

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on Trinity Sunday, the First Sunday after Pentecost, June 19, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

What Do We Believe?

Part V in a series

This is the 5th in a series of sermons about the words in our Eucharistic Liturgy, our Communion Service. Sunday after Sunday we say these words without taking the time to consider what they mean or why we are saying them.

This is especially true when we say the Creed. We say it because we know how to read, but do we know what we are saying or why we are saying it?

It begins with the words:

We believe in one God,
The Father, the Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
All that is, seen and unseen.

What are we saying here? Do we actually believe in a fatherly God and that he is the creator of all things, seen and unseen?

This morning we heard the story of creation from the first chapter of Genesis. (1:1–2:4a) It opens with the words, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...”, and it ends with “And it was so. God saw everything he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Whoever wrote that story was one of the greatest poets of all time. We can be so lulled by the imagery and the beauty of the words that might overlook what this writer is saying.

No doubt it is important that we believe that this universe was created by a divine being that we call God? But perhaps it is more important that we believe that what was created is very good? One is a statement of fact; the other is a statement of faith. I believe it is a fact that God made it all. And I have faith that what he made is very good.

To say “We believe in one God” is a statement of faith. We are not saying that we believe that there is a God. We are saying that we believe in God—we believe that God can be trusted—what God has done for us is good.

If I tell you I believe in my doctor, I am not telling that my doctor exists; I am telling you that I trust my doctor.

The story of creation reminds me of another great passage of Scripture. It is from the 65th chapter of the Book of Isaiah. The Prophet writes, Thus says the Lord, “For behold I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing and her people a joy... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Those words were written in a time when life in Israel was going down the tubes. Their politicians and religious leaders had become corrupt. The people had become demoralized. The economy was going south, and the enemy was at the gate.

Such words were written to bring comfort to a suffering people. Did they believe what Isaiah said? Could the Lord he wrote about actually be trusted that much?

What do such prophetic words mean to us today? We are living in a time when many people no longer believe in God. They doubt what the Bible tells us about the life of Christ, and there is an ever-growing trend to heap contempt and scorn on the Church.

These are times of lawlessness. We no longer leave the house without locking the door. We dare not put our credit card or Social Security number on the internet. We have political leaders who take action and make decisions, not for what they believe to be in our best interest, but for what the lobbyists will pay them to support. And what about all the sleaze?

Anthony Weiner is only the latest in a long procession of smutty celebrities. And the media loves nothing so much as regaling us with the details about their behavior. Their sponsors—those people who endlessly try to persuade us to use this or that medication (but, of course, not until you ask your doctor)—are paying for all of this.

In these times of lawless behavior and the collapse of belief, you and I must focus our attention on several things:

1. There is nothing new under the sun. The decline of civilization is always marked by defiance of the law and the decay of religious and moral institutions. It happened at the end of the Roman Empire. It happened in 18th century Europe. The streets of London in the 1700's were a cesspool of poverty, pestilence, and crime. The streets of Paris ran red with the blood from the mindless guillotining of thousands of innocent people. The Cathedral of Notre Dame became a market place where religious services were forbidden.

In the 1930's Germany saw the burning of books, the destruction of the Reichstag and the slaughter of millions of people for no reason other than their race or religion.

In the dark nights here in this country, hooded men burned crosses and lynched innocent victims. Did you know that in the 1940's the Rector of St. Helena's Church was the Grand Dragon (I think that's what they called him) of the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan?

Civilization is a fragile thing, frequently falling into darkness and decay. No wonder people ask God, "Where are you?"

2. This reminds me of the second thing we must consider, and that is that God is watching. God made some promises. God has promised in the preaching of the prophets and in the death and resurrection of Christ that he will create a new heaven and a new earth. At the end of the creed we declare that we are looking for "the life of the world to come."

It just doesn't make sense to believe in a God who would allow this creation to go up in smoke. As the writer of Genesis tells us God went to a lot of trouble to create this universe. He was so exhausted at

the end of the 6th day he needed to rest. Then he sent his only Son, through whom all things were made, to suffer the tortures of the damned in order to redeem it. After all of that it would be completely insane for God to give up on us now.

It will take a lot more than our lawless behavior, our corrupt politicians, and the wishy-washiness of the churches to bring about the destruction of what God has created.

Indeed, the promise is still on the books. When the last chapter has been written, God, as Isaiah said he would, has promised to “create Jerusalem a rejoicing, and her people a joy...The wolf and the lamb shall feed together...The lion shall eat straw like the ox; and dust shall be the serpent’s food. (The Muslim and the Jew will pray together. The Catholic and the Protestant will join hands and sing “What a friend we have in Jesus”. John Boehner and Barak Obama will play golf together.) They shall not hurt or destroy in all God’s holy mountain...” (Isaiah 65: 18, 25)

3. And finally you and I need to workout, developing our belief muscles. If someone asked you what you believe, what would you tell them? Would you recite the first few bars of the Nicene Creed? Why do I doubt that?

Do we take time to consider what we believe to be right and what we believe to be wrong? What is true and what is false?

If our bodies begin to run down we do something about it. We take exercise and change our diet. We might even ask our doctor what to do about it.

No less important than our physical well-being is the health of our inner-selves and the beliefs which sustain it. In order to protect this side of our lives, let me make several suggestions for meditation:

Remember that the universe was created by God our Father. We believe that we were created by him. The creation is good. You and I are more than just good; we are created in God’s image.

Remember that God loves us so much that he sent his only Son so that all who believe in him (trust him) will not perish. If nothing else, the life and ministry of Jesus reveals that God can be trusted. The management of this world—the life of each one of us—is in good hands, loving hands, sheltering hands.

And finally, remember that our lives are inhabited by God. His Spirit, that the creed names “the Lord, the giver of life,” dwells within each of us. It makes us a little crazy at times, and it defies all of the logic and the systemic of man-made laws. It makes us whimsical and breezy. It lets us laugh and allows us to cry. It fills our blood with the effervescence that allows us to compose symphonies, write sonnets, build suspension bridges, find the cure for cancer, and send the human spirit to the outer reaches of the universe.

So there you have it. On this Trinity Sunday our exercise regimen is to remember that God is our Father, the creator of heaven and earth. God is the Son, who for us and our salvation came down from heaven and was made man. And God is the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and who has spoken through the Prophets.

Amen.