

“AS WE BELIEVE, SO WE SING”
I: ‘I BELIEVE IN GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER . . .’
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
July 11, 2010

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

April 28, 1968 was a very special day in my life. It was the day I was confirmed right here in this church at that very chancel rail. I was in a class that also included Artie Cameron, Robin McCool, Donna Mercer and others, and I remember that I knelt down near that end - we were kneeling in alphabetical order, so I was near the beginning. I remember that a family friend made the white dress that I wore that day. Everything about my confirmation experience holds great memories for me.

So great, that I try every year to offer that kind of experience for the confirmands with whom I am blessed to work. And you know what? Some of the things that Rev. Thomas taught us in that class are the very same things I teach today. I've come to find out that not everyone learned some of the things we learned in that class. We learned about the seasons of the church year, and the colors that go with each season. We explored the wonders of our hymnal. We talked a lot about what we believe as United Methodist and why. And we, of course, memorized some important things - among them, the Apostles' Creed.

We joined the millions of new believers, who, since Christianity began, have done just that. The creed was actually written for new believers, who, at the point they made their profession of faith publicly said those words to tell those who were listening what they believed.

Once you learn the Apostles' Creed, it stays with you. This week, I was with a group of people, and one of them, a person who grew up in the church, but does not currently go to church, and is, at this point in his life, not religious at all, asked me what I was preaching about this week. I told him that I was starting this series on the Apostles' Creed; that I was starting with the first phrase of it. And then, with a twinkle in my eye, I said: "What is it?" And without hardly batting an eye, he goes, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." I about passed out! I'll bet he hasn't said the Apostles' Creed in twenty years, and it came back to him in a split second.

In my research this week, I was reminded again of why it is called the Apostles' Creed. There was a legend from probably around the fifth century, that, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, each of the twelve apostles dictated part of

it. True or not, whoever wrote it, it offers us a succinct way to state our faith.

The Apostles' Creed - in its lines we hear our story, who we are, what we believe - our past, our present and our future. That's why I decided to make it the basis of the summer sermon series, and I'm excited that, with the help of other staff members and lay members, we're going to add some creative twists.

So today, indeed, we start with the first phrase of the creed: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."

How do you begin to describe who God is? I could preach a thousand sermons and not do that justice. It's hard to get your mind around all the aspects of God who is, and what God has done and continues to do. Have you ever had a child ask you about God? Then you know how hard it can be to answer that question.

One mother, by the name of Buff Spires, wrote this: "When my young son Doug was looking at a full moon, he asked, 'Mom, is God is the moon?' I explained (she said) that God is everywhere. 'Is he in my tummy?' Doug wanted to know. 'Well, sort of,' I responded, not sure where these questions were leading. Then Doug declared, 'God wants a banana!'" (On-line, Bible.org)

Out of the mouths of babes!

So how do we begin to describe God? Well, the Apostles' Creed gives us a great way to do it, by looking at God as Creator. For as we do, as we look at God who creates, we will begin to understand so much more about him as well.

It's too bad that in recent years this world has gotten so hung up on the details of creation - you know, creationism vs. evolution. It's too bad that we've gotten hung up on reading line for line the creation story literally, because we miss the beauty of the story, and I think, too often, we miss its message.

I want to read something to you that I discovered this week, that will, I think, help us to really understand God through creation itself. It is words of a Dr. B. B. Warfield. Listen to how he sees it:

"A glass window stands before us. We raise our eyes and see the glass, we note the quality, and observe its defects; we speculate on its composition. Or, we look straight through it on the great prospect of land and sea and sky beyond. So there are two ways of looking at the world. We may see the world and absorb

ourselves in the wonder of nature. That is the scientific way. Or we may look right through the world and see God behind it. That is the religious way.

The scientific way of looking at the world is not wrong any more than the glass-manufacturer's way of looking at the window. This way of looking at things has its very important uses. Nevertheless the window was placed there not to be looked at but to be looked through; and the world has failed of its purpose unless it too is looked through and the eye rests not on it but on its God." (Ibid.)

I think Dr. Warfield is onto something. I think as we look at creation and through creation we will see God, and come to understand some things about God's nature.

The first thing - the very first thing creation tells us about God, is that God brings order out of chaos. In the beginning, chaos reigned - the earth was a formless void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. Through the breath of His Spirit, God created and brought order to that chaos. He made sunlight and moon, He made sky and sea, He made plants and flowers and vegetables, He made animals and human beings - He brought order and life out of chaos in the beginning.

As God did then, God does still today. The God who created the heavens and the earth, still creates today. The God who brought order out of chaos and darkness still does that today, in big ways and small ways. Perhaps you are one who knows how He did that in your life. Or you are one who needs to be reminded that the chaos you are in the midst of right now, will not have the final word - God will.

Who is God? God is the One who brings order out of chaos.

But there is more. God is the One who is the source of everything, and the One who called all that He created good. All of the beauty and wonder of life comes from the hand of God. Everything in our world is of God. That person sitting next to you; the air that you're breathing, the music that you're hearing, the baby that you're holding, the rain that fell so wonderfully yesterday, your heart that's beating to keep you alive - all from the hands of God. God the Creator, makes everything, and makes everything in the perfect time and place.

Jean Paul Sartre, the famous French philosopher, said this at the end of his life, much to the consternation of some of his philosopher friends. "I do not feel that I am the product of chance, a speck of dust in the universe, but someone who was expected, prepared, prefigured. In short, a being whom only a Creator could put here, and this idea of a creating hand refers to God." (On-line, sermonillustrations.com)

It took Sartre a long time to embrace what the writers of the Apostles' Creed knew so well - God is the Creator of all, even each one of us, who were, in Sartre's words, expected and prepared for.

So first, God is the One who brings order out of chaos; secondly, God is the creator of all that is, and ever will be, and thirdly, everything that God has created is good, and worthy and valuable. Wasn't it wonderful to hear the creation story read, and every once in a while to hear the words, "And God saw that it was good"?

That tells us so much about the nature of God - how much God loves that which He has created. Never forget that! Never forget the joy that God finds in His creation, and the joy that God wants who and what He has created to know!

Do you know that God sees you and says "good!"? Do you know that? God smiles on His creation, God sees the beauty and value of His creation, God knows the worth of His creation. That means you! Do you know how much He loves you? Do you know how valuable you are to Him?

I told you a long time ago about something that happened to Maya Angelou, but it bears repeating today. She was a college student, twenty-five at the time, when one of her teachers, a man named Frederick Wilkerson, asked her to read to him. She says that at that time she considered herself to be very erudite, very worldly. Dr. Wilkerson asked her to read a section from the book *Lessons in Truth*.

Listen to her words about what happened:

"The section ended with these words: 'God loves me.' I read the piece and closed the book, and the teacher said, 'Read it again.' I pointedly opened the book, and I sarcastically read, 'God loves me.' He said, 'Again.' After about the seventh repetition I began to sense that there might be truth in the statement, that there was a possibility that God really did love me. Me, Maya Angelou. I suddenly began to cry at the grandness of it all. I knew that if God loved me, then I could do wonderful things, I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything." (Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*)

Maya Angelou learned about her Creator God that day - how valuable she was, how worthy she was, how loved she was. Do you know that? Do you know how much God loves you? That's who God is, the Father Almighty, father and mother to us all, a Creator in love with all His creation.

So, from this historic creed, we know that God created order out of chaos, God created all that is at just the right time and in just the right place, and that He calls all that He has created good, and loves and values each and everything He has

created.

But the best is yet to come - because, for years and years and years, even though God the creator reached out to His creation, they rejected Him over and over again, so finally, He sent His most perfect gift ever - His Son Jesus. If you want to know who God is, look to Jesus, and you will know the heart of God - sacrificing, serving, seeking.

That's where we'll go next week - to God with us, Emmanuel, Jesus the Christ.

But for today, as we finish, I want to take us back to the poetry of creation, albeit in a little different way. James Weldon Johnson, a wonderful African-American writer, put the creation story into his own words, and I want you to hear it. I think it's wonderful. After that, I invite you to enjoy a creative litany - the music, "How Great Thou Art", a beautiful response to God's creation, and a slide show celebrating it.

First, "The Creation," by James Weldon Johnson.

And God stepped out on space, and he looked around and said:
I'm lonely - I'll make me a world.

As far as the eye of God could see, darkness covered everything,
blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp.

Then God smiled, and the light broke, and the darkness rolled up
on one side, and the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!

Then God reached out and took the light in his hands.
And God rolled the light around in his hands until he made the sun;
And he set that sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun God gathered it up
in a shining ball and flung it against the darkness,
spangling the night with the moon and stars.
Then down between the darkness and the light he hurled the world;
And God said: That's good!

Then God himself stepped down - and the sun was on his right hand,
and the moon was on his left;
The stars were clustered about his head, and the earth was under his feet.
And God walked, and where he trod his footsteps hollowed the valleys

out and bulged the mountains up.

Then he stopped and looked and saw that the earth was hot and barren.
So God stepped over to the edge of the world and he spat out the seven seas -
He batted his eyes, and the lightning flashed -
He clapped his hands, and the thunder rolled -
And the waters above the earth came down, the cooling waters came down.

Then the green grass sprouted, and the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky, and the oak spread out his arms,
The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
and the rivers ran down to the sea;
and God smiled again, and the rainbow appeared,
and curled itself around his shoulder.

Then God raised his arm and he waved his hand over the sea
and over the land,
And he said: Bring forth! Bring forth!
And quicker than God could drop his hand, fishes and fowls, and
beasts and birds swam the rivers and the seas,
roamed the forests and the woods, and split the air with their wings.
And God said: That's good!

Then God walked around, and God looked around on all that he had made.
He looked at his sun, and he looked at his moon, and he looked at his
little stars; he looked on his world with all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down - on the side of a hill where he could think:
by a deep, wide river he sat down; with his head in his hands,
God thought and thought, till he thought: I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This great God, like a mammy bending over her baby,
kneeled down in the dust
toiling over a lump of clay
till he shaped it in his own image;

Then into it he blew the breath of life,

And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.