

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in God" (*The Apostles' Creed Series*)
SERMON TEXT: Acts 17:22-29
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 6, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, while I was home recuperating after a surgery, I set myself to reading a book on the early history of the Christian faith. The book covered about 400 years, from the time of Jesus' ministry into the 5th century. One of my goals in reading that book was to learn about the origins of *The Apostles' Creed*. I knew that *The Nicene Creed* was adopted at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 and amended further in Constantinople in 381. So I figured that there must have been an early church council meeting or two that likewise determined the content of *The Apostles' Creed*.

But when I finally finished reading the book, I was puzzled. After 249 pages of early church history, I didn't recall reading anything about *The Apostles' Creed*. I'd read about all kinds of theological controversies, persecutions and deaths of martyrs, fanatically ascetic monks, and even the development of the New Testament canon. But I couldn't recall anything that was labeled *The Apostles' Creed*. Since I'd been reading the book after a surgery, I considered that I might have failed to remember due to the after-effects of anesthesia and pain medications. Or maybe I just dozed off at the wrong moment and missed it. Well, if that were the case, I figured I could just look it up in the book's index. So, I looked first under "A" for "Apostles." Nothing. So I turned to the "T" section for "The." Still nothing. Next I looked under "C" for "Creeds," and, again, there was nothing about *The Apostles' Creed*. Mystified by this, I then went back through the book, page by page, re-reading all the passages I had highlighted with a yellow marker. After reviewing all 249 pages, I still had found nothing.

So, I then did what I could have done much more easily in the beginning. I went to my computer and looked up "Apostles' Creed" on the internet. And, when I did that, I discovered the reason why *The Apostles' Creed* hadn't appeared in my very comprehensive textbook of the church's first 400 years. It

seems that *The Apostles' Creed* as we know it didn't reach its nearly-final form until the 700s, and it has even seen some changes since then. Apparently, the term "Apostles' Creed" comes from a legend. The legend says that, on the Day of Pentecost, while the original Christian believers were gathered in Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began preaching and baptizing, each of the 12 apostles contributed one statement of faith. Taken together, those 12 statements are approximately what we know today as *The Apostles' Creed*.

Obviously, if the exact words of this creed weren't formalized until the eighth century, this early-origins story is a legend. But, as legends often do, this one captures the essence of truth. Even though the exact form of *The Apostles' Creed* was perfected over many centuries, the core of these beliefs did go back to the apostles' original teachings that had been carefully passed along over the years. Revised and adjusted in the process of encouraging the faithful and instructing new converts, these essentials of belief were recited at baptisms and other acts of worship. In a variety of forms in different times and places, these basic creedal ideas were used to clarify, unify, and build up the Christian faith.

So, today, here we are, about to begin a series of sermons on this creed. Instead of 12 installments, we'll manage this in nine weeks. Joining Christians around the globe and in almost every denomination and non-denomination, we'll affirm and explore our beliefs in God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, forgiveness of sins, and life everlasting. Today we begin with the first line, "I believe in God."

1—I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD

When we Christians say, "I believe in God," or the fuller statement, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth," probably the first thing we mean is "I believe in *one* God." Like our Jewish ancestors and our Muslim brothers and sisters, we Christians believe in only one divine being, who is the creator of everything else.

Our Christian monotheism is in contrast to the ancient polytheistic religions. In Old Testament times, the prophets were constantly preaching against the Canaanite worship of idols or worship of agricultural fertility gods such as Baal and Astarte. Later, the Romans and the Greeks also had many gods. You know some of them: Zeus, the heavenly king of the gods; Apollo, the god of the sun; Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty; and Poseidon, the god of the seas.

Our scripture reading from Acts 17 indicates that, when the Apostle Paul visited Athens, Greece, he saw many religious idols, including a statue to an “unknown god.” Paul used that “unknown god” idea to explain to the Greeks about the one God of the Judeo-Christian faith. This one God, said Paul, is the God who created the heaven and the earth and everything that is in them. God can’t be limited to human creations of silver or stone because this one true God is alive and active as our creator and life-giver. As Paul says in verse 28, this one true God is the divine reality in whom “we live and move and have our being.”

While our belief in one God can easily be contrasted to *ancient* polytheism, I think it’s important for us to realize that polytheism exists today also. Whenever we divide our affections too much--sharing too much of our time, attention, resources, and talent with interests other than God, we run the risk of polytheism. Of course, God expects us to love our families and be responsible about going to work and school. Of course, God knows we need to have homes, furniture, clothing, tools, and transportation. Of course, God knows we need time to eat, sleep, exercise, and attend to personal hygiene. Of course, God knows we need to spend time with friends and allow ourselves some entertainment.

As long as we don’t give any of those things and people excessive attention or priority, they aren’t a problem. But if we ever allow any of those people or things to become equal to God in our concern or priority, then we become polytheists. If ever we allow God to become just one of the many values we hold dear, then we have fallen away from the Christian tradition of monotheism. If we are to

be Apostles'-Creed-kind-of-Christians, we need to ask ourselves regularly if we are, in fact, worshiping only the one true God.

2—I BELIEVE THAT GOD EXISTS

When we say, "I believe in God," a second meaning of our statement is that we, in fact, believe that God exists. In ancient times, the debate was one God versus many gods. Two thousand years ago, no one doubted that at least one supreme being existed. But, during the time of the Enlightenment, in the 1700s or so, people began doubting the whole God idea. The study of comparative religions and evolution in the 1800s caused others to lose their faith. This doubting of God's existence escalated in the 1960s to the point where larger numbers of people were saying that "God is dead."

While atheists like Madalyn Murray O'Hair used to be shunned in the public square, today, prominent atheist authors are gaining traction with books like *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins believes that ideas about God and religion have caused much more persecution, warring, and suffering in the world than they have alleviated. He thinks we'd all be a lot better off if everyone just stopped believing in God.

I agree that people hold a lot of weird and unhelpful ideas about God, and the world would be better off without beliefs that God commands genocide or endorses prejudices. But I don't agree with Dawkins that we should throw God out with the bad ideas bathwater. God has far too much good to offer us. Most of the world's compassion, healthcare, education, and efforts for the common good have been inspired by belief in God.

Personally, I believe in a God who is a comforting companion in times of distress--a strong rock and fortress, when the storms of life hit us like a tsunami. The God I believe in is the one who existed before time began, continues to endure now, and will forever be. The God I believe exists has a proven track record that gives us promise for the future. The God I believe exists is a God of purpose-filled love, not capricious fate or vindictive rage. The God I believe exists has revealed God's self in so many

wonderful ways: in the creation of the Grand Canyon, a new baby, and a spring daffodil; in the word incarnate in Jesus Christ; and in the comforting guidance of the Holy Spirit. The God I believe in is one who loves me and leads me, whose strong endurance gives me courage; a God who is far enough away to stretch me beyond my human limitations and yet close enough to provide mercy and comfort at every stage of my life.

In Acts 17:27, Paul is telling the Athenians about the one true God who created human beings “so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” I like that statement because I’m quite sure that we human beings are created to look for that higher Someone who can inspire us, forgive us, and transform us over and over again so that we, in turn, can inspire, forgive, and transform our world. Maybe atheists can find that assistance in some abstract philosophical idea, but I rather like the personal relationship I have with the divine Creator whom I believe exists.

CONCLUSION

At our bell choir rehearsal on Wednesday, we took all our Christmas music out of our folders and replaced it with three new pieces. Two of those are quite different and made us think about sounds of outer space or the call of whales in the ocean. That led my thinking to a song that’s in our *United Methodist Hymnal* called “God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale.” It has six verses. Here are three of them:

God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of the swirling stars,
How does the creature say, “Awe”? How does the creature say, “Praise”?
God of the hungry, God of the sick, God of the prodigal,
How does the creature say, “Care”? How does the creature say, “Life”?
God of the ages, God near at hand, God of the loving heart,
How do your children say, “Joy”? How do your children say, “Home”? (Jaroslav Vajda, 1983)

Whatever sounds and images lead you to it, I hope you will join me in affirming the Creator in whom we live and move and have our being. I hope you will join me in saying, “I believe in God.”