

January 22, 2017

The National Presbyterian Church

Absolute Allegiance

John 14:1-9, Colossians 1:11-20;

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In our sermons through the winter, we're thinking through some core Christian beliefs with the help of a short and ancient statement of faith called the Apostles' Creed.

Clearly, we're doing this at time of great change, and on a weekend (Inauguration Weekend) of great importance in our nation; and towards the end of this sermon I want to come back to this critical moment. But to begin with, let me move us out of the present and into the eternal: back to the Apostles' Creed, which lifts us up beyond the world, to focus on God; on one God in three persons – the Holy Trinity.

So -- If you look at the last part of the Creed you'll see that it has to do with **God as Holy Spirit** (or *Holy Ghost* – the same thing). The Holy Spirit is the practical and powerful presence of God in the world (*we'll be getting to this part of the Creed more fully in March*).

And, then, if you look back to the first part of the Creed, you'll see that it has to do with **God as the Powerful and Personal Creator**:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth" (we focused on this section over the past 2 Sundays).

And then, if you look at the second (middle) part, the longest part, you'll see that it focuses on **God as the Son** – Jesus, the Son of God. And *this is the section* to which we begin to turn today (and will continue to consider for the next few weeks).

In fact, today I want us to think re the opening words of this second section that says:

*I believe in Jesus, Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit)
and born of the Virgin Mary*

Now, if you read these words slowly, you realize that here are five or six affirmations, each of which raises big questions about what exactly we believe:

- about the person of Jesus: his uniqueness and divinity as the one and "only Son of God" – really?
- about his conception : "conceived by God's Holy Spirit" (with no human father; really?)
- about the birth of Jesus: "born of a virgin" (really?)
- about embracing Jesus as Christ and Lord ("Christ" means King, and "Lord" means Emperor). Both titles constitute a call for our total and absolute allegiance to this person! (is that really what we believe and want to do?)

So lots of questions are raised by these words. And this morning I want to explore them briefly by placing them in the context of the big storyline of all of Scripture. And to do this we need to begin at the beginning.

In fact, last week, we also began at the beginning! And as we did so, we looked at the opening chapters of Genesis, about Creation: not so much to ask “*How long it took*” for God to create the earth; nor to ask “*How God did it*” (what process, if any, God used). But to see if there were any great truths given to us by God in the opening chapters of the Bible that were crucial to *our understanding of God, and our understanding of ourselves as human beings*. And, indeed there are!

What we saw in Genesis, for example, *about God* – was a portrayal of God as the Powerful and Personal Creator; the indisputable *ruler* of all of creation, while at the same time being a God who was passionate about entering into *relationships* with the human beings he had created – with you and me!

And further, what we saw *about ourselves* was that when God created people (you and me), he did so “in his image” (Genesis 1:26): you and I are made *on purpose in the Image of God!* Which, at the least, makes us both (1) *remarkable* and (2) *responsible*?

God could have chosen to make us in some other way: as puppets on a string; as play toys with no real power of choice; as creatures merely of instinct – *neither remarkable nor fully responsible for our choices*. But God didn’t!

Instead God said to all of us:

***“You’re like me! You have the power of choice, and your choices have eternal significance, just as mine do. Make the right choices and you live! Make a wrong choice and you die!*”**

This may at first seem harsh. But in Genesis 1:16, on the one hand, God provides multiple possible good choices. He says: “*you may freely eat of all of the trees in the garden,*” – presumably including the fruit of the “tree of life”! While in Genesis 1:17, on the other hand, God provides *just one possible* wrong choice: “*but the day you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die.*” (The Apostle Paul reflects on this deadly consequence when he says in his letter to Rome, that “*the wages of sin is death!*” Romans 3:23.

And the truly sad thing, of course, is this: that like Adam and Eve (their story is our story), every one of us has made the wrong choice. Not just once, but often, and we, like them, are worthy of death! – which Genesis understands in two ways.

- One of which is simply death as we know it – physical death; the death of the body. We wear out physically and we die, because of our choices, our sin.
- And then the second way is spiritual: spiritual death: death that comes when we’re cut off from the source of life that nourishes both our bodies and our souls.

Let me illustrate this by saying that in some senses, our lives are like **the life of the moon or the earth: --** any radiance or life we have is reflective and secondary, not innate. The life and light of the moon (and our planet too) is derived from its relationship with the brightness and power of the sun: without the Sun, we all die!

Of course, we see this most clearly with the moon because we stand outside of it. We all know that for one second the moon were to choose to divorce its life either from the sun or the earth, it would lose all its brightness in a flash, and hurtle off into space and oblivion.

And we're like that in relation to God! Without God we simply cannot live. But we deny it or resist it, or just plain forget it!

So the punishment of Death is not so much the judgment of a vindictive God, as it is a declaration of the truth: of how it is!!

- Our life is a gift of God, and always will be
- And when we deny that, or ignore that, or act as if God's presence or word were optional extras, then, implies Genesis, we are choosing "Death," both physical and spiritual.

And this "Death" is represented in Genesis 3 by *separation, confusion, decay and isolation, and by the breaking down of both human relationships and our relationship with God* – most fully expressed by the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden; from the intimate presence of God; from the Source and Place of life!

And with no apparent way back in: Genesis 3 ends with the story of angels standing guard with swords crossed at the gates of Eden!

Which all leaves us with this question: WHAT'S GOD GOING TO DO about these choices we've made? Will God do anything? Will the Personal, Creator God, the Ruler and Relater

- Leave us to suffer the justified and deadly consequences of our decisions?
- Just sit there, and withdraw his love?
- Wipe his hands clean of the mess we've made, and walk away?
- Ignore humanity 'made in his image' while he stays in paradise all by himself?

Is this what God chooses to do?

To which, both the Scriptures and the Apostles' Creed cry out in unison: "**NO!**" That's *not* what God does. Instead

- God chooses to keep on loving
- God chooses to chase after those who choose to leave him,
- God chooses to give them a 2nd chance.

And he does so in a powerful and dramatic fashion.

Which brings us back to the Apostles' Creed, and to what Christians have always believed, that like a parent chasing after a willful child, (in love), God chose to humble himself, and enter our universe, the very universe that he himself created, and to look for us, to seek us out, on our own turf, and to call us back to the true path of life.

One of my favorite movies, now almost 30 years old, is "**Stand and Deliver.**"

It's the true story about a teacher, the late Jaime Escalante, who chose to enter and stay in an East Los Angeles inner city school, Garfield High, for 17 years, from 1974-1991, and taught Advanced Placement (AP) Math to kids whom no one else believed in.

And he succeeded.

By 1991, 570 of his students were taking AP exams, with remarkable rates of achievement. *He chose to love! He chose to come and stay, despite the personal cost.* He chose not to abandon those kids to the mess of multiple bad choices – *whether their own choices, or the messed up choices of their peers.*

And by his love and hard work and presence, lives were changed, given new purpose, and in some cases, *reclaimed from almost certain early death* guaranteed to those caught up in gang violence or drugs.

And this is what we believe God does for us. He doesn't send someone else. He doesn't delegate this to a flunky. ***But God himself*** comes to us and *stays* with us: to bring us back home; to restore our original purpose and the image of God within us; to bring life out of death – ***FOR US!***

And that's what the Apostles' Creed is calling us to affirm when we say we *believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary.*

Author, Madeleine L'Engle, in her book, *A Stone for a Pillow*, surely gets it right and when she says that

The virgin birth has never been a major stumbling block in my Christianity. It is far less mind boggling than that the God of all creation should stoop so low as to become one of us.

And scientist, Francis Collins, director of NIH (The National Institutes of Health) echoes her thoughts in an interview some years ago with the online magazine, *Salon*.

When he was asked, "How can you as a scientist accept some of these ideas in the Bible that cut so directly against the laws of nature?" and "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?"

He responded: I do. I have no trouble at all. Again, the big decision is, (DR: not "do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" – but) "Do you believe in God?" (DR: the creator God). If you believe in God, and if God is more than nature, then there's no reason that God could not ***stage an invasion into the natural world***, which, to our limited perspective, would appear to be a miracle.

<http://www.salon.com/books/int/2006/08/07/collins/> Monday, Aug 7, 2006.

Dr. Collins doesn't really seem to care if the miracle is a complete suspension of nature or a version of God's deeper laws that we as yet have not discovered. In either case, it's not the *Conception by the Holy Ghost*, that should bother us, or the *Virgin Birth itself* -- BUT the passion, and craziness, and riskiness of God's love!

A love that stoops down so low as to come to us in person! In the person of His only Son, he comes to us to be "the way and the truth and the life" – the one and only person who can destroy death, and bring us back to God.

That's what should bother us: such a love as this! And, then, following that, what should *also* bother us, is the claim on our lives that this love places!

Let me put it like this: if, indeed, the Creator God is so passionate about ***us*** and has come looking for ***us***, out of sheer grace: **How are we to respond?**

To which the Creed tells us *that the only appropriate response* is to name him both "Christ" and "Lord"!!

- Christ simply means ***King***
- And "Lord" was a title used for the emperors of Rome, which simply means ***boss***: the person who wields ***absolute authority*** over our lives; the one whose voice we listen to when we make our choices.

Is this what you believe? Is this who God is to you? Is this who Jesus is to you?

This is crucial: it's the only way to move back *from Death to life!* But it's also crucial and particularly important for these days in which we live as a nation. And especially with the election and inauguration of a new President! – Any new president, of any party!

- For some, these are Days of euphoria and high expectation.
- While, for others, these are Days of profound fear and heartfelt despair.

And within our congregation we have both kinds of people!

BUT What the Creed is telling us is this as it speaks about Jesus is that,

we have no right to concede to any political leader of any stripe or nation – no matter who he or she is --such power as to control our emotions or destiny, or to be in any sense our Savior!

- Our leaders -- are not our ultimate Lovers and Saviors!
- Our leaders -- do not control our life and death
- Our joys and our fears must never be in their hands!!

NO!! What we have been called to believe in the Creed is that the only true *Son of God and Savior*, who has the authority to create our joy is Jesus! And the only true Christ and King, Lord and Emperor, whom we are to fear – he, too, is Jesus!

Which is why the message of the angels at his birth rings eternally true:

Good News -- Great Joy! Fear Not!

I believe in God the Father (personal and relational)

Almighty (Ruler of all)

Maker of Heaven and Earth (outside nature, and in it too)

And in Jesus Christ (Jesus THE King, MY king)

God's Only Son (God's unique movement towards us)

Our Lord (our Boss)

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost (by God's decision)

And born of the Virgin Mary . . .

- God! Born into the world, like us.
- God! Chasing after us, despite our foolish delusion that we can go it alone!
- What kind of crazy love is this?

Return to him!

Because he loves you! He alone is Savior!

Return to him!

Because he alone is worthy of the absolute allegiance that the Creed calls for from us – as Lord.

Return to Him!

And find the freedom from death, and the life, that he alone can give.

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