

I Believe in God, the Father Almighty
Rev. Samuel Weddington, 9/8/19

Isaiah 6:1-5 My translation

1 The year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, the skirt edge of his robe filling the Temple. 2 Fiery serpents stood about him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. 3 They cried out to each other: "HOLY, HOLY, HOLY, is the LORD of hosts! All the earth is full of his glory!" 4 Every square inch of the Temple was shaken by their cries, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And so I said, "Woe unto me! I'm toast/done for/undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

Today we begin our series on the Apostles' Creed. Many of you have recited this creed since childhood. Others, like me, grew up unaware that creeds even existed. For others, you have questions, and maybe don't understand why we use it. Fair enough.

In my own case, I'm glad I took time to learn, and that is what we are going to do together. From our sermon series, all the way to our special study at 10:10am in the chapel, as well as our children and student programs, we are going to take the next 12 weeks to think out what we say we believe.

Let's turn to Scripture and begin with our first lesson regarding "God, the Father Almighty." Let's read from Exodus 33:15-34:7

Exodus 33:15 - 34:7 My translation

15 Moses said to Him, "If your presence/face does not go with us, do not take us any further. 16 How will it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? This is how we are different from every nation on the face of the earth." 17 So the LORD/Yahweh replied to Moses, "I will do what you have asked, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name." 18 Moses said, "Please show me your glory." 19 The Lord responded, "I will make all my greatness pass before you, and I will declare before you my name, 'The LORD/Yahweh,' for I will show favor/grace to whomever I show favor/grace, and I will be merciful to whomever I show mercy." 20 But the Lord added, "You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live." 21 The LORD/Yahweh continued, "Over here is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock. 22 So it shall be that while my glory passes by that I will put you in the cave and cover you with my hand as I pass by. 23 I will remove my hand and you shall see me from behind, but my face shall not be seen." 34:1 Yahweh told Moses, "Cut two stone tablets like the first ones. I will inscribe these tablets with the words that were on the first ones which you broke into pieces. 2 In the morning, be ready and come up to Mount Sinai and stand before me at the mountain top. 3 No one shall come up with you. No one should be seen anywhere on the mountain, not even flocks or herds should graze in front of the mountain." 4 So Moses chiseled two stone tablets like the first ones. He rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai as Yahweh had commanded him, carrying the two stone tablets. 5 Yahweh came down in the cloud, stood before him there, and declared the name, "Yahweh (the LORD)." And Yahweh passed before him and declared, "Yahweh! Yahweh! The merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and overflowing in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 who remains merciful unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, yet by no means acquitting the guilty, allowing the consequences of the fathers' sins to fall upon the children and their children to the third and fourth generation."

We moderns have a problem: when we say we believe something, what we're really saying is that we feel something. How about this for an example? There's that sappy song you may have heard, sometimes sung at weddings: "I believe I can fly, I believe I can touch the sky. Think about it every night and day, Spread my wings and fly away." If you don't know what I'm talking about, google it.

While the song tugs at the heart, don't the words strike you as a bit nonsensical? Seriously, think about what he's saying. Here's another gem of a line: "If I can see it, then I can do it, If I just believe it, there's nothing to it." Really? If I can see myself with multiple NBA championship rings like LeBron, or becoming a Wall Street tycoon, then I can do it? I hope I don't offend (well, maybe I do), but the idea that "if I just believe, there's nothing to it," is just not true. Of course, the song didn't invent this idea, it just reflects what we've all come to believe. We've bought the fiction that our strong feelings and emotions reveal truth. That isn't to say that truth doesn't involve our emotions. Emotion is part of who we are, but a part is not the whole. We live in a culture that confuses belief with feeling.

And so we must begin with our first words of the creed, "I believe." When we say, "I believe," we are not saying "I *feel* that God is the Father almighty." No! I believe! These first two words tell us that faith, that belief, that life in Christ begins and ends with real content. There is substance with Jesus. There are matters that need to be discussed and settled on if we are going to have anything at all. When we say "I believe," we are declaring to each other and to the world that there are fundamental truths about the Lord Jesus worthy of declaration.

But what is it, exactly, that we believe? What's the content? This morning we turn to Scripture for our first confession, "we believe in God the Father almighty."

The first thing we believe in is God. We believe God exists. We believe God creates, as we will see next week. We believe that God sustains, as we have seen here in Exodus. It was the Lord God that saved the children of Israel from Egypt, and it was the Lord God

who sustained them in the wilderness when they thought they would die. And because we believe in a God who saves, Moses pleads with God to continue on with them so that they might live.

And we believe in this God because God has revealed himself to us. We believe God has given us his name. Again, faith has content. Our faith claims a name. The God we belong to, the God we believe in, the merciful and gracious God has made himself known, and he's even left his calling card, his name with which we are to cry out: Yahweh. The Lord. I am that I am. Belief in God isn't belief in a force of either darkness or light, no matter how much I enjoy Star Wars. Yoda is a cool Jedi, but he is clueless about spiritual truth. The "force" is not, and can never be the Christian faith. We belong to a God who longs for us to know him.

Now, if this is God, Yahweh, the LORD, Adonai, how are we related to this God? What can we grab hold of God and know more about him?

Again, we will flesh out this question over the course of this study. But just from our readings, we know two things. One, God is almighty. Isaiah encounters God high and lifted up, and God is so overwhelmingly grand that even the tiniest sliver of his robe fills the Temple, the greatest marvel that Isaiah had ever known. As splendid as that Temple was, as great a testimony as it was to our piety and sincerity and will, as strongly as we feel in our worship and adoration of God, even to the point of constructing buildings to echo the greatest music ever sung, all of it – and I need you to hear this, First Presbyterian of Bristol – all of it, all the pageantry, all the music, all the fervent praying, all the sacrifices, all of it is nothing compared to the glory of the almighty, Yahweh God.

And Yahweh is holy. Did you catch verse three when the seraphim, the fiery serpents, cry out before his throne? What did they say? "Holy, holy, holy." In Hebrew, when you want to say something is really important, you repeat it. For example, when God created the world, God declared the world, "tob, tob," or "good, good." We translate that as "very good," or "the best." You want to say something is gorgeous, in Hebrew you say it's "beautiful, beautiful." However, nowhere else in the entire Bible other than in Revelation 4:8 do we hear this phrase, "Holy! Holy! Holy!" Three times holy! We used to sing a song years ago, "Above all powers, above all thrones, above wonders the world has ever know." That song barely scratches the surface of God being holy, holy, holy. Isaiah is telling us that God is greater than us, God is almighty, God is utterly just, God is wholly good -- God is God and there is no other! No other. We believe that God exists, we know his name, Yahweh, and there is no other person or thing worthy of worship and praise.

But, you know what? If we were just left with the majesty of God's might, we wouldn't have a chance. What does Isaiah say in 6:5? "Woe unto me! I'm done for..." If all we have is the holiness of God, then we are nothing but dust and ash, and we are left with fear and trembling. But we believe in one thing more: we call God, "Father." The almighty God that even the fiery serpents dare not look at, Yahweh has called us each by name, has chosen us as his inheritance, has lifted us all out of the mire, has covered us up in the rock of ages, his Son, Jesus the Christ, and has come to us and shown himself because he loves us. The almighty who entertains Moses' ignorant request to see God's glory makes a way for us to see despite our blindness. When we claim God as our Father, we believe that we are God's sons and daughters, and God will make a way for us to know him.

To that point, God's fatherhood isn't all sunshine and rainbows; God's love doesn't negate his justice. We are warned in Exodus 34:7 that God does not acquit the guilty, and God even allows the consequences to fall upon us all for the sins of others. But here is a mystery to ponder as I close. You remember that Yahweh wouldn't reveal his face to Moses, right? No one can see it and live. No one can behold the living God with eyes covered over by sin; God's holiness has no truck with sin. That same God who covered over Moses in the rock is the same who would show his face, eventually, in the face of his only beloved Son, Jesus Christ. That is what John tells us in 1:14: "we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

Moses only got a glimpse, and in 34:8, just the glimpse rocks his heart, that knowledge shakes him to his core, and he falls down in worship. But we have seen the fullness in the Son, and the consequences of sin that were to fall on us, the Son has borne it for us. He has taken our curse. He has looked upon the Father directly because the Son has fellowship with the Father. In Christ, we can see God face to face because he we are clothed in him. If you know this, if you have content to your belief beyond a handful of feelings, then you have what you need to have an actual relationship with him. This is how it is with us, isn't it? Your true friends, your family members, your own father or mother, if you have a relationship with them, you have more than feeling, you have knowledge. You know about them. We know God because God has revealed himself to us, by grace, and so we confess what we know about the Lord God who loved us first.