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# **I Believe in God the Father**

*"First in a Series on the Apostles' Creed"*

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).*

Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we say the Apostles' Creed as a reminder of the classic claims of the Christian faith. The creed is a short summary of what the church believes, but some of us are not quite sure what the all those words mean, or truth be told, whether we really do believe them. So I want to spend six weeks from now until Easter reflecting on what the creed has to tell us, and inviting you to consider how it might even come to shape your life.

Let's begin where the creed begins, with the words "I believe." What does it mean to believe in anything after all?

It's been said that to believe something is to "live by" it. If I really do believe something, I ought to live as though it was true, as though I could trust that it's part of the way things really are.

Some things we believe are more important than others, or at least more salient to our everyday lives. Scientists announced last week that they finally detected the gravitational waves predicted by Einstein's theories a hundred years ago. Cosmologists and physicists are all excited about that because it's hugely important in their professional world. The rest of us should probably believe what the scientists tell us, since they know what they're talking about, but I'm guessing we won't change any personal plans on account of the news. On the other hand, if we're trying to get to an important meeting at a place we've never been before, we need to decide whether or not to believe what the GPS tells us, and the more important the meeting, the more important is our belief in the GPS.

Notice that there's an element of faith or trust in any kind of belief. We don't ordinarily say we "believe" things that are obvious or self-evident. We don't say "I believe that's a chair" or "I believe the sun is shining" when everyone can see the chair or the sunshine. We only talk about believing something when there's at least a possibility that we might be wrong.

And we have to decide whether or not to believe in people too, don't we? We know a great many things about the world, but most of what we know depends on what other people tell us. Everything from details about the planet to doctors' diagnoses to news about family and friends depends on our believing what other people have to say—which in turn relies upon our sense of how trustworthy or believable those people are.

The biblical words translated "believe" in English carry this same connotation of faith or trust. So the psalmist says, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living," and the Hebrew word for "believe" is the same root as the word "Amen." When Jesus says, "*Truly* I tell you," he says "Amen" too, the same word we use to end our prayers. It means something like "May it be true" or "Let it be so." Similarly in Greek, the word *pisteuo*, "I believe," sounds like the word for faith, which is *pistis*.

To believe, then, is to have faith in something or someone, to trust that the thing is true or the person is reliable, even though there is some possibility that we might be mistaken.

The Apostles' Creed begins "I believe," and in fact it's called a creed because the Latin word *credo* means exactly

that: I believe. Other English words come from the same Latin root. A “credible” source, for example, is one that is believable. On the other hand, we might say that something is “incredible,” when what we really mean is that it’s hard to believe, even when it turns out to be true. “That’s incredible!” we say, or “Unbelievable!” when something is so unexpected that it takes a while to get our mind around it.

The creed begins “I believe in God ....” The very fact that it’s a creed means I choose to believe in God, to live as if God is real, even though I could conceivably be wrong. It’s entirely possible that there is no God, after all, which is why there are atheists and agnostics in the world. That’s an important point, by the way. If someone tries to undermine faith by bringing up uncertainty, pointing out that God’s existence is hardly self-evident, the creed already understands that. Statements of faith always carry an implicit element of doubt or uncertainty. If the thing we claim to believe was absolutely certain, we wouldn’t have to believe in it. Don’t be impressed, then, when skeptics come along and say, “You can’t prove that God exists.” Of course we can’t prove it. That’s why we say we *believe*, just as we believe in many other things that can’t be proved.

But what *kind* of God do we believe in? Most people believe in some kind of God. Genuine atheists, who claim that there is no God, are only a tiny fraction of the population. Just to say that we believe in God is not to say much of anything until we talk a little more about who or what that God is.

History and philosophy give us all sorts of options. There are the many gods of polytheism, gods for virtually every occasion. Then there are all those tribal gods—gods who not coincidentally show a strong preference for one’s

own group or nation over all other peoples. There is the personal but distant God of Deism, who set the universe in motion but lets it run entirely on its own, unattended. And then there's the abstract, impersonal God of some scientists and philosophers—a God who is mostly a metaphor for the laws of nature, to whom it would make no more sense to pray than it would make sense to pray to gravity or the electromagnetic force.

To say “I believe in God” is not to say very much at all until you specify what kind of God you believe in. So the Apostles' Creed goes on to say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”

The God of the Christian church is called *Father*—which is to say that God is *personal* and *loving*, a God with whom we can have a *relationship*. Believing in this God is more like relating to your dearest friend than it is like believing in gravitational waves or the predictions of a GPS. This is a God who engages the heart as well as the mind, a God to trust and even enjoy. The God of Christian faith showers us with blessings and surrounds us with good gifts. And this God is also “a very present help in times of trouble,” the one who will walk with us through the darkest valley, even the valley of the shadow of death.

Now of course there are all sorts of qualifications to the notion of God as our Father. The most obvious is that God is not a “Guy in the Sky,” not the bearded Ancient of Days depicted in so many works of art. God is not a man at all—as if the image of a Father was to be taken as literally male. Genesis says that God made humankind in God's own image, male and female. Of course God is not a man; and God is not a woman either. So if the image of a heavenly Father is troubling for whatever reason, it's only a partly

useful corrective to think of God as our Mother. The best Christian theologians have always understood the *imago dei*, the image of God, to consist in spiritual qualities—a capacity for love and creativity and moral choice and the appreciation of beauty, for example—rather than any kind of physical resemblance.

All our talk of God is metaphorical. Every word we say about God points beyond what it usually means toward someone who is infinitely greater, and yet bears some kind of resemblance to familiar things, or else we could never know anything about God or be able to relate to God in any meaningful way.

The creed says “I believe in God the Father *Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*” This God of the Christian faith is not only personal and loving but also powerful beyond our imagination—the one who brings all things into being, and sustains them in providential care, and will redeem us and all of creation in the fullness of time. Among other things, that means the power behind all creation is good, “the love that moves the sun and the other stars,” as Dante says at the end of his *Paradiso*.

I participated in a pastors’ conference recently in Florida, where one of the speakers was a retired Methodist bishop. The United Methodist Church is an international church, and the bishops of that denomination get together from time to time to learn from one another and talk about what God is doing in and through the church worldwide. Our speaker told a story he heard from a Methodist bishop in the Congo that sounded like something right out of the New Testament.

According to his story, the bishop conducted a



marriage for a young couple in his country, where weddings are often followed by a feast and celebration that might go on for several days. As it happened, though, right after the wedding, on that very day, the mother of the bride passed away. Now what began as a time of great celebration suddenly turned into a terrible tragedy. Moreover, in that culture, such an awful event could be considered a horrible omen for the future of the marriage and for the couple themselves.

So the bishop went into the house where the mother's body lay, and he asked everyone to leave him alone in the room to pray. In his prayer, the bishop said something like this: "Lord, we know that you are God, and you are good, and your will be done. But this is a very bad thing for this family, and it will be an awful burden for them, and a barrier to their faith and the faith of their village. This won't do, Lord. We need your help here. We need you to do something." After a few moments of fervent prayer, the bishop looked up and saw that the woman's hand began to twitch. Then her eyes opened, and soon she was completely awake and alert again. After he determined that the woman seemed restored to health, the bishop sent her out to rejoin her astonished family and celebrate with them.

The one who told this story didn't quite know what to make of it, but he knew the bishop and had no reason to doubt him, except for the obviously "incredible" quality of the tale he told. People all over the world know what death is, of course, and the people in this village thought the woman was dead. Were they mistaken? Was she really still alive? Or was she somewhere in transition, between this world and the next? Who knows? But we Christians believe in a God who does great things. Jesus himself says, "For God all things are possible," and the whole history of the church tells

of God's faithfulness in everyday life, and occasionally in some extraordinary signs and wonders. I've seen a few remarkable signs myself, and some of you have too.

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." To say the first line of the Apostles' Creed is to say that we know we might be mistaken about any particular detail, and it's even conceivable that we're wrong about God himself. And yet there are reasons to believe. Good reasons, compelling reasons based on our own experience and the experience of millions of believers throughout the ages.

Jesus tells his followers not to worry so much about the details of everyday life: what to eat, what to wear, and all the other things we need. "Your Father knows that you need these things," Jesus says, "and it is his good pleasure to give you the kingdom of God." Jesus doesn't mean that we don't have to work for things, and make reasonable efforts to provide for ourselves and our families and the people around us. Of course we have to be responsible, and in fact it is God who gives us what we need to accomplish all that we have to do. Jesus just reminds us that life is so much more than that. You and I were made for greater things. We were made to inherit the kingdom of God, and when we lose sight of our larger purpose we forget not only who God is but who we are.

All the testimonies of Christian faith point to a God who is infinitely more loving and good than even the best of human parents. And yet this same God is so powerful that all of creation exists at God's command, and continues under God's providential care, and will be redeemed one day when God brings about a new heaven and a new earth. In that day, Isaiah says, "those who wait for the Lord shall renew

their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

If we believe that, then it’s the kind of belief that ought to shape our entire life. It means that every good thing in life comes as gift from our heavenly Father, and even the worst things in this life—sin and sickness and suffering and death—will be redeemed one day. It means we can live a life filled with gratitude, a life full of faith and hope and love, because the power behind all creation is the one who made us and loves us and claims us for his own.

And that is why we say “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.”



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