

The Apostles' Creed: Unlocking Scripture

I Believe....In God

Hebrews 11: 6; Romans 10:17; John 20: 30-1; Galatians 2:20

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**August 11, AD 2019
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My best friend growing up was Danny Stewart. He was four years older and had played with me since I was a toddler. Danny liked me. Unless we were with other older children. Then he acted embarrassed to have such a squirt friend. And he could turn on me. We were in the side yard at my house talking with Lynn Grommet, a girl even older than Danny. And not very nice. To be the big guy, Danny started making fun of my stuffed animals. It was baby to be friends with fake animals that were just dumb toys. I told Danny and Lynn that my animals weren't toys. They were real. This was great sport for them. They laughed in my face. All right, I said, I'll show you. I figured if I brought an animal down and told them about him, they would see how real my stuffed animals really were. I brought down Big Bear and started a story. "Fake, fake, toy, toy, toy," they chanted. Cutting me off. Mocking me. Undaunted, I went to get another animal. Little red Spongy. "Fake, fake, toy, toy, toy!" This seemed crazy. Surely, if I just go get Big Dog and tell them about him, they will understand. I know if I just explain it better, they will see what they can't see now. I can do it. I can talk so people will understand. I wouldn't give up. "Fake, fake, toy, toy, toy!" was always the reply.

It was a searing humiliation. But I know I'd do it again. Because I wasn't delusional. Of course these stuffed animals were toys. They don't really talk; I talk to them. They don't really do stuff; I just pretend they do. But that's not what I meant by real. At age 6, I didn't have the words to say how these animals are real because I *really* relate to them. My imagination in playing with them opens me to a magic in the world that not everyone can see, but it's there just the same. They carry my love, my sense of play, my seeing the world as lit up with possibility. They're real. In other words, from an early age, I knew I was a true believer. I believe in things I cannot see but know in my guts are true.

Our first passage this morning tells us how important belief is to God, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6). God is invisible. You can't go someplace to pull back a curtain and show people God. You can't measure him, weigh him, or record him. But God is real. He's behind everything. He's the magic, the wonder, the glory that shines through

everything. To know him, to experience this God, Hebrews tells us we must seek him. We must pursue him by belief in what is unseen. Only then will we discover how real God is.

Today we begin our fall series on the Apostles' Creed. It's just 114 words in English. You can speak it aloud in just one minute. But it contains a story with life-shaping power. It's a radical, jubilantly defiant declaration of reality. It's a step out of cynicism and despair into a life of bright hope. In Latin, it begins, *Credo*. I believe. Think of how powerful that is. I believe. I will now state that I have faith in something beyond myself. I will take a stand and utter it publically. I will open my mouth with a declaration to which you may well reply, "Fake, fake, toy, toy, toy!" Nevertheless. I believe.

I believe in God. I believe in a personal being who is not just within me, but is Someone real who is beyond me. I am saying so many things when I start this creed that it makes me dizzy. I believe that we are not an accident. We are intended. The world is not an endless circle of repetition. It has not always been. It was brought into being by God and it is going somewhere that God has planned. Life is not random. Evil is not out of control. The end is not nothingness. The point is not mere survival of the fittest. The depth of me is not biological urges. I am not alone. I believe in God. This is a step of faith, a step out of a hopeless, decaying, chaotic world into a world of wonder shot through with hope. I believe in God.

In Jeremiah 29, the LORD speaks to his people, "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13). Saying the Apostles' Creed, I am seeking the one true God. I am locating myself in a story way bigger than I am. I am stepping into a journey that leads me toward God. I'm committing to an adventure way more significant than my personal ambitions for comfort, significance or success. I believe in God. By saying that I am propelling my life towards God. I am letting the story of my life be taken into the grand story of God's dealings with the world. I am going on a quest to know this God.

But wait a minute. Dawson, by your own admission, you are a true believer. You're credulous. You are prone to *cred*, to trust. You have credos, things you believe. But how do you know it's true? I mean you were wrong about the stuffed animal thing. People of faith can be sincere, and sincerely wrong. Does your God just seem real because so many people believe in him?

Not too long ago, one of our elementary students expressed something most of us have thought but very few of us have said. He looked around at our sanctuary

and declared, “You know, if this isn’t true, this whole building is just a waste of bricks and toilets!” That’s getting right down to it. Are we nuts? Were we right for the last hundred years to spend all this money and effort to create and maintain such a magnificent building? I mean, if this is just a made-up story, isn’t it kind of silly to build such a shrine? After all, we could have put that money into a stadium to celebrate the gods of football. Or into a shiny tall building dedicated to the gods of commerce. We really are taking a step of faith to be here.

So what makes our faith different than wishful thinking? What we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed is both historical *and* mystical. The heart of our Creed is the story of Jesus, a man lived in the real world. He was born in a real place while Caesar Augustus was ruling in Rome. He died in Jerusalem, a city that still exists, at the time when Pontius Pilate was governor. That same Jesus rose from the dead to live again. Not a mythical resurrection in our memories. But the body that died got up. His followers reported that they had seen him. They were willing to die with this report still on their lips. The resurrection became the central fact of all human history. And that history has a mystical dimension. People heard this report, believed and were changed. They entered a mystical, present relationship with the risen Jesus. It still happens. We hear the gospel story of events that occurred in our world 2000 years ago. We believe this story and suddenly we are flooded with a present, spiritual experience of knowing this Jesus intimately, as if he were right here before us, or even closer.

This is the wonder of the Gospel. Paul said it this way, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). We give the report. People believe it. They change. The Apostles’ Creed gives us the essential borders of the story of Jesus. It’s the controlling document that makes sure we get the report right. So that when we come to faith it’s not fake. The singer Rich Mullins declared of the Creed, “I did not make it. No, it is making me.”

As you know, David Torrance remains one of my heroes of faith. What a poignant joy it was this past summer to hear this 95 year old teach the gospel with such power. One of the most interesting things he ever told me was this. “In my ministry, I have always told new parents that if they will simply pray aloud every night with their baby, by the time the child is two years old, he will have a true awareness of God. That awareness will be indelible. If they would just model speaking to God in the presence of the child, even before the child knows the meaning of words, God will become real to the child. We are made to know God. That seed just needs to be watered.” I love to pass that along to parents before a baptism. So simple. Each night, even when you are dog tired. Each night, even if it

doesn't seem to matter. Pray aloud with your child. The Spirit of God will do the rest. And fathers, this really comes down to you. As the spiritual head of the family, model a manliness that acknowledges Someone bigger than you. Model your submission to the High King of heaven as you pray with your children. Just short simple prayers are fine. But do it. Form new believers by your practice.

David Torrance's brother Tom took it a bit further. As a young pastor, with children of his own, he wrote about the task of Christian education. He noted that we cannot make our children to believe. You can't force someone into faith. That is the Holy Spirit's work. And you can't make the Spirit come into someone's life. You can ask, you can pray, but you cannot control. What we can do, however, is lay down the tracks along which the Spirit is known to run. We can teach the stories of the Bible. We can cultivate the habits that are known to form us in faith. We can go to church. We can join with other believers as the highest priority of our week. Worshipping God in the company of God's people is not the optional spiritual accent on a good life. It is our very heart, absolutely vital to being connected to the Source of life. We can't make our kids believe, but we can certainly plow the ground to make it immensely more likely that faith will grow.

That's why I love to speak to parents of confirmation students. We do a rigorous year of learning the great stories of Scripture, of memorizing Bible passages, of learning to pray, of engaging God through the messages in worship. We ask in August that they put May 17 on their calendars and tell their teams, dance groups, and schools right now that this what they will be doing on that day. Their children will be making a public profession of faith. This I believe.

I love to talk in our Discovery Classes about the uniqueness of a Christian church. We are not as overtly demanding on people as schools, coaches and bosses. Yet what we offer is of eternal significance. A coach may demand, "If you daughter is not here at practice, she won't play." But not even the most egotistical coaches will say, "Her salvation depends on her being here." A boss may threaten, "If you don't make it to work Friday, you won't have a job." But even the harshest boss doesn't dare say, "Your eternal life depends on getting this project done." Here at the church, in our gentle way, we offer what is nowhere else to be found. Not because we possess anything ourselves, but because we have a living relationship to the Source of all life. Here, when we gather around his Word and at his Table, Christ is faithful to give us what we can get nowhere else. Forgiveness of sins. An awareness of love that fills in our deepest loneliness. Healing from the deep wounds of the past. Hope for the future amidst the chaos of the present world.

Assurance of resurrection life to come. Peace with God that passes understanding. The gift of bonds of love with others that endure through all the trials of life.

The conclusion of the Gospel of John wraps all of this up for us. Our faith has always been based on events reported to us as real. Receiving the news of these events leads to belief. Belief takes us into relationship. We know now in the present hour the Jesus who walked among us long ago. For he still lives! John wrote, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20: 30-1).

This week, consider the wonder of what you are doing when you say the Creed. I believe. I am not on the sideline. I am not alone in despair. I believe. I believe in God, the God who came to me in Jesus Christ. And here I will stand, because only here do I live.