

Sermon Text for October 5, 2014

by Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, Hebrews 11:1-3

“I believe...”

There are certain Sundays when you are more excited than others to come and be a part of the life of the family of FPC. Today is one of those Sundays. We have a lot going on. World Communion Sunday, Michael Neumann receiving his Bible, we have our church picnic this Sunday, but more than anything else, you know why I'm the most excited this Sunday...the beginning of our new sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. Normally we take a book of the Bible and work our way through it so this marks a departure from the norm. But why the Apostles' Creed? I heard a quote from Russell Wilson, the quarterback for the Seattle Seahawks who addressed the rash of domestic abuse in the NFL and he said: “I had a lot of anger that I didn't know what to do with. Thankfully I was saved by my faith when I was 14 years old and was able to start living for others instead of myself.”

Our entire series on James has encouraged us to live our lives not for ourselves, not to look at us and that it isn't about me, but rather about our faith lived out in action toward others. Jesus showed us the way in his life, death, and resurrection. The Apostles' Creed begins with I believe so it is tempting to think that today it is about me, it is about us. I believe..., We came to church so we can be uplifted, so we can feel good for the week, so I can be fed. But we will see it is not about me, but about our loving God who loves us unconditionally.

Both of our Scriptures today point to a faith that demands that as John the Baptist stated that we decrease so that God can increase. But that runs contrary to what we are taught in the world. The music we listen to tells us: What if God were one of us, or tell me all your thoughts on God. We have recently been very good at creating God in our own image instead of understanding who God is and basing our own lives on the model presented before us.

Today, when we say we believe, God takes our faith and places it where it belongs, out of our hands, and into his.

Today we begin a 16 week sermon series on what we believe. We are going to be using as our base, Scripture, and then follow along with the Apostles' Creed which will allow us to touch upon some of those issues that maybe some of us have had a hard time tackling. The Apostles' Creed has been recited in this church for over 182 years and within the Christian Church for over 1400 years. The Presbyterian Church as a denomination gathers more people from other denominations than any other church. That means that a majority of you haven't

grown up in the Presbyterian Church. How many of you were born to Presbyterian parents? Let's see if we can identify some of the other traditions that we have grown up with?

The Apostles' Creed is not a Presbyterian document. So this sermon series can be called Faith 101 because it teaches us the basics of what we believe. We are going to use the Apostles' Creed because it is the most widely used expression of our Christian faith. It is used from Strasburg, PA to Strasbourgh Germany, from Moscow Idaho to Moscow Russia, from Naples Florida, to Naples Italy.

We believe this confession as it is written contains an accurate reflection of what we believe as Christians. It also maintains its focus on God and not on us, even if we do begin today with the first two words of the Apostles' Creed which are: "I believe..."

What we find in Deuteronomy is one of the oldest and better known confessions of faith of the people of Israel. It is called the Shema which means in Hebrew hear or listen and it is taken from verses 3 and 4 where the verses begin, Hear therefore, O Israel, and Hear O Israel, Shema Ishrael. His confession of faith focused on the fundamentals of our faith. The Lord our God is one God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.

This basic teaching was then to be passed on, verse 7 and following tells us, to your children. Today we have the joy of presenting to Michael Neumann his 2nd grade Bible as a reflection that the faith of our ancestors, what we believe we haven't made up as we go along, but it has been passed on from generation to generation. The focus on God and God's faithfulness was taught which was in direct contrast to what their culture taught.

The people of Israel were surrounded by cultures where each generation another idol was created by hand to represent their needs, to represent a god they created in their own image. When we present this Bible our individual desires and needs, the God of the past comes shining through as Michael and Ken step in to do that which has been done by thousands of families before them. We are a part of something far bigger here than any individualistic idols ore desires that we may find in the culture around us.

When we move to Hebrews we find the author addressing a similar environment where believers were tempted, even in their faith, to focus on their desires and their wants. If the demands of their faith became too onerous then maybe that church isn't for me. Let me find a group of people who will let me be and just be a part of the crowd. Many times our faith and our belief in God is shaped by what we want from God. What we find is a God in the hands of angry sinners, instead of the reverse.

Adam and Eve in Genesis, from the very beginning, were tempted with self-idolatry by the serpent with the words: if you eat the fruit you can become like god yourself. Hebrews tells us today that our faith is less about us and has to be more about the object of our faith, God.

Hebrews tells us that when we say I believe that belief we call faith and that faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen. If we do not have faith then the reality of God is not in any way diminished. If we stop believing that in no way has any impact on the veracity of the Word of God. That should put us in our place. Calvin stated “If God should withdraw his hand a little, all things would immediately perish and dissolve into nothing.”

We think the same is true of us. If we don't act in a certain way or uphold our responsibilities then the world will come to an end. It is a great motivating factor to work hard, but over time it creates an “I believe” focused on ourselves and not on God. Faith, according to vs. 1 in Hebrews, gives us the ability to courageously swing out on the vine of God's promises over the chasm's of life, trusting that the vine would hold. Time and again, the vine was secure, the promises of God hold him.

God's word, which Hebrews tells us in vs. 3 created all that we see in his beauty of nature, which we will address in 3 weeks, also provides promises not based on our ability but on God's unmovable and never ending love. When you say I believe, it really isn't about you, it is about God. But we are taught by the world that you really can only believe in what you see and what you feel. You can only trust what you as a person can prove. You can't prove faith or belief, so it really doesn't exist.

But I Corinthians 4:18 tells us that what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal. Again Paul tells us that we are to walk by faith and not by sight. What a crazy way to live. Especially today, as if we can walk by faith and not by sight. We are assaulted by sights today that stun us and make us wonder if we can continue to trust those promises that make up that vine as we swing over the chasms of life. As I was looking at the facebook this past week I was stunned to see a post by a former member of our church in Moscow who showed the American held hostage by ISIS, Peter Kassig, whom I got to know in 2008 as I realized he attended MPC a couple of times and I think I played basketball with him in the US Embassy.

What we see and what we hear on the news is not a depiction of a God in control. Like Thomas we want to say I will not believe until God cleans this world up and makes it a better place to live in.

The trick to faith is not basing your life and your belief according to what you want, or what you experience or what you see, but on God when you trust as you swing on that vine of promises over the chasms. What is real is God's control which is hoped for and the knowledge that faith gives a certain reality to those things as yet unseen. Faith possesses in the present what God has promised for the future.

Our culture tells us to be true to ourselves. The most important thing is what I believe. We think to thine own self be true comes from Jesus when in fact it comes from Polonius speaking to his son in Shakespeare's Hamlet. But it is so tempting to make that our calling card. But I believe is not about being true to oneself. In fact, it is not about us at all.

We have to break our notion today that our faith has to serve us. It isn't about us, it is about God the Father Almighty, who created heaven and earth.

This Apostles' Creed reminds us that we have to live for something, someone far greater than us. Our purpose is to live for Jesus Christ. Amen.