

January 15, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

Apostles' Creed Series: II. "Made on Purpose"

Psalm 8; Psalm 10:1-4, 14:1

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I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord: Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, dead and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church: the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

In our sermons this winter we're looking together at **The Apostles' Creed** -- perhaps the most widely used theological summary of the Christian faith since the time of Jesus' himself (with, perhaps, the exception of the Nicene Creed). It's a statement that goes all the way back to the teaching of Jesus' original disciples (the "Apostles") and was probably more or less in its present form within 200 years of Jesus' time, with a few additional changes in the following four or five centuries. [See *The Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*]

It's a statement that speaks very little about *the content of Jesus' life* but focuses instead on broader themes of faith relating to the work of God as the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God yet revealed in three persons.

So, for example, the Creed ends by speaking about the work of God as Holy Spirit (a more modern translation of the name "Holy Ghost")

And in the middle, it speaks about the work of God as Son – *Jesus' birth, death and resurrection*.

And in the opening statement it speaks about God's work as Father: *the almighty and loving creator*. So the Creed begins:

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY
MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

And Last Sunday we began to think about this opening phrase, and as we did so I shared a couple of reasons why I believe, and a couple of reasons why many people find it hard to believe – or even stop believing.

So: Reasons to believe? There are many, but I shared two that were deeply personal to me.

- I spoke about math (I'm a math major!) as a language which fills the universe. The ability of the whole universe to be digitized, that is, to be described in terms of two numbers, 1's and 0's, is something that I cannot believe – *it takes too much faith* -- as happening by mere chance or accident.

- And I spoke of Love – the fact that for believers *and atheists alike*, meaning in life is so often found in loving relationships, which begs the question “why?” For me the most satisfactory answer is the simple answer that a personal God, passionate for relationship, made us that way; God made us for relationship, it’s in our DNA; relationship not just with each other, but with our Maker himself.

So I shared some reasons to believe, as well as some obstacles in the way of belief. Among the obstacles?

- Well, clearly there’s the huge philosophical and theological, and deeply personal, problem of evil and suffering and pain (which we touched on briefly).
- And then, too, there are the problematic and contentious debates of the past 150 years on the relationship between science and the Bible – and especially between science and common interpretations of the opening chapters of the Bible in Genesis (the story of creation).

And today, it’s the last matter that I want to follow up on as we continue to think about God as the Maker of Heaven and earth!

What I said last week was this: that so much of the conflict between science and the Bible arises because of what I perceive as a misunderstanding by both unbelievers and believers about the nature and purpose of Genesis 1 (and indeed, Genesis 2 and 3 as well)

The purpose of Genesis 1 – the story of Creation (“*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth*”) is simply NOT to tell us “*HOW* God made or created the earth,” or “*HOW LONG* it took.” These are interesting questions, to be sure – But, in my opinion, simply not the questions that the opening chapters of Genesis are intending to address; not God’s purpose in giving us the account in Genesis!

Or, let me put it another way.

If God wanted to do it in 6 days of 24 hours, *that’s fine with me.*

When scientists talk about the Big Bang, they talk about 5 epochs or eras taking place *within the first second!!* In fact, they believe that a huge amount of creative activity takes place in *the first few trillionths of a second!*

So, if scientists believe this, I have no problem believing that God *could have* snapped his fingers and made everything happen in a ‘split second’ – “just like that.”

BUT, at the same time, if God wanted to take his time (millions or billions of years) – *then that’s fine with me too.*

A couple of years ago, the choir from the DC elementary school where my wife was teaching performed in a Christmas event at the Kennedy Center for Vice President Joe Biden. Apparently, Vice President Biden was so pleased with the kids and their singing that he asked if they’d be available to sing at an event at his official residence the very next week! They were thrilled! And when the choir director said, “Sure,” Mr. Biden turned to his aide (*rather like John Luc Picard in Star Trek: “make it so!”*) and said -- “Make it happen” And it happened! It was so!!

I have no clue what went on behind the scenes to actually. “make it happen”; I’m sure there were lots of calls and e-mails, and re-arranging of plans by parents and kids and teachers.

But in some sense the processes were irrelevant. The issue was this – that this was the Vice-President, and in a beautiful way, that brought indescribable pleasure to lots of young boys and girls and their director, he used his power to provide an experience and that built a memory and a relationship that they will never forget.

In fact, when we turn to Scripture as a whole, the most important truth about time (about “How Long?”) – is spelled out in the Psalms and Prophets: which constantly tell us to “wait on the Lord!” (See the glorious passage in Isaiah 40:31 they who “wait upon the Lord,” will renew their strength). We humans always seem to want “the quick fix,” OR the “miraculous moment.” But most of the time, God is slower than we think or want and calls on us to wait, and have patience. And not only that, but in Psalm 90:4 and also in 2 Peter 3:8, we’re told that time means something completely different to God than to us: “With God, a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as a day”

In Other Words: what the Bible surely teaches is that if God wants to create the universe *in a split second*, then God can do it. But, if God wanted to *spin it out over time*, then God can do that *too!* Fast or slow, it’s all the same to God, the one who is the Almighty Father: **the Ruler** – who chose to create, and then did so! and **the Relater** — who made the universe in order to be in relationship with you and me.

In fact, these, to me, are among the first great and critical truths in Genesis that are really important. Not “How?” or “How long?” but that **God is Ruler** and **Relater** (a personal God, passionate about relationship).

God as Ruler speaks, and things happen! In Genesis 1, God says,

- “Let there be Light” – and there was light (fast or slow)
- “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. And it was so . . .”

These are the words of a RULER! Someone in charge and who does this (who creates), because he wants to be in a loving, caring, parental RELATIONSHIP with you and me – which is increasingly emphasized in Genesis 2. Listen (Genesis 2)

⁷then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

⁸And the Lord God (*out of sheer grace*) planted a garden (*not a wasteland, not a desert but a fruitful garden*) in Eden in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed (*this is God’s intention: this is where God wants us to be, in a place that is wonderful*).

⁹Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

- (pleasant to the sight means God’s passion is for us to experience beauty
- and good for food means God’s passion is to provide)

How critical it is for us to know this in a world in which there are many forces and relationships that seem to have power over our lives:

- forces that are political, economic, international, or personal
- or relationships out of control: with families, or friends or colleagues each, seeming to have the power to rob us of life.

How critical it is for us to know that God is the **Relater** who not only longs to be in **relationship** with us, and is on our side, but that God is **The Ruler** -- whose power is greater than any other *and that, above all the change and chaos down below* the powerful and wise **Ruler** who created the Universe remains unshaken.

This is the kind of relationship – a **Relationship with a Ruler** – that every single human being needs in their lives in order to thrive! And what God wants us to know through Genesis is that we can find both this Ruler and this relationship in God!

But there's more to it than that. If Genesis teaches us that God is both **Ruler and Relater**, then it also teaches us that *we* – as human beings – are both **Remarkable and Responsible**.

- We've been made in a remarkable way: in God's image
- and we've been given responsibility -- and will be held accountable--to treat God and each other and the whole world that God has created in a manner that will be pleasing to God

So listen again to Genesis in chapter one and verse twenty six:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind *in our image, according to our likeness*."

That's you and me! Made in God's image! Remarkable!

Made unlike any other creature on the earth, made to be creative, and powerful – like God! Made to live in relationship with God ! And with each other: because whoever '*the other*' is, they too are made in God's image; every single person, of every race and creed and economic level.

The "I have a Dream" speech and message of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is so important, and still resonates today, 54 years later, *not just because* it is the message and promissory note of our Declaration of Independence and founding fathers – though it is – but it resonates precisely because it is the message of Genesis 1! – All people were made in the image of God, and therefore have been "*endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,*" among them, "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.*" God could have made us in another way (for example, as puppets in a string) – but God didn't!!

SO The promissory note was written first by God, in Genesis who holds us every Bible believer, to account, to deliver on the note and to treat not only *ourselves* as remarkable (and those who are like us), but also, all others too.

Which is one reason why Jesus not only tells us -- to love our enemies, but *to call no one* "a fool or an idiot"! (see Matthew 5:22,44). The person you want to call "fool or idiot" was made in God's image too.

So what Genesis says to us is not only that God is Ruler and Relater
But that *we're* remarkable! *They're* remarkable! *You're* remarkable!
And so too is everything else that God has made.

In fact, we are so **Remarkable** that God holds us **Responsible**, not just to take care of each other but to take care of the whole earth!!

So in Genesis God not only commands Adam and Eve

“to have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”(Genesis 1:26)

but God places the man on the earth,

“***to till the earth*** and ***keep it.***” (Genesis 2:15)

To ***till*** the earth means to make it as productive as possible. Use it! Develop it! Make it Productive! But then to ***keep it*** (till it and keep it) means = “***to protect.***” It’s not about *possession* but about *protection!*

Just as in Britain, some of the castles are called “keeps” – places of protection; just as in soccer, you have ‘the goal-**keeper**’ who is the one who protects the goal; just as in other places in the Bible, God is called “our keeper,” that is our protector. So God calls us both to ***use*** the earth and ***protect*** it; to be stewards of everything entrusted to our care

And for all of this God hold us to account:

Genesis 2:16-17 And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, *for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.*”

A lot of ink has been spent trying to figure out what exactly *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* is all about. And I’m not sure anyone has been successful. *Nor am I sure that it really matters*, because what is beyond a shadow of a doubt is that what God is saying to Adam and Eve, *and to us* is that the choices we make, the way we listen to God’s word, God’s call, God’s commands – *or ignore them* – have enormous consequences, are matters of life and death. And precisely because we are **remarkable** creatures made in God’s image, and not mere puppets on a string, we are going to be **held responsible**: our decisions are matters of life and death!

Which would be a very scary thought indeed, if we did not also know that the Ruler who made us Remarkable and Responsible is also the Relater: the God who longs to be in **relationship** with us, and will give us one chance after another, grace upon grace upon grace, to help us make the right choices, to get life right, to fulfil the purpose for which we were made.

I BELIEVE – IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH. I believe in the Ruler, and Relater, who sees us as Remarkable and Responsible. This is the message of the opening chapters of Genesis: good news, on which we can and must stake our lives.

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