***I BELIEVE: THE APOSTLES’ CREED***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Matthew 28:16-20

When I went through confirmation class fifty some years ago at Center Presbyterian Church in Slippery Rock, PA where my dad was the pastor and confirmation leader, we were encouraged to wrestle with what we believed even as we learned the faith that the church had articulated across the generations. There was a short book that we read, weekly meetings, a visit to the Roxy Theater downtown where the Catholic Church had a Sunday folk mass, and a few things we were required to memorize along the way: the books of the Bible, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed.

Like the Lord’s Prayer, it was not hard to memorize the Apostles’ Creed as I had been saying it for most of my young life – and perhaps you have too! It is not our oldest confessional statement – that honor belongs to the Nicene Creed that we considered last week – but the Apostles’ Creed is the most widely used creed in western churches, especially in worship. Perhaps that is because it is so concise in its form as opposed to the other creeds, or perhaps it is because its language has resonated with Christians more so than others. Its’ name is a bit of a misnomer as it was not written by or ever spoken by the apostles. It evolved across the early centuries of the church from the 2nd to the 9th centuries – being tweaked, amended, and expanded along the way. Unlike Nicaea, there was no emperor demanding that a resolution be reached or a controversy be resolved, though by the 9th century the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne insisted that people were not qualified to be godparents unless they knew by heart and could repeat the Apostles’ Creed.[[1]](#endnote-1) So, the creed developed out of Christian practice across the centuries, and the heart of its message has remained pretty much unchanged these last 1,000 years.

Some years ago, there was a creed composed for the Masai tribe in Africa to express the essential tenets of what Christians believe in language the Masai might understand. The creed reads:

*We believe that God made good his promise by sending his Son Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left his home and* ***was always on safari*** *doing good, curing people by the power of God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured, and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave but the* ***hyenas did not touch him****, and on the third day, he rose from the grave.*”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Amid the references to tribes, safari, and the hyenas, you can hear echoes of the Apostles’ Creed, laying out the basics of the Christian faith.

Those basics were taught at the time that converts were baptized, and the Apostles’ Creed arose in the context of such baptisms. In early years of the church, a convert to be baptized was asked, “*Do you believe in God the Father Almighty?*” The person would answer “*I believe*” and then be baptized in the name of the Father. This pattern would be repeated with affirmations of belief in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, each followed by baptism. This threefold confession and threefold baptism were considered to wipe out the sins of one’s former life. Those to be baptized were instructed about the meaning of the affirmations they were making, and so the creed developed as a summation of those baptismal responses,[[3]](#endnote-3) following Jesus’ Great Commission to his disciples that you heard earlier from the end of Matthew’s Gospel:

*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.*

The creed, like the Great Commission, like your baptism is trinitarian in form; and it is also personal – “I believe” not “we believe” – for it was originally an individual’s expression of faith, not a corporate expression used in worship as it is today.

The first part expresses belief in “*God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth*.” Three things are noteworthy about that affirmation. First, by referring to God as “Father” we do not affirm faith in a male God. Gender is part of God’s created order, not part of who God is. God exceeds any limitations of gender. God is neither male nor female, for in the image of God, God created all people. That said, the language of “Father” affirms a close personal relationship between us and God. God is not some impersonal being – a dispassionate entity with whom we could no more be in relationship than we are with a rock or tree or the wind. Rather, our God is one who created us for relationship – with one another and with God. To say that God is “Father” in the creed is to affirm that personal relationship, limited by the bounds of language and patriarchy, as a loving parent to us with all the caring, nurturing, protective nuances of that role.

Second, by saying that God is “Almighty” we affirm that nothing is greater than God. There are a host of other religions out there who claim that their God is the mightiest. The creed gives voice to a claim that God alone is the one true God without equal or limitation. There are those who have tried to play linguistic games with this claim by asking: “*If God is almighty, then can God make a rock so big that God cannot lift it?*” That non sequitur is not what the claim that God is “Almighty” is about. Rather, it is about God’s unique standing as the God above all else in creation, the one who rules over all.

The third aspect of this first affirmation about God – *Maker (or Creator) of heaven and earth* – was added sometime in the 5th-7th centuries. It affirms that the Lord alone created all things. In the Bible the Hebrew word for “create’ is *bara*, a word that is used only of God. Humans *shape*, *construct*, *build*, and *make* things, but God alone creates! It is perhaps for that reason, rooted in the unique role of God as Creator, that some translations of the creed prefer “Creator.” But in any event, it is a strong affirmation that there is only one God who created all things, and that God is the One in whom we express our belief.

The second section of the creed focuses upon Jesus Christ (*Christ* meaning *Messiah*, not Jesus’ last name). He is *God’s only Son* which is a claim of authority and relationship, not paternity – and *our Lord*, which describes our relation to him. “Jesus is Lord” was the first affirmation of faith in the early church, so it is not surprising to find it repeated here. What is surprising is what follows – and what doesn’t!

“*Conceived by the Holy Ghost (or Spirit) and born of the Virgin Mary*” is not a biological description, but a theological claim, an affirmation that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. How that was accomplished by God remains a divine mystery, but it is important to our understanding of who Jesus was – one who is uniquely divine and human, and thus uniquely can save us. He came into the world as we entered it – through birth – and fully understands us as one of us, yet because he is fully divine, he wields the power of God, and in him we see God present with us. He is not a god who seems human, nor a human who pretends to be a god. He is fully human **and** fully divine – that is the claim of this account of his conception and birth. And then there is a long silence – no account of his life or ministry or teaching or healing, no description of his message or call to discipleship, for the creed moves quickly to his suffering, death, and resurrection.

As we will see, later creeds spend significant time on Jesus’ life, teachings, and call to us as disciples. But for those in the early church, the burning question of faith was the truth and meaning of his death and resurrection. You heard it in that passage from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received; that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*.

The Apostles’ Creed holds of first importance that same focus on Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. The suffering under Pontius Pilate places his life in historical context, and then the creed goes to great lengths to confirm that Jesus was indeed dead before being raised.

In *The Princess Bride* there is a great scene in which the body of the hero Wesley is brought to Miracle Max, played by Billy Crystal, in the hope that he can bring him back to life. After checking Wesley out, Miracle Max declares: “*He’s not dead; he’s just mostly dead. There is a big difference between mostly dead and all dead*.” Then Miracle Max proceeds to resuscitate him – with the aid of bellows from the fireplace. Jesus was not just mostly dead, says the creed; he was all dead, dead dead. That claim refutes any suggestion that his resurrection was just a resuscitation. No, says the creed. He was crucified, dead, buried, and then descended into hell, that odd phrase that many of you skip over as the creed is recited. We would not phrase it that way today – *he descended into Hell* – and it has no real biblical basis; but what it affirms is that Jesus was dead and gone to the furthest place from life imaginable. Yet even from that distant place, God was able to raise him to new life. Here is a rejection of any suggestion that there is a place beyond the reach of God, that there is a realm of heaven ruled by God and a realm of Hell ruled by the devil which God cannot reach. There is no place – none – that is beyond the reach of God. As Paul writes to the church in Rome:

*Neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us form the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

It is that good news, not some historical account of Jesus’ descent into Hell, that the creed affirms. For if no place is beyond the reach of God, then **no one** is beyond the reach of God – and in that promise is hope for you and me!

The creed concludes the section on Jesus with an affirmation of his resurrection, ascension, and role as judge at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. This is not geography, but authority – a bold affirmation that the risen Jesus not only reigns but also acts as judge of *the quick and the dead* – not *the fast and the dead*, but *the living and the dead*. We might not like to think of that day of judgment or of Jesus as judge, preferring to embrace him as our friend and savior, but Robert Chesnut puts it in perspective when he writes:

*“God’s judgment is about restoration and justice. Pain, suffering, and death are involved, but when all is said and done God’s purpose is not punishment. God’s merciful, redemptive judgment revealed through Christ’s cross and resurrection is about setting us and all things right.[[4]](#endnote-4)”*

And with that affirmation, we finally arrive at the last section of the creed – the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. Like the Nicene Creed, there is little development of the third person of the Trinity – that will come later. Instead, the Holy Spirit is lumped in with a list that includes the holy catholic (small c) church which is the church universal not the Roman Catholic Church, the communion of saints which connects us with one another and with those who have gone before us, the forgiveness of sins promised by Jesus, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Most of the affirmations in this list were added in the 4th and 5th centuries to address particular concerns that had arisen, without much description of what they meant. By including them in brief, the creed lifts up their significance without making the creed too much longer.

Two of our hymns today – *All Things Bright and Beautiful* and *Once in Royal David’s City* were written 176 years ago by an Irish poet to illustrate for children the meaning of the Apostles’ Creed. Which suggests that this statement of faith has been important and helpful to a lot of people of all ages for a long, long time! So perhaps, just perhaps, it may be important and helpful for us today too! Amen

1. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, The Westminster Press:1985, p.58 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?* Viking: New York, 2005, p.215 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions*, The Westminster Press:1985, p.61 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Robert A. Chesnut, *Meeting Jesus the Christ Again*, Wipf & Stock:2017, p.89 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)