

God Is

The Apostle's Creed, Part 1

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

Introduction

Today begins a five-part preaching series during the five Sundays of Lent exploring *The Apostle's Creed*. I am doing this because I believe we need to believe. Let me explain that. We live in a secular world that does not place its primary values on the things we truly need to be holding dear – family, honesty, integrity, morality, and ethics. The world around us is constantly telling us to be about the opposite. Our movies, television, advertising, and daily news are testimony to that statement. To stand against what the world would have us be requires us to be firmly anchored, and the best anchor we have is God in Christ. Our core beliefs determine our attitudes; our attitudes determine our feelings; our feelings determine our behavior. In a nutshell – we are what we believe.

The basic question of course is, "What do we believe?" The obvious answer as Christians is that we believe Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God. But there is much more to it than that. The early Christians were asked what they believed. They were also attacked by heresies that challenged their beliefs about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In response they met in councils and formulated creeds as succinct statements of who they were and what they believed as Christians.

The Apostle's Creed is the oldest of several creeds developed by the early church. It was written in the second century and finalized in its present form in the sixth century. Charlemagne then standardized its use and the church adopted it as its common creed. At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century the new Protestants carried *The Apostle's Creed* with them into their new religious practices. Today it is still the most well known and beloved creed in Christendom.

Some churches are creedal churches. The United Methodist Church that Susan, I, and our children attended in Virginia stood and recited *The Apostle's Creed* every Sunday in worship. Some churches don't use creeds at all, which is unfortunate. The ten creeds affirmed by The United Methodist Church are in our hymnal on pages 880-889.

The Apostle's Creed is named for the twelve disciples who became the first apostles at Pentecost. It was named for them because the Creed reflected what they believed, and what they taught and preached as they spread the Christian faith. *The Apostle's Creed* is what we are supposed to be about.

Proclamation

Children have interesting perspectives on God. Here are a few of their letters to God:

Dear God: Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you have?

Dear God: Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works for my brother and me.

Dear God: If you watch me on Sunday, I will show you my new shoes.

Dear God: In Sunday school they told us what you do. Who does it when you go on vacation?

Dear God: I read the Bible. What does "begat" mean? Nobody will tell me.

Dear God: Is it true my father won't get into heaven if uses his bowling words in the house?

Dear God: Did you mean for the giraffe to look like that, or was it just an accident?

Dear God: I went to a wedding and they kissed in church. Is that okay?

Those are some children's perspectives. What are our perspectives about God? The first statement in *The Apostle's Creed* is "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." There are four elements here – God, Father, Almighty, and maker.

If a skeptic asks, "Does God exist?" we are going to answer, "Yes." And if the skeptic's next question is, "How do you know?" what will we say then? The truth is we cannot empirically prove that God exists. The Bible does not try in any way to "prove" that God exists. It simply affirms that he does. The Bible does assert that those who seek after God will find him. Hebrews 11:6 says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." The apostle Paul, in his great theological treatise to the Romans, says there is sufficient evidence of God's existence in the world around us to remove any excuse for not believing. What we point to are the effects of God in the world – his presence and hand in creation and nature, and his working in the lives of believers. We can and should testify to the transforming power of God when we believe and trust in him. The evidence of God's existence is overwhelming, yet it still demands a choice. Every person must decide whether to believe or not.

The very word "God" almost defies description because God is so much more than we can ever fully comprehend. When we say "God" we are referring to the Prime Mover in the universe. We try to find words to capture God – like creator, eternal, majestic, healer, and mystery. Even a conglomeration of words is inadequate. St. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1100, said, "God is that, the greater than which cannot be conceived." And yet – God has revealed, and continues to reveal, enough of himself for us to know many things about him, even though we cannot know all things about him. The more we read, study, question, and ponder the Bible and God, the more we are going to understand and accept about God.

The qualities of God are reflected in what comes after "I believe in God" within *The Apostle's Creed*. I'm going to throw two major theological descriptions of God at you – they are immanence and transcendence. Don't worry about the words. What's important is what they mean. God's immanence is spoken of in *The Apostle's Creed* by the word "Father." God's transcendence is spoken of by the word "Almighty."

Hold those two side-by-side for a moment – Father and Almighty. You can just sense the difference. Father is up-close and personal. It is the knowable part of God. We understand that God is genderless. We know that because all of us are created in God's image that he has female characteristics as well as male. But we call God "Father" because Jesus did, and he did so 23 times in the New Testament. The term Father creates an image of us as God's children, and the Father-child, or Mother-child, or Parent-child relationship is a personal one. It speaks of shared love in which God pours out his blessings on his children. God's love is a giving love. His love is a servant love, meeting our needs. God listens to each of us and to all of us, and God brings comfort to us.

By contrast, speaking of God as Almighty points to his other-worldly nature. He transcends time and space, indeed the entire universe. He cannot be contained. This is that aspect of God that presents him as prior to, distinct from, and not dependent on anyone or anything.

Finally, in this first part of *The Apostle's Creed*, God is the "maker of heaven and earth." Genesis 1 and 2 attest to God's creative power. We believe that God created not only our own world, but the entire cosmos and beyond. It is why I am personally convinced that Earth is not the only expression of God's creativity. As the father says to his young daughter in the movie *Contact*, if this is all there is, it is certainly a tremendous waste of space.

God is always creating. He creates in nature. He creates within us. God is pained when his creation is marred. No creative makers like to see their creations defaced or impaired. But God works continuously and faithfully to redeem his creation through us and in natural ways.

The question always arises – if God is good and loving, then why do we have pain and suffering? Let me answer that in two ways:

First, if God immediately answered all of our prayers, always took away our problems, then God wouldn't be God any more. We would be calling the shots, making all the decisions, and running the universe. God would only be here to do our bidding. We need to be actively involved with God in helping to bring compassion, love, and yes, healing, to others, as well as to ourselves. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not what I will but what you will." Jesus didn't say, "Father, if you don't help me out of this I won't believe in you anymore." Jesus submitted and he was obedient. He allowed God to be God, to be the Father Almighty. And so should we.

And then secondly, I like very much what Robert McCracken, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, said. McCracken confessed that he couldn't understand why people are always so quick to bad-mouth God for the evil in the world, but so slow to see the good he has produced. McCracken said, "The evil in the world shakes faith in God. What about the good? Why talk only about the problem of evil? Why not the problem of good? What right do we have to take the good for granted and seek only an explanation of the evil? Surely what we ought to seek is an explanation of the world as a whole."

Yes, the world was created with shifting plates that sometimes result in destructive earthquakes and tsunamis. Terrorists fly airplanes into buildings and people die. There is also beauty and compassion and sacrifice and humility all around us. These must count for something. And they are in the world because God has created and provided for them. Why should we focus on blaming God for the evil, injustice, and unhappiness in the world? Instead, we should remember that God is responsible for the goodness and the joy in the world also, for inspiring poetry and music, for sunsets and butterflies, for deeds of mercy and moments of hope.

There is a lifetime of things to talk about regarding God. It is why we have worship and Sunday school and study classes, why we read the Bible and ponder God, ourselves, and our relationships with God. What I have shared this morning are the very basics. They are a starting point in growing closer to God and understanding more and more about him. When we stand and affirm, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," we are asserting the very beginning of what we believe is true. I do so believe. Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 13 March 2011