

“Is God a Man?”
The Apostles’ Creed
What We Believe—The Book of Confessions

Genesis 1:1-5 and 26-31
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 7, 2017

“I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth...”

Those of us who grew up in the mainline churches probably are familiar with these words, the opening line of the Apostles’ Creed. Many churches, including the one I grew up in, said this creed every Sunday, but it is not nearly as common as it used to be.

The Apostles’ Creed is one of twelve confession, or creeds, or theological statements in our Presbyterian Church *Book of Confessions*, and this is the third of six sermons looking at those creeds. Our intent is to learn more about our history and theology, so we can live more faithfully in the 21st century.

The Apostles’ Creed is one of two that come from the early church. Six come from the Reformation, and the final four come from the 20th century.

With roots as early as the 2nd century, the Apostles’ Creed as we know it was affirmed in the 9th century. There is a legend that 12 separate parts of the creed were each compiled by one of the 12 original apostles. While historians have pretty much dismissed the historicity of this claim, the creed does reflect the historical faith of the early church, of the apostles.

The Apostles’ Creed is the shortest of all the creeds taking up less than a page in our Book of Confessions. The Second Helvetic Confession, from Switzerland, takes up over 65 pages. (We’ll save that one for another Sunday.)

The Apostles’ Creed was put together for individuals to use when making a baptismal affirmation, for the time when someone new was going to become a Christian.

Thus it is relatively simple, without a lot of theological complexity, and it is presented in the first person singular, giving it a very personal feel. “I believe...”

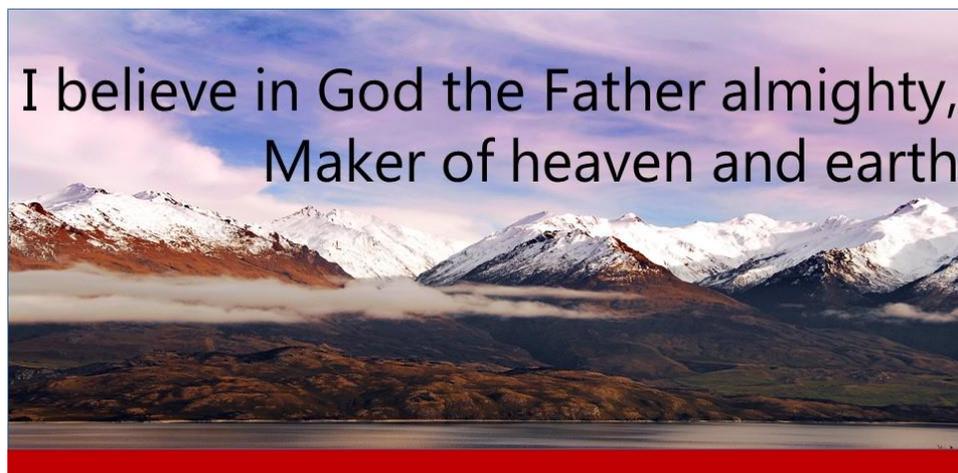
The Nicene Creed, the other early church creed in our *Book of Confessions*, is longer with more theological complexity and it is written in the first person plural. The Nicene Creed explores the nature of the trinity and the essence of Jesus Christ as human and divine—reflecting the theological controversies of the early church. At a time when the church as a whole needed to clarify things, the creed begins: “We believe...”

You can actually find the text of the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, as well as the 20th century "Brief Statement of Faith" in your hymnal, starting on page 34. For those who are interested, you can find all of these creeds in Spanish and Korean as well.

While the Apostles' Creed is short, it offers many intriguing possibilities for material in a sermon. If we had time, I could reflect on

- The engaging and challenging phrase "he descended into hell"
- Or the seeming absence of anything about the life of Jesus, as the statement jumps from his birth to his death.
- The providential placement of two phrases: "the communion of saints" and "the forgiveness of sins"

But in our time for today, I want to focus on those first few words: I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.



What Do We Believe? The Apostles' Creed



Those words echo the narrative of Genesis 1, where God creates. You've heard the first five verses of that chapter. Now listen for the final six, where we read about the goodness of creation and how humanity was created in the image of God.

Listen for God's word:

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

²⁹ God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.

³⁰ And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. ³¹ God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

The very first account in the Bible is God creating, God making everything. And we need to remember that everything created is good, and that we are created in the image of God.

But right away in Genesis and in the Apostles’ Creed, we’re confronted with a question. Is God a man?

The pronouns are all “he.” The Creed says “God the Father”

And throughout history, artwork--such as Michelangelo’s famous fresco in the Sistine Chapel--presents God as a man.

Language has power, and as we’ve learned about patriarchy and language and biblical studies, more and more people have become uncomfortable with exclusively male language about God.

Here at Covenant, over the years we have discussed and wrestled with issues of language and sexism and theology. Several years ago, before my arrival, the Session approved a statement on language, which you see in your bulletin. It guides us here at Covenant. We try to avoid an excessive amount of male imagery, and we recognize that God is known in many ways.

At Covenant Presbyterian Church, we are aware that human language cannot adequately name and describe God. In our liturgy we may use traditional texts that refer to God as “He.” However, we also strive to use language which is both faithful to biblical truth and which does not exclude people because of gender, color, or other circumstance in life.

In 1991, the Presbyterian Church USA affirmed “A Brief Statement of Faith” which I will be focusing on more thoroughly next week. For now, I want to point out two things:

The writers of that statement wrestled with language for God. Some wanted to use the traditional “Father” language, while others wanted to abandon “Father” completely. The result was a biblical and theologically sound compromise.

“We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba, Father.”

Later in the Brief Statement, we see male and female imagery for God:

“Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still.”

While the language issue is important, and while we still wrestle with sexism and patriarchy in the church and culture, the overarching point in the creed and in our Biblical text for today is the affirmation that God has created the world and that God has created us.

Sadly in our culture, we have a false dichotomy between science and religion, with some people thinking you can't believe in God and science at the same time. I'm glad to be part of a congregation and a denomination that values science, rational thought, and asking questions. I'm glad that here at Covenant you don't have to check your brain at the door.

Pastor and author Adam Hamilton has a book on the Apostles' Creed in which he affirms the value of science and Christian faith side by side. He believes in God and he believes that creation was not a random coming together of particles.

He cites astronomer who thinks that the idea of life developing on its own is impossible, noting that the chances of life developing on its own “were about the same as those of a gale-force wind blowing through a junkyard and, after it passed, revealing that a Boeing 747 had spontaneously assembled itself.”

Hamilton offers a simpler image, reflecting on cocoa, eggs, flour, sugar, and oil, and what they might become. He writes, “No matter how many billion years we might wait, there will be no three-layer chocolate cake without its being mixed, baked, and iced by someone who knows what a chocolate cake should look and taste like.” (From *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, p. 23)

Creation is a marvel, and today is a wonderful example, with blue skies and sunshine, with flowers and birds.

Just this week, I was wandering around the church and got a couple of photos, reminding me of the blessing of creation.



I believe that God created this world and made it good.

I believe that God created us and made us good.

I believe that God made the world and us with intentionality, with purpose, with hope.

I believe that we were given this day and every day for a reason—to welcome God’s love and to share God’s love.

The apostle Paul puts it well:

For we are what [God] has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:10)

Thanks be to God the creator of all. Amen.