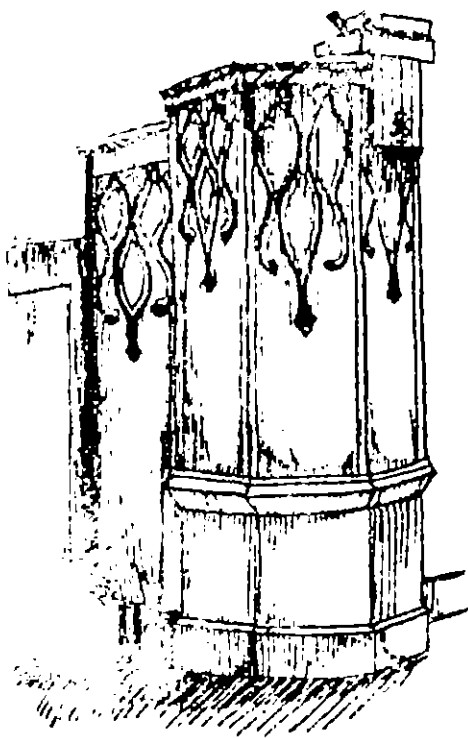


The Southminster Pulpit

THE APOSTLES CREED

I. "I BELIEVE . . . IN THE ONE WHO MADE IT ALL"



Text:

"In the beginning God
created the heavens
and the earth."

Genesis 1:1

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Rev. Richard M. Cromie
Southminster Presbyterian Church
Mount Lebanon, Pennsylvania

During the Second World War, at its level worst, the great Emil Brunner was preaching his heart out in Zurich, afraid for his life and the lives of those who gathered by the droves with him. There one day when the world was at its lowest, he said:

"Is it not something enormous to dare to believe that our beginnings and our destiny are in the hand of God? What so frightens us today is that godless powers are running wild. It seems as if everything has become meaningless. Everything we have worked for, everything worthwhile is now threatened with extinction, and the worst is yet to come. Now at least we know the enemy by name. The time will come when the world will wrestle with unnamed principalities and powers."

My friends, the time has come. It is here and now.

I think that among sensible people, even among sensibly optimistic people, there is these days an almost common agreement that some sort of demonic madness has been set loose in the world, working its own insidious mayhem on us all. There are also many grand and good things going on which we could parade around as evidence of our progress, but today, especially in this matter of what we believe, I begin with the lamentable assertion that something has gone wrong. We see it in a myriad of ways. How would you describe the underlying cause of what is sad and sorry in our world? And, if you catch the note of what I am saying, how would you then propose its cure? To name the demon often makes it go away, but then often it does not.

It has to do with the decline in moral structure. It has to do with the alarming economic picture. It

has to do with the lack of leadership throughout the land. It has to do with the creeping dependence in this past century on the created things of our material world. We could add a multitude of other explanations, but I want to dig a little deeper today. The harsh cold winter winds are coming soon again

I pose for your consideration the thought that one of the best ways to describe the modern predicament is to say we lack commitment, commitment to the things which are enduring and worthwhile. We do not believe enough, and thereby we deny ourselves the foundation from which we need to grow, and the anchor which we need to hold against the wayward winds, and we wander as lonely aliens in the world. The age of indifference, one recent author calls it, and the indifference is born in our refusal, our inability to believe. We deal trivially with triumphant themes. We dash around and scurry off to whatever fads and fancies capture our insatiable need for newness. And lacking a depth of belief in the essentials which we need, we hurry on and give ourselves to totally transitory goals, and of course they let us down and of course our trust is broken and of course life disappoints us all the way around.

The opposite is occasionally observed in the radical all-consuming fanatical belief of those who cannot stand to be let loose: The cults, the burgeoning idolatries we see, the super-patriots, even the most rabid Steeler fans - we all need something to believe in. Each of us knows someone who darts from one excessive commitment to the next, following what ever fortune is parading by - the one who sweeps away the past and follows any promised future. In every family there is one who cannot ever manage to settle down and in. In any set of friends there

is one whose need to believe in something is so acute that his friends get weary just in listening and looking on.

Beliefs really do matter. They are the source of nourishment out of which we grow. They set our boundaries; they open our horizons. Behavior is a symptom of the problem. It all originates in the things which we believe - or which we do not. Do you think it matters whether we believe or not? - I mean at this point, if you believe in anything. In our action-oriented world we miss the realm of thought and the power of our silent, intangible beginnings. Do you think it matters that we believe, or what we believe in?

Suppose you know a child who believes that he is worthless - does that belief then affect the way the child will live and think about himself and interact with other people? The answer is painfully obvious. Suppose you believe that the world is an awful place, that evil usually wins and that it doesn't matter what you do, that it all comes out the same. Suppose you believe that one life does not matter. Do you think that would affect the way you live?

Suppose you believe that goodness is its own reward and that whatever comes you need to be in touch with your inner possibilities. Suppose you believe that the world was made by God, made for His purpose, that your life and mine matters in it, that it all is going somewhere and that we can go right with it, that whatever comes, falls within His all-knowing care; and, however sad the moment, suppose you believe that moment still is God-given to you to move you to a higher, deeper region. Just suppose you believe that - would you say it makes a difference in the way you live your life? The answer is wonderfully obvious, too.

When we do not learn to believe, we fail the one essential charge of what it means to be a completed human being, to reach both the world and self, the touchable and tangible, and to walk on yonder mountains with the thrill of all that draws us up above the passing uncertainties of what the earth is now, was then, and will be evermore. There is a madness loose within the world, and its cause and name are both the same: We do not believe. We have not anchored who we are. We are attracted by and attach ourselves to nothing and thereby become prey for everything. Is it any wonder that so many hearts are broken and hopes unfulfilled and we tiptoe closer to international oblivion and personal ennui?

So what better time, should all that be even partially true, to begin a series of sermons on the ancient credo of the Christian faith, the "I Believe" of the Apostles Creed? And through this coming year all the way through next spring, when the autumn leaves are falling and when the freezing cold of winter snow will keep you locked indoors and when the thaw begins to come and the crocus begin to rise and blossom once again, from the pulpit of Southminster, we will still be digging for the depth of God and Christ within the Creed. Today we begin the search with the opening words of "I Believe" - "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth." Oh!--If the world could only say it and mean it!

Now I have no intention of trying to persuade you to believe the way I do, or even to ask you to believe it all the way those who formed the Creed believed. My purpose will be to share with you the power and to dig and search and grow. My highest hope of all is that next spring each of us will focus on what we believe and find our faith renewed.

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In the form in which we have it, it was not finalized until nine centuries following the death of Jesus. It does, however, have ancient claim and approximates the earliest expressions of what Christ's people came to say they believed.

There is a well-known medieval document which tells of the time ten days after the Ascension when the disciples were gathered and were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they began to speak. Peter said - so the legend goes - "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." And Andrew said, "And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." James added, "who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary". And John said, "suffered under Pontius Pilate" - And Thomas, James, Barnabas, Thaddeus and all added their parts until Matthias, the newest of the twelve, elected to take the place of Judas Iscariot, added "I believe in the life eternal". The legend is no doubt untrue, or at least exaggerated.

There are statements of what the church believed within the scripture. Each of the apostles no doubt taught and testified to what they did believe. Romans speaks about the "form of doctrine delivered to you", and "aspects of the principles of the doctrine of Christ". Paul in I Corinthians 15 lays out his expression of the Creed, the faith he received and in which he stood. By 100 A.D. there was what eventually was called "The Roman Symbol" to guide the Church and its essential articles of faith. The reason why the wording of the Apostles Creed became firm and even final was that as the Church became organized and expanded, it was necessary to define what the faith was. The original purpose was to proscribe what it was a person had to believe before he was baptized into the faith. Without a creed, anybody believes anything and everybody ends up believing nothing.

Now to recapitulate: We have declared the necessity of belief, the firm foundation of what it is that we do believe - now let us go on to speak in these remaining moments about the first article of the Creed: I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

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I believe. I often say that if you hear and understand the first verse of the scripture, you have the one essential ingredient you cannot live in peace without. There is a choice, and I call to your attention that when and if you affirm "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth", you have made a choice. With all the scientific and historical arguments falling into line, you have made a choice. You have said the world was made, created with a purpose. You have already decided there is One who has the power to create; to make a world ex nihilo - out of nothing - and ipso facto, if there is the One who has that power, then of course all else falls within the realm of possibility. The greatest act of faith is to believe that God made the world. Individual life and death and resurrection of the body and miracles of healing and the idea of salvation, the forgiveness, love and power of God, each and all are secondary. The primary article of faith is to say there is a God and that that God made the world.

Well, "How do you know it?", the sceptic might ask. "How do you prove it?", the agnostic adds. Did you ever notice that the Bible never bothers to question or debate or defend the existence of God? To the writers of the Scripture, as to avid believers in our modern time, the existence of God was and is as self-evident as the existence of the self and the world.

Now I have never been persuaded that you can argue a person into believing in God, whether that person be another or yourself. Faith itself is a gift, understood and mediated no doubt by a series of circumstances which in part can be documented and described. But arguments for the existence of God are largely academic matters, helpful for the curious of mind, but largely inconsequential in the matter of whether we believe in God or not.

There are some classical proofs for the existence of God: of momentous interest and importance. But normally they convince only those who are already convinced that their conviction is well founded, reasonable, and consistent with what is known and believed elsewhere. The unbeliever remains unconvinced; and whether it be Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Feuerbach or you, the most which is ever gained is the admission that God is a theoretical possibility and while the agnostic cannot disprove His existence, he cannot prove the existence either.

Now this is not the kind of thing which the most of us go around worrying about day by day. More often we work on the assumption that God is there or He is not there. The proofs for God's existence are interesting however, and who knows what God might use to work His way into the heart and mind of the unbeliever. I shall sketch them with alarming brevity, in hopes that your mind and faith might begin to move again:

1. The first of the classical proofs for the existence of God is the ontological proof, original with St. Anselm, the Eleventh Century Archbishop of Canterbury and a marvelous Christian man. It is terribly cerebral and unbelievably complex, but what it says is that since the idea of God's being is present in the mind of man, it had to originate

somewhere outside of the finite and imperfect existence. The very fact that we have the idea of a Being greater than which there cannot be, means that the Greater Being exists and originates the idea of His own existence - Else where does the idea of God originate in the first place.

Feuerbach, Freud and Marx would rise in unison to say that the idea originates in a projection from within the human mind - an illusion they would call it; but the ontologist would answer even there the idea must have a source outside the mind to which it tends and from which it originates. Anselm mentions the Psalmist who wrote "The fool hath said in his heart there is no God" - but even the fool can understand what kind of being is greater than all others, Anselm replies. To mention God at all implies that He exists. Okay - Got that? - the ontological proof.

2. The cosmological argument is a little less ethereal and is the concern of our scripture reading from Genesis. Originating there and from thinkers as diverse as Plato and Aquinas, this argument simply declares that since the world - the cosmos - is here, a creator behind it is automatically implied. It is the Psalmist saying, "When I consider the heavens, what is man?". Aquinas argues that God is logically necessary - How else did or could the world have come to be?

3. The third classical proof, the teleological, follows exactly at this point, the famous watch and watchmaker argument of William Paley, the celebrated Christian apologist of the latter Eighteenth Century. Paley said, "Suppose in stumbling across a field I came upon a watch, a clock, in working order - all parts individual, all parts working in common. What am I to think about how the watch got there in the first place? When I inspect its several

parts and see it work together keeping time - would I not then conclude that someone had made that watch for its individual purpose? And would I not be reasonable in assuming that even if it did not always work the way it was intended and, even if I had not seen it being made, that a watchmaker was at work sometime before I got there?" The basic purpose and design of the universe, he concluded, makes it wise and reasonable to assume a cosmic watchmaker of the world. Right? The only way in which Paley's argument could be unconvincing would be to the one who refuses to listen to its power.

4. The fourth argument for the existence of God is the moral argument, best known in Immanuel Kant, the consummate German philosopher in the Nineteenth Century. Kant rethought the entire question and, by the way, rejected all three of the arguments we have mentioned. Yet he argued that proof for the existence of God originates in the moral sphere. What he meant was that our search for goodness and the supreme good in particular points to the existence of a supreme goodness from which all moral goodness comes and to which it all returns. Life and the search for goodness is meaningless unless it is related to the supreme good by which it is judged and for which it was made. Goodness originates with God.

5. The last classical proof of God's existence is the one which has always meant the most to me - what we used to call the anthropological argument and what A. E. Taylor calls the argument from religious experience. Were I a non-believer I have to feel my greatest hurdle and my essential contradiction would be the record of the religious experience of God's people throughout history and among the ones I know today, those who testify to the power and peace of God's presence.

I could say, were I an unbeliever, that they all are duped and lulled by this opiate of the people, but surely that could not be enough. It would cause me to wonder when I saw the devotion of perfectly sane and moral beings called together by a common experience of what it means to believe in God. To be sure, the Church has not always acted consistent with the expression of its faith. To be sure, individual Christians often belie the strength of their faith by the way they often act. But still . . . the power of what belief in God has meant in the long, slow unfolding mystery of the universe would astound me, were I an unbeliever. The fifth and last classical proof is the argument of religious experience.

Now what have we said in recapitulating these classical arguments for the existence of God? . . . We have said that from time immemorial with varying degrees of success, the believer has argued for the existence of God, giving credence to belief itself, establishing support for those who wonder and waver, giving the willing enquirer something to hold on to, but largely incapable of converting the unbeliever - not be argument alone.

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Now surely someone present within the sound of my voice is asking, "Why? Why do some people not believe? If God is the God you say He is, why has He been so largely unsuccessful in persuading the vast world of men that He is and that He is present and that He is good?"

One of the reasons why we do not believe enough is that we are not willing to trust enough; that is, to believe in someone/something else means that we believe less in ourselves. Let me give it to you in a humorous form, and then we will take you deeper.

A story went around several years ago to the effect that a man fell off the edge of a cliff and was hurtled downward to certain death when miraculously he caught onto a tree that was growing out of the side of the cliff, and precariously he swung back and forth. When he realized he was temporarily safe, he called out to the top: "Hello, up there. Can you help me?". So the story goes, a voice came back saying, "Fear not, John. This is the voice of the Lord. I will take care of you. You can trust in me." Upon which, the terrified man called back up, "Who did you say it was?" "This is the voice of the Lord. Just trust me and I will take care of you." "Are you sure?", John said. "How do I know it is you?" The voice came back saying, "Just let go of the tree and trust me. After all, this is the voice of the Lord." And then the man cried out again: "Is there anyone else up there?"

Suppose I tell you that my friend Ralph is good. You would probably want to know what I mean by "good". I would tell you he is kind to his wife, honest in his dealings at his work, concerned for the poor and the weak, supports his church and nation, and that he visits Mayview Hospital every Tuesday night. Still, you could ask how I can be sure he is good. Perhaps all those items are trimmings. Maybe he has fooled everybody. Maybe he needs to do those things to overcome a sense of deep inferiority.

You know what I would do? Can you guess my final argument? I would say, "That's fine. I told you what I know, now I will introduce him to you. You get to know him," I would say, "then you can tell me whether he is good and kind and true." The ultimate test is the test of your experience.

To believe a thing means to acknowledge, but to believe in a thing means to trust it and to give yourself up into its care. Pascal, the noted

French mathematician and philosopher of the Seventeenth Century, said it is like a wager - you must learn to take the risk and bet your life upon it.

I would not want you to miss it. Not so much that you might miss eternity, but that you might miss today or that you might miss tomorrow, or that you might waste it all scurrying around after whatever it is you need to scurry after, dodging, hiding in the corner of your garden. Christ came to bring us life, and I want you to have it. Now and evermore. Amen.

This sermon is printed as preached from the Southminster pulpit, and is not edited for publication.