

John 1:1-5

Delivered June 20, 2010

Words and More Words

In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. God's word is Jesus Christ, however, we who are language bound, have to make do with strings of vowels and consonants to express ourselves. And so we speak and so we write. We speak in monologues, in conversations, in debates and in sermons. We write poems and prayers, essays and novels. Another thing we write is creeds. Two weeks ago, when I was last preaching, we discussed the Apostles' Creed – a thoroughly human document which attempts to express by way of strings of vowels and consonants that which God first expressed through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Right there you see the problem. No mere mortal can do that –express with words that which is flesh and spirit and yet we try. Why? We try because written words have more staying power than flesh, and unlike spirit, words can be ordered and contained on a piece of paper. Comparing the word, Jesus Christ to the Apostles' Creed, though, is a little like comparing a Bach sonata to a commercial jingle. They are no where near the same thing.

Still, the Apostles' Creed is something more than so many words on a page. It is a complex document-- more so than our other creeds, since it is a composite of eight centuries of theology and since it was composed more than a millennia past. When I preached on the Apostles' Creed two weeks ago, I felt that we had only scratched the surface. The Creed deserves at least another week of our attention. It probably deserves an entire summer of our attention, actually, but we have other fish to fry so to speak. At least, when I finish today, though, we will have gone a smidgeon deeper in understanding what the creed is all about.

There are two specific lines I want to discuss today from the Apostles' Creed. The first is this: "He (meaning Jesus) descended into hell." Walter Mehring told me after the sermon two weeks back, that he is absolutely certain he didn't recite that line when he was growing up. I'm sure he's right. In The Apostles' Creed that appears in the old red Presbyterian hymnal, the line, "he descended into hell" is askericked. There is a note at the bottom of the creed stating "some churches omit this." In other words, "He descended into hell" is optional. Walter's pastor at the time, then, simply opted to leave it out and little wonder that he did.

"He descended into hell." That just may be the most disturbing line in the whole of the creed. Jesus was crucified. Wasn't that enough punishment for one person? "He descended into Hell." It's enough to make young children cry and adults shake their heads in wonder. We don't know what hell looks like, but according to John Milton, Hell is "A dungeon horrible, on all sides round, As one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames, no light, but rather darkness visible Served only to discover sights of woe...and torture without end." Why would God allow Jesus to go to that great furnace flamed to witness torture without end?

There are two explanations as to why this troublesome line was added to our Creed in the 5th century. One is that Jesus had to experience death, alienation from God (as he did when he uttered, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me”) **and** the fires of hell, too, so that he could have a broad understanding of the human condition. “He descended into hell” assures us that there is no human emotion, no human experience with which Jesus is unfamiliar. No matter your pain and sorrow, Jesus has already been there done that. That is a great comfort, isn’t it?

The other explanation as to why the Apostles’ Creed includes the line “He descended into hell” , has to do with salvation. That’s a heavy subject indeed and one that continues to be controversial in Christian circles-- including Presbyterian circles. Some of us believe that in order to be saved, we must accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior. I was taught that when I was growing up, and maybe you were, too. When I was in church school, in fact, my Sunday school teacher, told me that my best friend Betty, who is Jewish, would be going to hell when she died. But it’s just not Betty, or other Jews, or Muslims, or the unchurched, who are doomed to hell, is it, if you believe that salvation can only be had through acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. How about all those beloved prophets of old—Abraham, Moses, David and the like? To some peoples’ way of thinking, they too must be doomed to “torture without end” simply because their earthly existence predates Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection.

About this last point, our Christian forebearers evidently worried a great deal. There is a very early Christian Syriac doxology (We’re talking 2nd century) from which the line in question, “he descended into hell” is thought to be derived. That doxology reads in part, “[Jesus] was crucified under Pontius Pilate and departed into peace, in order to preach to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the saints concerning the ending of the world and the resurrection of the dead.” In other words, Christ went to hell to visit Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and the rest and convert them to Christianity. It’s not too much of a stretch then, to imagine that Jesus still stands with one foot inside the gate of hell. He stands there to rescue from that fiery furnace all those who have not been baptized and therefore are not technically Christian, but who nevertheless are children of God. Whether the original authors of this line meant this or not, we may never know—probably not, but it is definitely an interpretation that sits well with the progressive Christians among us.

The other line in the Apostles’ Creed up for discussion today is this: “I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, and the Communion of Saints. I’m going to take these in order. First, the Holy Ghost. The Apostles’ Creed mentions all three parts of the trinity, of course: God, Christ and the Holy Ghost—which you would expect; However, the Holy Ghost appears only fleetingly—The Apostles’ Creed focuses on God and Jesus. Poor Holy Ghost! I don’t know why the Holy Ghost is seemingly overlooked in our Creed. Perhaps the theology concerning the third part of the trinity was only more fully developed after the 9th century—after the Creed had reached it’s final form.

Maybe like me, you have noted, though, that when we say Holy Ghost in worship, we run it together with Holy Catholic Church. “I believe in the Holy Ghost the Holy Catholic Church.” It’s like the two belong together, isn’t it? If you know your English grammar, it’s like an appositive. Cove Presbyterian Church (comma) the historic church located on Route 29—that’s an appositive. “The historic church located on Route 29 explains Cove Presbyterian Church.” In grammar terms, it is equal to the subject. So almost with, The Holy Ghost (comma), the Holy Catholic Church. The Holy Ghost and Holy Catholic Church are almost of a piece because the work of the Holy Ghost is most evident in the life of the church. If ever there is doubt that the Holy Spirit is NOT at work in the world, we need only look to the church, which has existed for over 2000 years and counting. Collectively, we ARE part of the holy spirit, aren’t we? And note: the word “holy” applies to both the Ghost and the Church. The word Holy means “set apart by God.” Both the spirit and the church are set apart by God and we too are set apart by God, when we are doing God’s work in the world.

Next in the line in question, is this: “I believe in the holy Catholic Church.” We’ve already talked about this phrase, some, but I want to focus our attention on the word Catholic. That word is always a sticking point with confirmands. It has come up every year in all the years I have taught confirmation classes. The young people think they are so smart when they say, “We’re not catholic, we’re Presbyterian.” My answer back is this: Catholic, simply means universal. I believe in the one church universal—which of course, is a fantasy. From the time of the first apostles the church has ALWAYS been divided. Marcionites, Ebionites, Arians, to name three early Christian groups that were eventually deemed to be heretical. In 1054 the church even split in two—East and West. What I tell confirmands though is this: “Whether we ever achieve unification is beside the point. The creed reminds us that we are to respect our brothers and sisters in the faith and honor their traditions even as we hope that we ourselves will be respected, and our own traditions will be honored.”

Finally, we come to the last phrase we will be studying today. “I believe in the Communion of Saints.” We who are Protestants understand this phrase to mean the assembly of all of us, both dead and alive. However that line originally referred only to those special people in the faith who have attained special sainthood status. Roman Catholics still understand that line to refer to martyred Christians, the apostles, but also Saints like Francis, and Benedict, and modern day martyrs. So, Protestants interpret that phrase one way, Roman Catholics another BUT, we respect each others’ interpretations because (pause) we believe in the holy catholic or universal Church.

I want to spend the rest of our time today talking about why it is that we don’t recite the Apostles Creed every single Sunday—why I often switch out the Apostles Creed with some of our more modern creeds, usually the Brief Statement of faith. If the Apostles’ Creed is so very old, and if, as I say, it represents 8 centuries of carefully crafted theology, why not use that as our one creed every Sunday?

There are several reasons, but I only have time to mention one today. That reason has to do with our understanding, or lack thereof, of the Apostles’ Creed. With two sermons

on the subject under our belts, we still have just begun to understand the history and the meaning behind the words of the Creed. On a Sunday morning, would that a little angel rested on each of our shoulders as we recited those words, “I believe in God the father almighty,” etc. That angel would whisper to us what the words mean, what issues the words were meant to address; their historical significance and how we might better interpret the words today in light of a more modern theology.

The Presbyterian Church’s newest creed, the Brief Statement of faith, borrows from many of the older creeds—the Scot’s Confession, the Westminster Catechism, the Nicene Creed, and of course, the Apostles’ Creed. It is grounded in the past, BUT its purpose is to address current struggles in the church and in the world. For instance, where do we as Christians stand regarding environmental issues? The Brief Statement of Faith tells us: “We threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God’s condemnation.”

This is a creed for our day. Like the Apostles’ Creed—like all the creeds, it is still just a string of vowels and consonants, still words on paper-- not flesh, not spirit, but pointing us to God’s word in Christ Jesus. Unlike the Apostles’ Creed, though, it takes no angel sitting on our shoulders to interpret it for us—at least not yet. When that “yet” does come, however, and it will come, there will be a new generation of Christians ready to take up pen and paper, or computer, or whatever it is that people will be using then. That generation will craft a new creed for a new age, and it will begin with the words, “I believe.” Amen