

What We Believe and Why It Matters: Exploring the Apostles' Creed
Hebrews 11:1-3 and Psalm 78:1-16, 22, 32
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We have just finished the season of Advent during which Christian churches all around the world, including this one, made much of the belief that in the birth of Jesus Christ, God came to humanity in bodily form—God was “pleased as man with men to dwell”, as Charles Wesley put it in his familiar Christmas carol, “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.”

I want to start this morning by asking you: what difference does believing in the Incarnation make to you personally—in your life, with whatever challenges you are facing right now?

This morning we begin a new sermon series on this matter of belief—what we Christians believe, why we believe it, and why it matters. The vehicle for our exploration of belief is the Apostles' Creed. Now, the first logical question is to ask, why the Apostles' Creed? One reason is that it provides a concise and very early outline of Christian theology. While the Apostles' Creed took its present form in about 390 CE, the church started as early as the second and third centuries to formally state what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, and the Apostles' Creed grew out of those early formulations. Second, the Apostles' Creed is a foundational Confession of the church, one of the most enduring creeds that we have. It has been used by millions of Christians through the centuries and all around the world, a statement of faith that has been passed from generation to generation, as Psalm 78 admonishes us to do, so that we will not forget the foundations of our faith.

The first word of the Apostles' Creed in Latin is *credo* which means, I believe. Before we delve into what we believe as Christians, let's think just a moment about belief itself. What do we mean when we say we believe? How does belief affect us and what are the sources or reasons for belief?

The word *believe* can have multiple layers of meaning and can be applied to everything from the silly to the profound. For example, I might say I believe the Washington Nationals will make it to the World Series this year. In this sense belief expresses my hopes, which may be at least partially rooted in my assessment of the skills and level of play I expect from the team this year.

Often we use the word *believe* to express our preferences or opinions or predictions about things that are not of ultimate importance. I believe a particular car brand is a better value than another. I would not die for my convictions about a car brand, and my convictions might be easily changed if new information about another carmaker came along.

Then there are the deeper and more important beliefs we all carry. You might believe that small government is important, or you might believe the government should do more to ensure the welfare of its citizens. You might believe that every person should have the right to carry guns, or you might believe that we need more restrictive gun laws. You might believe that one of the greatest threats to our future is global warming and that humans are having a significant impact on the environment, or you might believe that global warming is a hoax or that it may be a real phenomenon but that humans have very little impact on it.

Many deeply held beliefs have the power to motivate us to action, sacrifice and service. Think of the convictions of our Founding Fathers here in the United States, who spelled out some of their fundamental beliefs in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Think for a moment about your most deeply held beliefs. How did you come to hold those convictions? For many of us, our parents played a key role in shaping our fundamental beliefs. We might also have been shaped by the writings of a particular author or the ideas of a certain teacher or philosopher. Many of our beliefs are shaped by personal experience, particularly those experiences that most deeply touch our hearts—the most painful, to be sure, but also the most loving, beautiful or gratifying.

These deeply held beliefs can shape us for good or bad. Some fundamental convictions lead people to do great harm, and other beliefs lead people to live sacrificially in service to others. One set of convictions shapes the Ku Klux Klan, and another shapes the Sisters of Charity. What we believe matters.

Which brings us back to the Apostles’ Creed. The word “creed” is defined as a statement of the basic beliefs of a religion; an idea or set of beliefs that guides the actions of a person or group. That is true because our most important beliefs, whether expressed in the Apostles’ Creed or in other ways, affect our

understanding of what it means to be human and our convictions about values, morality and relationships. Ultimately our most deeply held beliefs shape our goals, ambitions, hopes and dreams. These kinds of convictions are seldom scientifically verifiable; nevertheless, we ought to carefully consider and question them and be able to make a compelling case for why we believe the way we do.

Since our convictions cannot be completely verified scientifically, there will always be some measure of doubt associated with them, some question as to whether they really are true. Regardless of what we believe about God, or humanity, or our world, we will lack certainty, and that lack of certainty should rightly lead us to humility in our convictions and in our interactions with those who disagree with us.

I think Albert Einstein had it right when he said, “I believe in intuitions and inspirations. I sometimes feel that I am right. I do not know that I am.” For Einstein, there were some things about the universe that he believed with a high degree of certainty, while many others represented reasonable convictions based upon what he could observe.

In the end, belief is a decision of the will. I choose to believe certain things, as do you. Well over four decades ago I made a decision that I believed the basic tenets that are expressed in the Apostles’ Creed. That decision, to put my trust in God through a relationship with Jesus Christ, has had a profound impact on my life ever since. It has influenced my education and my friendships, my decisions about what I do with my money and time, how I raised my children and what vocation I pursued. It has directly shaped what I believe is of ultimate importance and worthy of my blood, sweat and tears. But, this doesn’t mean that doubt or questioning my convictions hasn’t been part of my journey, or that it is not part of my experience of faith even now. In fact, this particular sermon series is, in part, born out of the questions I have been asking about faith over the past several months, questions that have arisen primarily out of pain and grief.

(Personal Story here)

So, when I say that I question what belief, and the faith that arises from it, has to do with our real lives, I’m not whistling in the dark. This is not a theoretical or intellectual exercise. My very life depends on how I answer that question. I have come face to face with evil. What do I believe about how God is at work in the midst of abuse of the vulnerable? What difference does my faith make when I am flat on my face in anger and grief? How does faith speak into my life when life

is coming apart at the seams? Because here's one thing I believe—if faith doesn't matter when our hearts are broken open by grief or pain or suffering, then it doesn't matter at all.

I want to invite you to use this sermon series as an opportunity to think deeply about what you believe, why you believe it and why it matters. I want to encourage you to honestly confront your doubts because doubting and questioning is an essential part of our faith journeys. It's not the most comfortable part, to be sure, but if we're ever going to grow into followers rather than just hang out on the sidelines as fans, it is critical work.

I've been here before. Certainly not with these exact circumstances, but I have been in this place of questioning and doubt and pain and suffering before. I can tell you from personal experience that the God that is proclaimed in the Apostles' Creed is real and present and working in our lives and in our world, even when we can't see it and in fact, all the evidence seems to point to the contrary. The God made known to us in the Incarnation—Jesus the Christ—he's the real deal, too. If you are not staking your very life on who he revealed himself to be, then you're building your life on sand. The Spirit that Jesus left with us—that Spirit blows through our lives with the same power that flung the universe into being and raised Christ from the dead. It is in relationship with this God that we find our purpose, our meaning, our very reason for being. And, when the bottom falls out from under you, it is this God who will hold you. This I believe.

To God alone be all praise and glory and honor. Amen.