March 5, 2017

Psalm 90:1-5

I Believe in God

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 90:1-5 Common English Bible

Lord, you have been our help, generation after generation. Before the mountains were born, before you birthed the earth and the inhabited world – from forever in the past to forever in the future, you are God. You return people to dust, saying, “Go back, humans,” because in your perspective a thousand years are like yesterday past, like a short period during the night watch. You sweep humans away like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning.

Prayer: In the silence of the stars and the heaving of the sea. Speak lord. In the chatter of a child and the words of a stranger. Speak lord. In the silence of this room and the calming of our hearts. Speak lord. Allow me to move aside and let your words to be spoken.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This is the first Sunday in Lent, which is the 40-day period of preparation for Easter. Lent began in the early days of the Christian Church and people would fast to inspire a deeper faith experience and appreciate the sacrifices and suffering Christ endured. Lent is a journey home to the heart of God and as with any journey we have to stop and notice which direction we are going so that we are going home to God. Our journey as a church family this Lent is to explore what we believe. We are using the Apostles’ Creed as our jumping off point. The Apostles’ Creed was designed to be said together in worship which is what we did today.

As the faith family said those words together, they had a shared identity. Now, folks didn’t have to sign in blood verifying that they believed exactly the same way about Jesus and forgiveness and resurrection, but saying the same words together was a worshipful expression of people whose lives had been totally transformed by the Bible and by the risen Jesus. Saying the creed together wasn’t a way of shutting doors, it was a way of throwing open doors into the very heart of life with God. The Apostles’ Creed didn’t get into too many specifics. There is room for many kinds of Christians, and there is definitely room for questions. In fact, tonight, I hope you will join us at 5 pm in Glory Be Hall as we talk about our questions and share together about our beliefs in God.

In ancient times, hundreds of Christians, under interrogation, refused to bow down to the empire’s gods, stood their ground and declared, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” and were executed for saying so[[2]](#footnote-3). It had not been so long before that those new converts had risked everything by choosing Christianity. New converts were instructed in the faith for months, they would fast from food and entertainment, and were prayed over. Then at the midnight Easter prayer vigil the new converts would wade out into a pool of water and they would be asked, “Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord?” They would be baptized, anointed with oil, dressed in a white robe, and given a drink of milk and honey as a symbol of their new life in Christ.[[3]](#footnote-4) When we say the Apostles’ Creed we join with the great 2,000 year-old story of believers, missionaries and martyrs. When I say I believe in God, I become part of something bigger than myself. I am attaching myself to something old.

But the Apostles’ Creed is just a tool. We read the Bible, we sing hymns, we ask questions and talk together about what we think to get to the heart of what we believe. The Creed reminds us that we are not sawed off out on a limb when we believe. I believe with you; you believe with me; we help each other to believe; we believe for each other when it’s hard to believe.[[4]](#footnote-5) We need one another. Ancestors, friends who are like us and friends who are not, saints of old, little children. We help one another believe. We help one another grow into our faith. We help one another correct those places where we have misunderstandings of God. We help one another believe when it is hard for us to believe.

We use the Apostles’ Creed to discover what we believe, and don’t believe, to figure out who we are and how to live because faith is what we give our heart to.[[5]](#footnote-6) Faith is how we view the world. It is like when Copernicus threw everyone for a loop when he said that the world wasn’t flat, our faith helps us remember that we are not the most important thing in the world. God is.

For centuries the Apostles’ Creed was important because a majority of Christians didn’t know how to read, so the Creed is the story of God’s love in the world. It tells the story of God first, then God creates; then God sends Jesus, who is born, dies, and is raised; and then the Holy Spirit dawns on the Church and its life.[[6]](#footnote-7) And it all starts with God. When we say we believe in God, we don’t simply mean we think a supreme being exists or we have spiritual feelings. We are saying that we commit ourselves to God. We give our hearts to God. God is our motivation. Our priorities, our time, our energy, our money, and our hearts are given to God. The writer Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* said “if we can determine what it is we give our heart to, then we will know what it is we believe” (62).

There was a preacher who was once talking to a longtime church member about belief. When the preacher asked, “What do you believe?” The church member said, “Well, I believe the same as the church.” The preacher asked, “What does the church believe?” and the church member said, “Well, they believe the same as me.” The preacher was getting frustrated, so the preacher asked one final question, “And what is it that you both believe?” The church member responded, “Well, I suppose the same thing.”

Now there are many in our world who don’t believe in God. They say that they want proof of God’s existence. The proof that I have for God’s existence is the changed lives of those who believe in God. It is Bill Holston who could have had a lucrative career in law but instead serves refugees who have no other advocate. It is the example of many in this place whose marriage was put back together through lots of work and prayer. It is the woman who continues to smile and shine with the joy of God in the face of adversity. It is Brenda and Carol, together for 37 years, and they share their love by loving this place. Brenda is one of our head ushers and Carol is one of our trustees and sings in the choir. The proof that I have for God’s existence is a church workday where amazing people come to paint fences and clean out sheds and share their love for God by loving this place. And at the same time we had youth and Confirmation kids and adults growing in their faith on a retreat. Yesterday was a good, busy day for Greenland Hills UMC.

Now, all Christians are not like Greenland Hills UMC Christians. There are Christians that people look at and they think, I don’t want to be a part of anything like that. I don’t want to say that I believe the same as racists and bigots. I don’t want to be a part of something that says I have to leave my brain at the door. I believe all people are loved by God and I believe in science and God. In the scopes monkey trial of 1925, William Jennings Bryan boasted that he was more interested in the rock of ages than in the age of rocks. Church folk hollered Amen, but rocks do have considerable age on them and the grander that age, the more God is glorified. Science does not put me on a path contrary to my faith. For me, the discoveries of science boggle my mind and God is not diminished. Instead, I realize how small the box is that I have tried to cram our immeasurable God.

It is important for us all to remember that doubt is not the opposite of belief or the enemy of belief. Doubt is exploring, asking why we believe something. When we believe, we are placing our trust in the witness of others. Maybe even the witness of ourselves when we have an experience of God.

God or no God, human beings will find reasons to oppress and kill one another. They will resist progress in ideas, they will justify their own prejudices, and act upon those prejudices.[[7]](#footnote-8) If we believe in God, our lives are different. So, maybe the issue isn’t a belief problem, but an unwillingness for our lives to be changed. Many of us would prefer to live without God.[[8]](#footnote-9) But we do so at our peril. 12 Step programs for addictions have as one of the first steps a commitment to a belief in a higher power. For those who reject even the word God, they must accept that they are not alone in this world. To recover from addictions, they must acknowledge that there is a higher power. We call it God.

When we say I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, we call God Father because Jesus called God Father. “Abba” Jesus said. A better translation is Daddy, intimate, tender. It is also a declaration of our allegiance and radical obedience that we serve God. We cling to the God who is the author of the universe who also calls each one of us beloved children.

As a Christian, I see God’s glory and creativity throughout creation.[[9]](#footnote-10) An atheist can look at the same things that I am looking at and see the glory and creativity of nature. So, at some level we choose either to believe or to reject the idea that there is One whose power and mind have brought forth the cosmos.[[10]](#footnote-11) I believe in God because of the moments that I have spent in prayer when I have felt something – someone – offering comfort, assurance, guidance, and grace. I was made to praise God, I was created to be in relationship with God and so when I do spend time with God, I feel peace. I feel God with me. I feel my heart connecting with God. I feel God speaking love to me.

The question becomes because I believe in God as the creator of all that is and all that will be, how will I respond? I will respond in love. I believe in God, who yearns for the intimate relationship of a parent to a child, and I respond by having a relationship with God.

Our scripture shows me that I am a small part of God’s creation, and yet God wants to be in relationship with me. I matter to God because I am God’s child and my fellow human beings matter to God and are God’s children. And I in return can love God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength. When we wake up, we praise God with our lips, when we go to sleep, we thank God for the gift of the day. Faith in God leads to gratitude and we are grateful for God’s gift of creation to us. We want to take care of that creation. Faith in God means that we are never alone. God is with us. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Thanks to Rev. Kim Meyers for this beautiful prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. p 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Howell, James C. The Life We Claim: The Apostles’ Creed for Preaching Teaching and Worship. Abingdon Press, 2005. p 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. p 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Hamilton, Adam. Creed: What Christians Believe and Why. Abingdon Press, 2016. p 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)