

January 14, 2024
The Second Sunday after Epiphany
Pastor Matt Duerr

“The Confessional Church-Let’s Begin Big”

Grace, Mercy and Peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. One thing that I've had asked of me many times is, “Why do we make a standard confession each week?” And I'm not talking about the confession of sins. No, I'm talking about our confession of faith using the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. What I have heard is that when we do it, no one really pays attention. They don't really mean it. They say, you know, it's so boring. It's unattractive to visitors. It's old-fashioned. Yay verily, I would imagine soon I will hear it's so “white patriarchal.” And to understand why we do it, I think we need to ask two questions. First of all, when was it written? And then more importantly, why was it written?

The when; by what we can see throughout history and the manuscripts and pieces of manuscripts that we have uncovered, it was written sometime in the late 1st century to the early 2nd century. It was the first Creed written. It was originally called the Roman Creed. The oldest complete manuscript that we have of it dates to AD 341, and it's found in a letter. A letter that a guy named Marcellus of Ancira, wrote to Julius, the Bishop of Rome.

Fifty years later, a guy named Tyrannus Rufus wrote a commentary on this Creed. The title of his commentary was Commentarius in Symbolum Apostolorum. I had to work on that Latin for a while to get it right. But from that you hear that Apostolorum the apostles; and in his commentary he wrote that it was the twelve apostles who wrote it after Pentecost, but before the Dispersion as they headed out into all the world to fulfill the Great Commission.

In AD 390, St. Ambrose is the first to call it, “The Apostles Creed.” And in his writing, he said, and I quote “The Creed of the Apostles, which the Church of Rome keeps and guards in its entirety.” Well, why the need for a creed? Why the need for something that you would keep, that you would guard in its entirety? Very simply because heresy or heresies had invaded the church.

Gnosticism was on the move. Gnosticism has its basis in gnosis, or knowledge, and that there was this secret knowledge. Oh things that were revealed that the Church doesn't want you to know about, but that you need to understand so that you can gain salvation and for a price we will share it with you.

But that's where we get some of these things where people will say, well, Jesus really wasn't God. He wasn't truly God. He was a man. It was filled by God, and well, he was, you know, being a man, He had desires, He was married to Mary Magdalene. And well, you know, he didn't really die, He swooned, But the disciples said he had died. Or he did die, but he didn't really rise. Just his spirit appeared to the disciples, and the list goes on and on and on.

And at that time, they did not have typewriters so you couldn't say, well, let's pull out our Bible and take a look here at what the apostles wrote. They wrote a creed. This is what we believe. And so, from the early 2nd century on, people have been using this creed because it's simple, it's to the point, or shall I say, points. There are three articles to it that lay out what is believed by the Christian Church. It's been condensed. People were taught to memorize it, they were told to believe it, trust the words. And to go back to an old commercial with Andre Agassi, "Accept no substitutes."

As I was looking at it, it kind of reminded me of Elihu. He's the 4th friend of Job in the book of Job and he's found in chapter 32 and in the chapters following. He had silently sat there and listened to Job and his three friends. Jobs' three friends accused him of being a sinner and God was punishing him, et cetera, et cetera, and he needed to confess his sins and get right with God before he was condemned to hell. And Job would come back with a defense against them every time. And after listening to these individuals for 31 chapters we read that he burned with anger. Why? He took on Job first because Job tried to justify himself. Only God can justify is what Elihu had to say. And Elihu was right, and Job knew it. And when it came to the friends, he burned with anger because they did not speak correctly about God. And he begins with the critical point. God is the maker. He's the creator. I mean to sum up what Elihu has to say to both Job and his friends as this. God is big. Big is not really big enough to describe God. In high school we came up with a word for really big, _____. I was going to make that the title of the sermon, but I didn't know how to spell it. God is massive! And we are puny. And before

we say, "Oh my God!" Like so many people say, invoking the name of God. We might want to just stop for a moment and consider who God is. And understand why Elihu burned with anger. Because I'm afraid we've lost a lot of this in the church.

So, who is God? How big is He? Well, God is. Omnipotent. Omni means all, potent means powerful. We also say He is almighty. How mighty is He? It starts right there in Genesis chapter one. God spoke, and the universe began. Think about that for a moment. He spoke. Let me try that for a minute. "Let there be a piece of pumpkin pie!" Yeah, it doesn't work for me.

Last week Pastor Tim brought up the laws of science and I so appreciated that, "an object at rest stays at rest unless it is acted on by an opposing force." There is another law of science. It's called "the law of conservation of mass." It says simply this, Matter can neither be created nor destroyed. And yet God was able to overcome that law with just His voice. He didn't have to go into His workshop, He didn't need power tools. He simply spoke and the universe came into being. In fact, the law of conservation of mass is part of His creation because God is a God of order and not disorder. And therefore, He made an orderly universe, and He created all the laws of science to make this whole thing run, or as we heard back in the Truth project, the cosmic dance of the universe. This is why when we look at Scripture, we read in Genesis 17:1 God saying, "I am the Almighty God." That's in the singular. He's the only One. In Luke 1:37 Gabriel to says Mary, "With God, nothing is impossible." She a virgin would bear a son. That's nothing for God. He can do it. He's almighty. He's omnipotent.

And then in Matthew 19, verse 20, our gospel this morning. Following Jesus was speaking and in correcting a rich young ruler, His disciples asked Him, "who then can be saved?" And Jesus's response was, "With God all things are possible."

God is omnipotent. He is also eternal. Psalm 90, verse 1 and 2 puts it this way: "from everlasting (that's going backward in time) everlasting (just keep going) everlasting, things just keep on going to everlasting. How long? everlasting in that direction. From everlasting to everlasting, You are God. No beginning. No end. It blows my mind. It's because He's bigger than me. He's

unchangeable. Malachi 3, verse 6. "I am the Lord. I do not change." That's why we worship God in an orderly way. Just look at the universe. It's orderly God's order.

He is Omniscient. There we have that omni again. All knowing. In John 21 verse 17 Jesus asks Peter, "Peter, do you love me?" He asked him three times and on the third time Peter's distressed that Jesus keeps asking him this. And what does Peter say? "Lord. You know everything." God knows everything about everything.

He is also omnipresent, all present. We look at Jeremiah 23, verse 24. Can a man (in the singular) so just an individual, one of the millions of the people on the earth? Can a man hide himself in secret places of that I cannot see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord. This whole universe, the Cosmic dance, all governed by the laws that God created. He fills it, He's everywhere. Go to the moon. He's there. Go to Mars, He's there. Go way out there to the biggest star, He is there. He's omnipresent.

He is also (I so like this part) just. He's fair. He's impartial. Deuteronomy 32, verse 4. We read that He is, quote "a God of faithfulness and without iniquity just and upright is He." And so, there's that "just." He's fair. He's impartial. He's upright. He's righteous. But He's also faithful, really? He has kept all His promises, and He has fulfilled all His prophecies, except that He's returned and pretty sure He's going to fulfill that.

But we also see He is without iniquity. God has never sinned. He is righteous. He is merciful. Merciful means to not give what is deserved. Instead of getting what we deserve, He gives us grace. Grace is by definition, getting what you don't deserve. And so, when we read in Exodus 34:6-7, the Lord passed before him (that is Moses) and proclaimed the Lord a God who is merciful. I'm not going to strike you dead. And Gracious, I'm going to do it for you. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, and transgression and sin. Instead of condemnation, we get love, we get forgiveness of sin. We get salvation.

And that brings up another point about God. God is love. 1 John 4, verse 8. And that love is agape love, sacrificial love that puts the need of those we love before our self. And our God, the King of kings, separates Himself from every other political person/king, anything in this world in that He truly lived that and died that.

Which leads to the final point about God. He is holy. All too often we think that holy means perfect, and it does. But it means along with perfect, set apart. God is perfectly set apart. And so when we read in Isaiah 6 verse 3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Isaiah is saying our God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, all are holy and perfectly set apart for our salvation. Isaiah is saying. Our God is the only God. Only He can do this. Because only He is powerful enough, holy enough, loving, merciful, gracious enough, omniscient, omnipresent.

And so, when we say the Apostles Creed, we begin with, "I believe God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth. In our minds the thoughts should be just rushing forward with this thought of this is God the Almighty Creator. There's nothing impossible for Him. And He set Himself apart to show us His love, to show us His mercy, to show us His grace, not condemning us and sending us to hell, which we deserve, but saving us by doing what was just and right. Our sin demands and just sentence. And that sentence is death, and it is the only right sentence. So, our God sent His righteous Son who never sinned, who is bigger than all creation; He sent His Son to die and fulfill our death sentence for us. He and he alone is big enough and strong enough to do this.

This is why every Sunday we take the time to say. I believe in God the Father Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth. Lest we forget it and then let heresies, false teachings in the church. Every time we say that Apostles Creed, we should feel like Martin Luther standing before that tribunal and saying. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Because only He can. And as Luther would conclude every section of his explanations in his catechisms and explanations. And this is most certainly true. Amen and Amen.