

I Believe: Creator | 5th Sunday After Epiphany | February 10, 2019
Pastor Nick Shults | St. Mark Lutheran Church | Sunnyvale, CA

Our confession of faith is an act of trust in God our heavenly Father who has created us and sustains us, giving of himself to us, His people.

“I Believe...”

When I was younger this statement, this confession, was akin for me, to a simple intellectual assent to a set of propositions. I figured the Christian faith went something like this: I'm going to say yes, I agree with you that there exists a God of some sort out there. Ok, I'll go ahead and agree that he sent his son Jesus to die for our sins. That's great. I mean, what do I have to lose? If I'm right, then I get the eternal bonus round. If I'm wrong, well, I won't really know that I'm wrong because I'll just be dead. And then I thought, what do I have to lose? Like an hour a week? I can spare that. I guess the joke's on me, right?

Seriously. This is how my thinking went. I approached faith, or mere belief or head knowledge about some facts about the world, as I defined it, as what you might call “Fire Insurance”. I'll believe so I can reap the benefits of Christianity later on, you know, after I die.

I believe.

Sometime later in my life, I came to understand this statement as a litmus test, of sorts. There were all sorts of religious voices around me and in the books that I was reading. Some seemed in line with the beliefs I had grown up believing to be true and some of these voices, even Christian voices, called these beliefs into question. So the words, “I believe” became a measuring stick. It was a way to cast suspicion upon those who I thought didn't believe as I did. Do you believe this? OK what about this? No? Then we're not friends.

I believe.

Now, I'm starting to wonder. I wonder if, when we confess the creed together, I'm wondering if we're doing something more here. When we stand together and confess with one voice the words of Apostles' Creed. I wonder, are we doing something greater than just intellectually assenting to a particular set of stale dogmas? Are we doing something a little more productive than simply drawing constructing a wall that keeps us on the correct side and everyone else on the other side. I wonder, are we doing something greater, more profound, more mysterious with these words we speak. I hope so. Because, if that's all the Christian faith is, fire insurance or a litmus test, it's frankly not very interesting.

I Believe.

This morning as we begin this three week sermon series on the Apostles' creed, we're going to explore that question. Are each of these articles of the creed which we're going to look at, are they simply stale dogma? Are they boxes that we must check to prove that we're a cool kid or an insider in the social group we call the church? Are they just abstract theological concepts we need to say we believe so we can make sure we don't pull the eternal short straw?

Or are the articles of the creed something more?

Are they, in fact, a story, a narrative, which God is inviting us to live into, right here and right now? Are they actually a confession of divine drama which is playing out, not just in the pages of scripture, but actually in front of us every single day? Are they actually a deep river that we wade into, a river in which apostles, martyrs, and saints stood in too?

I believe. It's a statement that is not like "I think" or "I want" or "I know". I Believe is not a statement about mere knowledge. Rather it's a confession of faith, a confession about trusting in the triune God who has revealed Himself in the world and in the pages of Scripture. Our confession of faith in the words of the Apostles' creed is a confession of trusting in the God who has shown himself to be One God, yet Three Persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And in the first article of the creed we take up the person of God the Father.

"...In God the Father Almighty..."

It is perhaps curious that our first confession about this God who has revealed himself through the pages of scripture is that He is our *Father*. This image of God as Father is not exactly a positive one for every person here this morning. Some fathers weren't there for you. Some fathers were overbearing or abusive. Some Fathers were apathetic. Some fathers simply could not be pleased.

But the fatherly image of God in the Bible is that of a Father who is present with his people. Who pursues his people, even when they run away from Him. In Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve fall into sin, they are cast out of the Garden but God does not send them away empty handed. He provides for them in the midst of their guilt and shame, giving them clothes to wear to hide their nakedness. But perhaps the best image of what God is like as Father comes from the Gospel of Luke and the famous parable of the prodigal son (or the parable of the loving Father).

The son who leaves his Father, taking his money and spending it frivolously. But no matter what the son did, no matter where the son went, the Father watched and waited each and every day...waiting to receive his son back home again.

There is a famous painting of this homecoming. Rembrandt interpreted this parable and set it to the canvas and if you have seen Rembrandt's depiction of this parable, you would have seen a son, broken by his sin and disobedience, kneeling before his Father.

Despite all the son had said and done, the father holds the son close, one hand, masculine and strong, the other feminine and caring.

“I believe God the Father Almighty...”

God cannot be anything other than Almighty for that is what it means to be God. But to confess that God is Father is a radical confession. Our God, who has revealed himself through the pages of Scripture, and in the person of Jesus, has shown us that He is an Almighty God but a God who is filled with grace and truth and love for his people. He is the God who remembers us, His children. He is the God who welcomes us home everytime we go astray.

“I believe God the Father Almighty...”

“...**Maker of heaven and earth...**”

A couple weeks before my sophomore year of college began I was attending a leadership retreat with a large group of other students from my university. We had gone up to Whidbey Island, in the Puget Sound, miles from anything resembling a city. One evening I took a few minutes to get away from the group. I was feeling particularly broody that evening I suppose, frustrated with the way the retreat was going. As I stepped away for a bit, I found a picnic bench nearby and sat down. As I leaned back to take a look at the sky, I was astounded at what I saw. The sky was filled, absolutely filled, with stars. I mean it was more stars than I had ever seen in my entire life.

In that moment, seeing the work of God above me, I felt a profound sense of comfort and a reminder...

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth.

In whom, in what do we place our trust? What kind of God is it which we confess our belief in? The Bible reveals and thus the creed professes God who is both Father *and* Almighty. A God who created both the heavens and the earth and everything in between. We confess, like our friends in AA, that there is indeed a higher power in this world, a Being, a Power, far greater than ourselves. We believe in a creator.

At times like this, this may seem like a foolish confession. At times like this, a time when scientific exploration and discovery continues to just go crazy, this confession of ours may seem like a confession that only a pre-modern type of person might make. To confess the Creator sometimes just seems silly. But look around. Look up as I did that night on Whidbey Island. Look down at the ground on which you walk. The very creation itself bears witness to the creator who made it. The creation bears witness to the bigness, the almighty-ness, the creative power of God who it Father, who is Maker.

We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.

And indeed, we don't just confess our faith in a God who made us, wound up the clock, so to speak, and then left us alone on this planet to figure it all out. In his explanation of this article of the creed, Luther really hones in on the fact that we have a Creator who is also our sustainer. Because He is both Father and Creator, He has given us all that we have, and still he takes care of us too.

That is to say, through the very Creation which God Himself spoke into being, we are taken care of and provided for. God, through His very Creation, sustains each and every one of us.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.

This first article of the creed, this confession, we make week in and week out, it's far more than simply saying "I believe there *is* a god...". It's more than "I think there is a god" or even "I know there is a god...". All of those are merely intellectual. A belief that is in our heads. But the Apostles' Creed is something different than that. Our confession of faith is our confession of *trust*. Trusting in our God who is Father.

This Father is not the harsh father who is demeaning and cruel. This Father is not absent and uncaring. No, this is the Father of the Parable who looks upon his people and celebrates the return of even just one sinner back into his gracious household. This is the Father who throws banquets and parties for the lost who are found...the dead who are alive.

This is the very same Father who created us...who formed us from the dust...and who continues to take care of us and sustain our very lives.

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

This confession of ours isn't Fire Insurance. A merely intellectual exercise that assures us of a life after death. Neither is it a litmus test to make sure we know who is in the club and who is outside of it. No, this confession is a confession of *faith*...a confession of trust in the living God, who is all caring and all loving father...in our maker and sustainer into whose story we have been born and in whose story we live each and every day.

So let us rise together and confess this faith. Today we will be confessing this first article of the Apostles' Creed as well as Luther's explanation of it found in Luther's Small Catechism...