



Apostles' Creed 2
January 11, 2004

Romans 8:1-6
I Believe in God
You are Part of the Story
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When my daughter was in high school, her well-meaning principal tried to assure all parents attending an assembly by saying, "In this school we tell our students there are no bad ideas." Really? I was shocked that no one seemed interested in going into cardiac arrest. There are so many bad ideas in society, and telling teenagers that there are none is one of the worst ideas I have heard. In his book *Modern Times*, Paul Johnson has demonstrated how the killing fields of Cambodia began with just few ideas being tossed around by a group of students in a Parisian cafe. Ideas and beliefs are extremely important. Every tragic and heroic moment in history began with an idea.

The same thing is true in your life. If you believe you are a failure, you will most certainly fail. If you believe you are loved, you will be loving to others. What you believe, whether you are paying attention to those beliefs or not, determines what you do and how you spend your life.

Some people pay a lot of attention to their beliefs, and are quite sincere about them, but the sincerity of your beliefs is really not enough. It doesn't matter how sincere the flat earth society may be, they are still wrong. It doesn't matter how sincerely a pig believes it can fly, it will never get off the ground. So since your life is largely determined by your beliefs, you probably want to strive not just for sincerity but for belief in the truth.

In all humility, though, how do we really know what is true? Some would say that in this post modern society where all absolute truths have been dismantled, we are each on our own to determine that for ourselves. But how is that working out for you? How confident are you of your ability to know the truth? How helpful is it really when someone responds to your confusion about a decision by telling you to trust your heart? If your heart is like mine, it is divided and torn by competing affections. Most of the time it feels like there is a bad committee meeting going on in there. Every special interest in my heart is constantly trying to hijack the meeting and to pull me in a different direction. Frankly, the heart is divided, and that is why it is part of the problem.

The same thing is true when it comes to faith. No one can muster up enough belief in the truth of the gospel on their own. Again, that is because we are divided. There is a believer and an unbeliever living in all of us. Martin Luther, who wrote the great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," also wrote that for long periods of time Christ seemed wholly absent to him. If we are going to bank our lives on the idea of faith in God being faith in the truth, we need a source for that idea that is greater than our own heart. We need a faith that is bigger than "my little

faith.” What we need is great faith, because in times of darkness and tragedy the individual is buffeted by torrents of doubt. Personal faith isn’t going to do it in those times. That is when we have to lean upon the great faith of a great heritage. And that is why the church has written creeds. These creeds have been payed for in the blood of martyrs, hammered out by centuries of theologians, tested by the constant adversity of the historic church - all to the end of nurturing great faith.

Last week we began this series of sermons on the Apostles’ Creed by looking at the opening line “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.” We noticed what it means to confess that we are believing not in our achievements or in our failures, but in what God the “maker” makes of our lives. We also examined what it means that we can know this God, not just know about God, but actually know God through his self disclosure in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So if Jesus is our means for knowing the truth of who God is, that makes the sentences about him pretty important in the creed. Isn’t it striking then that the creed tells us only that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was dead and buried. Then it goes on to speak of his resurrection and ascended life at the right hand of the Father. But it leaves out a lot of information about Jesus’ life on earth. What about all of those great miracles, all of those wonderful things he said, or all of the compassion he demonstrated? Why does the creed only tell us about Christ’s birth and death, resurrection and ascension?

Most importantly, this is because the creed wants you to base your beliefs, and thus your life, on who Jesus is before you get caught up in what he did. This drives us nuts because we are more comfortable with the teachings and compassion of the Jewish rabbi named Jesus than we are with things like the virgin birth, atonement, and resurrection. But it is the historic beliefs in Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection that affirm his identity.

So you have to struggle with these doctrines to know who Jesus is. And you have to know who he is in order to know who God is. You have to know God in order to know what he is making of your life. There is no getting around this if you want to find great faith. You’ve got to make sense of things like the historic belief in the virgin birth.

To stand in church and say that you believe in the virgin birth is not to say that you are certain about the biology of how the Holy Spirt conceived a child in the womb of a virgin. To tell you the truth, Mary wasn’t very certain about that either. She echoes all of our confusion in responding to the annunciation by exclaiming, “How can this be?” Notice that the angel doesn’t respond to her by talking about zygotes and fetal development, but by restating the theological truth that God has conceived this idea. It is not about biology or sacred sexuality. In the words of the early church father Athanasius it is about “the reconciliation of God and humanity coming together in the womb of Mary.” In other words, to believe in the virgin birth is to claim that Jesus wasn’t just a great man who figured out divine consciousness. Jesus is Lord because he is the incarnation of the Lord God with us.

All of his miraculous healings were also about this. The sick whom he healed all became sick again. The hungry whom he fed were all hungry again the next morning. So clearly the healing and feeding was never an end in itself. The purpose of all those miracles was to attest to the great truth that we are not on our own in this confusing life. The Creator has entered creation as one of us.

As the Apostle Paul states in our text today, not only did the Son of God take on sinful flesh, but in his death he condemned sin. Sin is anything that separates you from God. Your achievements can do that as well as your great failures. Sin is whatever we do to turn from God, and its result is that we have turned from life itself. For life is derived only from the Maker. Since it is our sin, only a human *should* save us from this separation, but only God *could* do it. And that is exactly *who* Jesus Christ is as the Son of Humanity, and the Son of God.

A second reason why the creed leaves out so much information about the life of Jesus is because, by its very omission, the creed claims those days were ordinary. They are important, but ordinary. Just like most of your days. When you count up all of the days of Jesus' three year ministry described in the Gospels, they do not add up to even a full year. That means that, even for Jesus, two of three days nothing happened that was worth writing down. Again, just like most of your days.

Imagine that you were the winner of an ecclesiastical lottery and got to travel back in time to spend one day with Jesus and the disciples. Finally the big day came, and Peter greeted you and said, "We are happy to have you with us. But today is laundry day, and you're welcome to join us." You would think, "Nuts. I was hoping to at least see him walk on water or heal somebody." But no, you got laundry day. Then, if you were paying attention, it would occur to you that even getting to do laundry with Jesus would be pretty cool. And that is exactly what you do get to do today, because of WHO Jesus is. He is the God who rose from the dead, who ascended to the right hand of the Father, and who continues to be with us through the Holy Spirit. Again, if you are paying attention to who is with you, the ordinary becomes pretty extraordinary.

It is striking that Pontius Pilate makes it into the Apostles Creed. The Virgin Mary we would expect, but why Pilate? He was just another ambitious bureaucrat whose job it was to maintain Pax Romana in Jerusalem. But one ordinary day, an ordinary looking Jew was dragged in front of him who had clearly ticked off the religious leaders. They wanted him killed. For the life of him, literally, Pilate could not figure out what Jesus had done wrong. But believing in the crowd more than in truth, he made the ordinary decision to give them what they wanted. And the Son of God was crucified.

By contrast the ordinary Jewish peasant girl named Mary was told that her womb would be the meeting place between God and humanity. She knew immediately no one in her crowd would understand this. She couldn't make sense of it herself. "How could this be?" But she said, "Let it be to me according to your will," and salvation entered the world.

Two ordinary people, just like you and me, living ordinary days. And they were woven into the creed for good or for evil. So is your life woven into this creed. You can either be Pilate, or

you can be Mary. Those are your only two options. You can either say no to Jesus or yes to him. There is no third choice. Where you stand in this creed depends on what you believe. And what you believe determines whether your ordinary days will be used to crucify Jesus, or make his salvation known in the world. Amen.