

Credo: I Believe in God

January 16, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Nehemiah 9:6-17

I once heard a United Methodist pastor tell the story of a man in his congregation who went out of town on a business trip. While this man was gone he got a phone call from home. It was the phone call that no person ever wants to receive – the kind of call that brings everything in life to a screeching halt. His wife and kids had all been killed in a car accident.

So the man gets the first flight home, and he is, understandably, in shock. He's walking through the airport around on auto-pilot. He's numb, the reality of what he is facing has yet to really sink in. But it's sunk in enough that he is having a hard time thinking, or even forming words. He's been a lifelong churchgoer, but even so...he can't even really pray, because...what do you say to God, when you have lost everything?

But as the plane is taking off and rising up into the air, a few words jump into his mind. They are not his own words, but ancient words. Words that have been spoken for more than 2000 years. They are not words of scripture, but they are words that are very much rooted in scripture. Words that people more often than not just rattle off the tongue, without really thinking about them. But in this moment, when everything in life had been turned upside-down, these were the words that he most needed to hear. And these words became his prayer.

In spite of everything, even now:

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

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only son, our Lord."

Today, we are beginning a new sermon series on these very same ancient, and yet profound, words: the words of the Apostles' Creed.

Now, I think it may have been a good number of years since we last used the Apostles' Creed as a regular part of our Sunday morning worship services. It hasn't been the practice since I have been here, and I think that was also true before I got here. But in talking with some of you, I know that there was a time when standing up and reciting the Apostles' Creed was a regular part of Sunday morning worship.

And in fact, I have no doubt that quite a few of you could rattle off the Creed, word-for-word, without even thinking about it. But I don't want to assume that that is the case for everybody.

So, let's start today with the most obvious question: What is the creed, and why is it important?

Well, the word "creed" comes from the Latin word "*credo*" – which literally means "I believe." So, very simply, a creed is a statement of faith. It is a statement of what we believe.

There have been many different creeds written over the years, throughout the history of the church, and even before Christianity ever began. And these different creeds were written for many different reasons. The Nicene Creed, which is a longer and more complicated version of the creed, was written around the 300s AD, as a way to combat a whole host of different heresies that were floating around the new baby church. And it was basically written to say "okay, here is what is most important about what we believe. This is what we can pretty much all agree is true about the most essential parts of who God is. And everything that says something different than this, that is outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity. Oh, and by the way: if you don't agree with us, we might bring you up on charges and burn you at the stake as a heretic."

The church's history is not all sunshine and roses.

But even before the Nicene Creed was written, there were other creeds – other statements of faith out there.

Probably the earliest one that we might turn to as people in the Judeo-Christian tradition goes all the way back to the book of Deuteronomy chapter 6, in the words of the *Shema* – words that members of the Jewish community continue to write on their doorposts and sometimes have on their person any time they gather for worship. The *Shema* goes like this:

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

This statement of faith might not begin with those classic words "I believe," but even so...this is a beautiful and concise statement about what was most important to the faith community in that day and time.

- First: they believed that God is a God of community. That the voice of God can be heard when in community.
- Second: They believed that God is one God, and should be worshipped to the exclusion of any other gods. There is no other god *but* God.

And while to our modern Christian ears we might be thinking, "well, duh," you have to remember that these words were written in a time and culture when practically everybody in the world worshipped whatever little deities they possibly could, in order to try to get ahead in life.

- And then finally: They believed that every bit of who we are, from the brains through which we think, to the bodies through which we act, to the hearts through which we feel, to the words through which we speak is created for no other purpose than to worship the God who created us. So everything we do, should be done as an act of worship.

So, that's the *shema* – probably the oldest creed written in scripture that people today still fashion their lives after.

The creed that we are going to be exploring for the next couple of months is known as “The Apostles’ Creed.”

We don't know exactly when the Apostles' Creed was written. We do think that it was being used regularly, even before most of the words of the New Testament were ever put into writing. We are pretty sure that the creed was used most often in early Christian baptisms, as a way for people to express the basics of their faith – as a way to say that they knew what this new life that they were being baptized into was all about. Or at least, they knew the basics. God would reveal the rest to them over the course of their lives, and there would always be some mystery present...but at least, these are the most important things that we believe to be true.

And that is why the words of the Apostles' Creed start with “I believe,” instead of “We believe.” The Nicene Creed starts with “we believe” because it is a unified statement of the church: “Here is what we as a unified body can agree that we believe.” But the Apostles' Creed is intended to be personal. “I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I believe in the Holy Spirit. And because I believe this, I am now going to live my life in accordance with *my* belief.”

So, today we are going to start at the very beginning – start at the place the creed begins; start at the place where *we* begin as people, as human beings. And we start, first and foremost, with God. God the Father. God the creator. God the source of all life. God who set the whole universe in motion. God, without whom we wouldn't be sitting here today.

And as we start here, we are going to turn to the words of scripture that we read this [morning/evening].

So, quick show of hands: When you open your Bible to start reading, how many of you think “I think I'm going to start today in the book of Nehemiah”?

Nope, didn't think so. Nehemiah is not the most well-known book in all of scripture. I have to admit that when I turn to this book, I always have to go back and remind myself what it is about. So if that's you, know that you are not alone.

Nehemiah is what is known as a “post-exilic” book – meaning that it was written *after* the time of the Babylonian exile. King Cyrus of Persia has conquered Babylon, and has issued a ruling that the Israelite people may return to their homeland, if they so choose. Once the exiles return home, their first item of business is to re-build the temple that has been destroyed, and then they begin re-building the wall around Jerusalem.

But somewhere along the line, as they are laying bricks and putting their broken city back together again, they come to this realization that their walls were not the only thing that was broken. Their whole identity as a community had been torn to pieces. And they realized that the only reason they were in this position in the first place was because their ancestors had broken their covenant with God. So, as they began to re-build their lives, they recognized their need to start with a reminder of who they were. A creed, of sorts. A statement of belief. A reminder to themselves of who God is and how God has always acted in their midst; a confession of where they have gone wrong; and a hope for their future, of how they intend to live in accordance with the call that God has placed on their lives.

In essence, “as we start this next new phase of our life together, this is who we are; this is what we believe; and because of that, this is how we will live.”

And they started at the very beginning, in the same place where we are starting today:

“You are the LORD, you alone; you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. To all of them you give life, and the host of heaven worships you.”

Or in the words that we use:

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

I believe in God. I believe that there is something or someone out there who is bigger than me. Bigger than life itself. Big enough to put all of life into motion.

And what’s more, I believe that this God – this source of all being – is *personal*. Like a father is personal. This isn’t just a God who creates something and then steps back and watches the rest of time unfold. This is a God who is personally-invested. Who wants to have an ongoing role in the life of the world – the lives of the people – who he just created.

But even though God is Father, God is intimate, God is personal, God is relational, God wants to be “in this” with us, God is also Almighty.

God is bigger than we can imagine.

For God, nothing is impossible.

God has no limits.

God can do whatever God wants.

God can – and does – surprise us, because God doesn’t always play by our rules.

God rattles dry bones and rolls away stones and speaks in burning bushes and sends big fish to swallow up runaway prophets. God calls murderers to lead the Israelite people; summons tiny little shepherd boys to take down giants; reveals the newborn king to stargazers from faraway countries; eats with tax collectors and sinners and brings shade upon the self-righteous religious leaders. God plays by his own rules and turns the world upside-down and still somehow manages to surprise us every time God shows up in an unexpected way.

And finally, God is the maker of heaven and earth. God is a God who creates. A God who breathes beauty into being. God thinks it; God dreams it; God speaks it, and it happens. Light and dark? Done. Mountains and seas? Boom. Caves and slot canyons? That's just God showing off. The duck-billed platypus? The sloth? The octopus? God must've been in a really weird mood.

And not just the earth, but the heavens. The Milky Way galaxy. All of the planets in our solar system, and also Pluto. Which will always be a planet in my mind. Poor Pluto. All of the solar systems, and all of the galaxies, and all of the mysteries that we will never be able to fully comprehend or explore or inhabit. The universe in all of its splendor. The mystery of God that extends beyond the universe. All of it. Everything that is known, and everything that is unknown, and everything that can never be known.

I believe in the God who created it all. Who knows it all. Who orders it all. And who continues to create and re-create, even to this day.

This is the God in whom I believe.

And we start here, because in the light of this kind of a God, the rest of the story pales in comparison. Our rebellion? Our brokenness? The ways that we have turned away from this God, again and again throughout history? This is a big part of *our* story, but if we really, truly believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth – a God of creation, a God of intimacy, a God of power, and a God of surprises – then we would know that it has always been the case that sin and brokenness and pain and suffering and rebellion and disaster and confusion, that sickness and death and pandemic and war and division and fear and hopelessness – all of these things that take over our day-to-day existence – while they may be real, they can't hold a candle up to the goodness and the power and the love and the grace of God. God is bigger than all of that.

So my friends, as we go forth this week to face whatever life throws our way, may our response be one and the same: I believe in God. And because I believe, I know that this God will bring me through.