

I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST
SECOND IN THE SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
SEPTEMBER 21, 1986

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What was God to do? Something went wrong. The Apostles' Creed begins with the affirmation that we believe God is the creator. In last week's sermon, we affirmed that God created and is yet creating all there is. The method by which God creates is not a critical factor of faith. The Bible is really not interested in how God creates, so we are free to let science tell us how the universe and life came and comes into being. What is critical for our Christian faith is the belief that God creates and what God creates is good. God looked on all that was made and God said, "It is good." God looks on you, the person he has created and placed here on this earth in this time and place, and God says, "You are good. I did a good job of creation. You are a beautiful, magnificent, inimitable work of art. There is no one like you." What God created and creates is good.

But, what went wrong? Human life on this planet is not as God intended. There are glimpses of the original purpose, sometimes more than glimpses, even pictures of the original. There are examples--some families, some communities, some churches, some persons--of God's purpose, but something has gone wrong. Traditional Christian theology says that humankind fell, fell from God's plan, fell from the Garden of Eden, fell from paradise. The Adam and Eve account of creation, in the second and third chapters of Genesis, is a graphic, gripping, suspenseful story told to answer the questions: What went wrong? Why is there evil? Why do people suffer?

The answer to these "why" questions, in a word, is sin. Sin is the biblical word to describe the human condition and predisposition. We are prone to sin. When God created humankind, God gave us free will. Adam and Eve were given freedom of choice, to obey or not to obey, to be content with their life of paradise in the garden, or to try to be like God. The serpent told them that God didn't want them to eat the fruit because then they would be like God. We humans prefer to be in charge. We humans tend to be self-centered, rather than group-centered. We tend to choose selfishness, greed, and rebellion. We humans tend to be suspicious, hateful and hostile to one another.

Because of sin, this world is not as God intended. Two young men, on their way to their graduation ceremony from high school, were hit and killed by a drunk driver. In the funeral meditation, the minister said that God must have wanted them in heaven and decided they had lived long enough. Did God intoxicate the driver? Did God send the drunk out on the road intentionally so that the young men might be killed? A lot happens in this life that is not God's will! Sin created the conditions whereby the young men were killed. Sin has raised havoc with human life. Accidents, disease, self-destruction through alcohol or drugs, war, killing, etc., are the results of sin, not of God's creation.

The result of sin is broken relationship. After the tragedy in the Garden of Eden, the serpent was separated from people, banished to the ground. The man and woman were banished from the garden. They began to experience pain and suffering. The relationship with God was broken. The relationship they enjoyed with each other was broken as they blamed one another. The relationship with animals, whom Adam named, was broken. The relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed with the garden, with nature, was broken.

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Picture a circle of people, holding hands around a campfire. By the light of the fire, they can see each other's faces. By holding hands and seeing one another, they experience a relationship, a fellowship, a bonding. God created humans to live in fellowship with him and with one another. But, the circle has been broken. Rather than face the light of God, humankind chose to face the darkness. We have turned around, dropped hands and are facing the darkness. When we try to see one another's faces, we see only shadows. Because the light is shining from behind, the faces are in darkness. And the more we jump, dance, and try to find one another's hands, the more grotesque our shadows become. What went wrong with God's creation is that humankind chooses broken relationships, chooses defiance of God's order, chooses sin, rather than God's way.

What was God to do? We believe and know from experience that God did not throw up his hands and say, "I give up." However, one ancient story which is found in many civilizations says that God did lose patience and once sent a flood to drown his people so that God might start over again with a remnant few. But, the lot he saved on the ark--Noah and his family--was not any better than those that drowned, and so God put a rainbow in the sky to tell us he won't do that again! No, God doesn't give up on us. God is constantly creating order out of chaos, and God is constantly reclaiming, building bridges, seeking to heal the broken relationships.

What God did, according to the Bible, was to call a people to model his will for humankind, a people through whom all humans might be reunited with God. God called Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, Leah, Rachel and Jacob to be the parents of his people, and with them God made a covenant. When they ended up in Egypt as slaves to the pharaoh, God sent Moses to lead them to the promised land. When the people flirted with other gods, disobeyed the covenant (the Ten Commandments), neglected and exploited the poor, God sent prophets to preach and call the people back to the covenant.

When the prophets were essentially ignored, God himself came to the earth. John 1:1, 14 reads: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." God came as the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus. "Christ" is the Greek word for the Hebrew word, "Messiah." When the people of the covenant again refused to listen, when they took the Son of God, humiliated him, judged him wrongly, and mercilessly hung him on a cross to die, God then reached out to the non-Jews, to the gentiles, you and me. God created the church, and as the church, we are the new Israel, the new people of God, called to be a light to the world. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see God. We see how God loves humankind. We see how God wants us to live. Jesus is both the message and the model of God's kingdom.

It took the church many years and much struggle before they reached this understanding of Jesus. Who was Jesus and what did he do were questions that divided the church in those early years. In fact, they are questions that still divide the church, for there are churches and there are individual Christians who do not accept the Apostles' Creed as a definitive statement of Christian beliefs. But, the mainline churches, including the Roman Catholic, accept the Apostles' Creed as a statement of what we believe about Jesus. There was not such unity in the early centuries of the church. When you

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examine the Apostles' Creed, notice the large amount of space given to Jesus. The belief in God, the Creator, is stated in one sentence with 12 words. Belief in the Holy Spirit is expressed in one phrase with five words. But, Jesus takes seven sentences and 74 words! You get the clue that Jesus is the reason for the creed! And, indeed, the early church struggled over a long period of time about Jesus. Next week I will discuss this struggle and look at the virgin birth and the phrase, "He descended to the dead."

But, this morning, we are looking at what God did and is doing about sin. How does God mend the broken relationship with humanity? How does God reclaim humankind? Anthropologists have been interested in the Babemba tribe in southern Africa. The tribe has few fixed rules and no formal criminal code. The reason for the lack of formal laws seems to be that they are unnecessary. There seems to be little anti-social behavior. Further investigation of the Babemba tribe uncovered a unique method of discipline. When a person acts irresponsibly, or unjustly, he/she is placed in the center of the village. All work ceases and every man, woman and child in the village gathers in a large circle around the offender. Then each person in the tribe, one at a time, even the children, speaks to the offender about all the good things he/she has done. Every incident, every experience in which the offender made a positive contribution to the tribe is recalled, in as much detail as the speaker can remember. The offender's positive attributes, good deeds, strengths and kindnesses are cited carefully and at length. No one is permitted to fabricate, exaggerate or be facetious. And, no one is permitted to speak of any previous act of misbehavior, nor is the present act mentioned. Not a word of criticism or judgment is allowed. Sometimes the event goes on for days, and at the end, after everyone has spoken, there is a celebration, a party, in which the offender is welcomed back into the tribe. This overwhelming positive experience strengthens the offender's self-image and increases his desire to live up to the expectations of the tribe. Can you imagine what the person feels while standing in the center of the circle hearing about all the good things he/she has done, knowing that he/she has now let down the village? No wonder the necessity for this ceremony is rare. There is little anti-social behavior in that tribe.

I have participated in groups where we practiced "strength bombardment" and each was told of his/her strengths, but only for a few minutes. It is a warming, loving experience to be bombarded with illustrations of your strengths. Perhaps families might use this method, or churches, rather than dwelling on the negative by criticizing, and counting up the misdeeds.

On further analysis, this is God's method. God bombards a wandering, misbehaving humanity with love. The circle is remended. The relationships are re-established through love. When you feel isolated, guilty, sorry for what you are or have done, the love of God reaches out to you in overwhelming power. God bombards you, surrounds you, undergirds you with unspoken words of your goodness, your worth, your importance, your beauty, your potential. God loves us into goodness, loves us into relationship, loves us into his kingdom. God's love for us is not cheap. It cost Jesus his life. God so loves his struggling humanity, that Christ died for our sins. Rather than punishing you, rather than making you suffer the consequences, Jesus took upon himself the punishment, the suffering, the sin, on your behalf, so that you might experience reconciliation, redemption, salvation, a loving relationship with God.

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We are co-creators with God when we seek to create the kind of world God envisioned. We can be co-creators with God because, through Jesus, we have been redeemed. We have been reclaimed. We have been brought into relationship with God and reconciled. Our task then is to experience the reconciliation ourselves and tell the world the good news. Where are you in your relationship with God and with one another? Do you experience the brokenness or are you in solid relationship with God? God gives you freedom of choice.