-4a (CEB)**

- <sup>1</sup>Heaven is declaring God's glory;  
the sky is proclaiming his handiwork.
- <sup>2</sup>One day gushes the news to the next,  
and one night informs another what needs to be known.
- <sup>3</sup>Of course, there's no speech, no words—  
their voices can't be heard—
- <sup>4</sup> but their sound extends throughout the world;  
their words reach the ends of the earth.

### **Psalm 139:13-14a (CEB)**

- <sup>13</sup>You are the one who created my innermost parts;  
you knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb.
- <sup>14</sup>I give thanks to you that I was marvelously set apart.

### **Mark 9:24 (NRSVue)**

- <sup>24</sup>Immediately the father of the child cried out [to Jesus], "I believe; help my unbelief!"

### **Scripture Study Questions**

1. Psalm 19 describes creation as "declaring" and "proclaiming" God's glory, even though there are no audible words. What kind of communication is the psalmist describing?
2. When you observe the natural world—the night sky, the intricacy of living things, the beauty of a sunset—does it point you toward God? Why or why not?
3. Psalm 139 speaks of being "marvelously set apart" and "knit together" by God. How does this image shape the way you think about your own existence and purpose?
4. The father in Mark 9 prays, "I believe; help my unbelief." How do belief and unbelief coexist in that single sentence?
5. Jesus honors the father's honest prayer and heals his son. What does that response teach us about how God receives our doubts?
6. Have you ever prayed something similar to "I believe; help my unbelief"? What prompted that prayer, and how did it feel to voice it?
7. These three passages offer different angles on belief: creation's witness, the wonder of being made by God, and the honesty of doubt. Which angle feels most compelling or accessible to you right now?
8. These passages point toward trust in God even when certainty is out of reach. How does distinguishing between trust and certainty help you understand your own doubts?

## **Weekly Action**

This week, choose one moment each day to pay attention to something in the natural world—a tree, the sky, a bird, the way light comes through a window or casts a shadow. Spend at least two minutes just observing it without distraction. Pay attention to the details, the complexity, the beauty. Then ask yourself: Does this point me toward something bigger than what I'm physically looking at? Don't force an answer don't focus on certainty. Just allow yourself to observe, and see what shows up in your awareness as you pay attention to the world God has made.

## **Prayer**

God of mystery and presence, you meet us in our questions and in the places where certainty is out of reach. Give us the courage to bring our doubts into the open, and the humility to trust that faith is not about having all the answers. Help us see your fingerprints in the beauty and complexity of creation, in the wonder of our own existence, and in the lived experience of your grace. Like the father who cried out to Jesus, we pray: I believe; help my unbelief. Amen.

*Disclosure: This content was developed by Rev. Bob Rhodes using AI tools in alignment with La Jolla UMC AI Usage Guidelines. AI assisted with initial drafting, structuring discussion prompts, and organizing content from source materials. All theological framing, final text, and editorial decisions were made by Rev. Bob Rhodes.*