

January 13, 2019

We Believe
We Believe in God
Genesis 1:1-5

Opening words: Weekly, at Western Reserve, we recite the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed was not written by the Apostles; it is called the Apostles' Creed because it summarizes the teachings of the Apostles. The Apostles' Creed is important because it does three things. First, the Apostles' Creed tells the world what we believe. That is important because our world is getting smaller. Non-Christians want to know what we believe. Second, the Apostles' Creed reminds us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, of our core beliefs. Being a good person is not good enough. Christian theology is clear and structured. Third, the Apostles' Creed reminds us we that stand with the church throughout the ages. Ours is not the first generation to recite these words. The Apostles' Creed is a historic document, which has come to us from the first and second centuries. We stand with the saints of the past. Each phrase of the Apostles' Creed is grounded in scripture.

Today, I begin a new six-part sermon series, *We Believe*. In this series, I am going to look at six core values found in the Apostles' Creed. Your understanding of these core values is important because each one is a key piece in Christian theology. By the time we are done, I will have looked at what we believe about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, the forgiveness of sins, and heaven. The Apostles' Creed begins, "I believe in God." That sounds simple, but it is very complex. Our scripture reading for today is Genesis 1:1-5. Let me call this message *We Believe in God*.

Genesis 1:1-5 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

We find ourselves today in the very first chapter of Genesis. The word Genesis can be translated in several ways. Depending on the context, it can mean "birth," "genealogy," or "history of origin." Tradition tells us Moses, the great law giver, wrote the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Collectively, those books are called the Pentateuch. The verses in today's reading are not just the introductory words of an Old Testament book, they are the opening words of the entire Bible. The first verse is a summarization of the entire creation story. It is our introduction to God, Himself. Let me state the obvious. God is a very complex topic. Everyone seems to have a different understanding of God. Everyone seems to have an opinion about God. Just think about it for a moment.

What do these people have in common?

Arian Foster
Daniel Radcliffe
Julianne Moore
Ian McKellen
Andy Rooney
Billy Joel
Jodi Foster
Galileo

Each one of those people was, or is, an atheist. In other words, they say there is no God. That list came from CNN. According to Wikipedia, there are between 450 to 500 million atheists in the world. That is about 7% of the world's population.

That means 93% of the world's population believes in the existence of God. However, the 93% have different views of God. For example, followers of the New Age movement see themselves as a god; that is why they are always striving for a higher consciousness. Hindus believe there are numerous gods. Collectively, they call those gods "Brahman". He is a universal soul that is found in everything. Muslims believe in one almighty god, Allah. He is viewed as the creator of the universe and the source of all good and evil. He is a powerful and strict judge. He lacks compassion and love. Pantheists believe God is found in nature. Mormons believe a little piece of God can be found in every newborn. That is why they promote family and value each child. Many of the American patriots were deists. They believed God created both the universe and natural law. However, they believed God would never break natural law, so miracles, including the resurrection of Jesus Christ, never happened. Even Satan believes in the existence of God. Do I have to go on? This little three letter word, God, is very complex. If you will admit God is a complex topic, say, "**Amen!**"

So, when we begin reciting the Apostles' Creed with the words, we believe in God, don't take those words lightly. God is a very complex topic. Let me ask a few questions. Who is the God mentioned in the Apostles' Creed? What did the apostles teach about God? What do you believe about God? What are the great characteristics of the God of the Christian faith? Let me just give you a few.

We believe God is all-powerful. Jeremiah 32:17 says, "*Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.*" Never underestimate the power of God. In our scripture lesson for today, the world is introduced to God. The first thing we learn about God is His power. Look at the text with me.

God created the whole universe out of nothing. Do you remember the order in which God created the universe? God started with nothing; the world was a formless mass. Then came light, so day and night were created. Then, God created the sky. Then, God created the land, the oceans, and the plants. Then, God created the sun, moon and the

stars. Then, God created the birds and the fish. Then, God created land animals. Finally, His crowning jewel of creation, God created mankind. Creating all of this out of nothing is amazing, but the vastness of this creation is incomprehensible. Did you know the planet Jupiter's mass is 300 times that of Earth? The expanse of the observable universe is 93 billion light-years. God's creation is massive, yet God's creation is tiny. An atom is the smallest particle of an element, unable to be seen by the human eye. God's creation is massive and complex. Creation itself reminds us of the power of God. John Piper (born 1946) is a Reformed Baptist pastor and author. He once said, *"It is about the greatness of God, not the significance of man. God made man small and the universe big to say something about himself."* If you believe God is all-powerful, say, **"Amen!"** Yet, there is more to our understanding of God than power. There is also presence.

We believe God is ever-present. The Psalter lesson contained these words: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me, and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you* (Psalm 139:7-12). What is David trying to tell us? He is reminding us of something we already know. God is ever-present.

Many believe, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City of Jerusalem is the most sacred place in the world for Christians. I was there several years ago. The church was consecrated in the year 335. They say, it is in that location Jesus suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, and was resurrected. The final five Stations of the Cross are located inside that structure. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is another holy site. I will never forget being on my knees to place my hands in a hole, under the center altar. They say that is the exact spot where Christ was born. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my life, and I knew God was present. However, the Bible teaches us God is always present. Not just in the sacred places, God is present in all places.

Elie Wiesel (1928-2016) was a Romanian-born American Jewish writer, who survived the Nazi Holocaust. Perhaps you have read his book, *Night*. He often told the story of a day in the camp, when three men were executed by hanging. The scene was not pretty. Two of the men died quickly, but the third lasted longer. The prisoners were paraded past the bodies, as the death camp guards taunted them. The guards asked the prisoners the same question repeatedly, "Where is your God?" Wiesel said he answered that question internally. "Where is our God? Here. Hanging in the gallows." We believe in an ever-present God. You have never been orphaned. God has always been with you, during the most exciting times in your life and the most challenging. If

you are thankful for your ever-present God, say, **"Amen!"** We believe in an all-powerful God. We believe in an ever-present God.

We believe God is love. Romans 8:38-39 are two of my favorite verses in the Bible. You may know these words, *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* I am always moved by those words. Our all-powerful, ever present God loves us. Love is not afraid to sacrifice.

Lee Dawn Mann was not afraid to sacrifice for her children, because she loved them. Do you remember her story from the news? On July 26, 2018, she and her three daughters were at the Big Manistee River, in Michigan. Everyone was having a great time, until the unthinkable happened. The girls went too far out and began to struggle in the current. The thirty-three-year-old mother jumped into the water and pushed her daughters to safety. Unfortunately, she couldn't save herself. The current took her away. Her family and friends called her a hero. I call her a loving mother, who wasn't afraid to sacrifice her life for her children. Love is not afraid to sacrifice. Can anyone tell me Lee Dawn Mann didn't love her children? Love is not afraid to sacrifice, so Jesus went to the cross for us. The picture was not pretty. Can anyone tell me Jesus doesn't love us? If you are thankful God loves you, say, **"Amen!"** We believe in an all-powerful God. We believe in an ever-present God. We believe in a loving God. This is the truth:

I could have written an entire sermon series on the great characteristics of God, but time does not permit. It will have to suffice to say our all-powerful, ever present, loving God is also merciful, faithful, constant, just, holy, righteous, the absolute truth, sovereign and all-knowing. In short, we believe in a great God! If you believe God is great, say, **"Amen!"** Let me end with this story.

In 1715, King Louis XIV (1638-1715) of France died after a reign of 72 years. He had called himself "the Great," and was the monarch who made the famous statement, "I am the state!" Let's just say, he had a healthy self-image. His court was the most magnificent in Europe, and his funeral was equally spectacular. As his body lay in state in a golden coffin, orders were given that the cathedral should be very dimly lit with only a special candle set above his coffin, to dramatize his greatness. At the memorial, thousands waited in hushed silence. Then, Bishop of Massillon began to speak; slowly reaching down, he snuffed out the candle and said, "Only God is great." The Bishop was right, God is great. If you believe God is great, say, **"Amen!"**