

“What Kind of God?”
Romans 5:1-5
Trinity Sunday

June 16, 2019
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

It was just a couple of weeks ago that our family saw our first copperhead snake in our backyard. For those of you who don't yet realize this about me...I DON'T DO SNAKES. My motto has always been, “The only good snake is a dead snake.”

Now I understand that there are good snakes.
Last fall, one of our sons discovered a big, black snake slithering across our grass.

We were advised by our neighbors that this kind of snake is a great snake to have, because it eats the BAD snakes. Ok...I can live with black snakes that make a diet out of copperhead snakes.

But when we noticed the copperhead that was just next to our shed...
and then it slithered back under the shed...
I resolved, right then and there,
that I may not enter that shed until December...

Why do I bring this up?
This isn't a sermon about snakes, but we're going to return to the question in just a moment.

Some of you may recall that back in the fall, I promised that I would preach a sermon later in the year on the Apostles' Creed. After all, the Apostles' Creed is the creed we say most frequently here in worship, we say it every time there's a baptism in worship.

And yet, my hunch is that many of us who grew up learning the Creed did NOT learn why it was composed in the first place.

In other words, we do something almost every week in worship without knowing the WHY...would you mind spending a bit of time with me this morning on the WHY?

Here's the short version of the story.

In the second half of the second century, an individual named Marcion had a powerful heretical movement going in Rome.

He believed that God was not an all-powerful Creator, but was a "lesser energy," called a "Demi-urge". Marcion taught that God was "a blundering craftsman who created a product of which nothing good can be said."

"...how, he asked, could a good God create mosquitoes, crocodiles, and vipers...?"¹

In other words, Marcion said:

What kind of God would create poisonous snakes?

(I'll bet you've never made that connection before, but the next time you see a snake, I want you to think "Apostles' Creed...")

In Marcion's faith, Jesus came from a different spiritual world to save us—
NOT to save us from our sin, but from God—
and from this mangled creation in which we live.

According to Marcion, creation is not good,
the God of the Old Testament is not good,
we should only read some of Paul's letters and
part of Luke's Gospel and call it a day...

The list of strange of beliefs went on and on, but it also CAUGHT on.
In LARGE NUMBERS.

In other words, Marcion's version of Christian faith threatened to become the PRIMARY teachings of the faith. So one of the ways in which the Church did battle with Marcion was to define itself against his beliefs.

Do you remember how the Apostles' Creed begins?

1. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth..."

¹ Harry W. Eberts, Jr., *We Believe: A Study of the Book of Confessions for Church Officers*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994.

This was a way of saying that God is not a demi-urge, a lesser energy, but the Almighty...that God is the Creator of us all, of “heavens and earth.”

2. “And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord.”

In other words, Jesus was not from a different spiritual realm, separate from God. Jesus was from God, and is a part of God, and is God’s only Son.

3. “...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...”

Jesus was not just a spiritual being, but was truly human.
Born. Suffered. Died.

Again and again, the words of the Creed refute what Marcion taught.

It was a response to controversy.

It was a way of answering the question: “What kind of God do we believe in?”

Not a demi-urge, not a bumbling craftsman...but God who is Almighty and our Creator—and who gave us Jesus Christ, God’s only Son.

All of which may be fine and good for Marcion’s time, but what about our time?

Some say we live in a “post-creedal” day when it comes to church.

That creeds can even be detrimental to the non-churched, people who visit a church and say the creed and don’t have any idea where it came from...

We live in a day and age when INDIVIDUAL faith is emphasized.

As David Brooks put it in his column just this past week:

“The emerging spirituality is a hodgepodge spirituality. Each person borrows practices from, say, Native American, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish and

SoulCycle traditions and blends them in a way he or she finds moving. There is no grand narrative... Religion bows before individualism.”²

To this way of thinking, the Apostles’ Creed says no.

Christianity is not just individual faith.
It’s COMMUNAL faith.
It’s the faith that is taught to us, passed down to us,
given to us...

This is why, when someone comes to me and says that they have trouble believing some particular phrase in the Creed...that’s fine.

The Apostles’ Creed isn’t supposed to be a perfect reflection of YOUR faith. It’s a statement of the Church’s faith.

And every time we say it,
we affirm not just what we believe or what the Church believes.

We affirm **who we belong to...**

Do you know how important that is?
How meaningful it can be to have a community of faith CLAIM you,
for you to say...THIS is who I belong to...

Heidi Neumark is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in New York City.

A few years ago, she wrote about a family that had recently joined her congregation after suffering the loss of their 15-month-old son. They were grateful for the church’s ministry to them during this devastating time in their lives, so they decided to join.

Now the family also had an older boy, a 5-year-old named Charlie.

Neumark writes:

² David Brooks, “The Age of Aquarius, All Over Again!,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2019.

“Many Sundays Charlie hid behind his parents’ legs. He rarely spoke. He didn’t want to go to Sunday school but sat with his dad and drew pictures of cars and rockets...

[One of those rockets had a prayer attached to it]:

‘Dear God, please send us a rocket ship
so Jakey and me can go to the stars.
I love Jakey. Amen.’

Eventually, Charlie decided to go to Sunday school with his father sitting nearby.

“One Sunday the Sunday school teacher prepared a lesson on Tabitha...”

You remember Tabitha, right?

Mary Kathleen preached on Tabitha on confirmation Sunday last month.

Well, the Sunday school teacher “told the story of Peter raising Tabitha [from the dead....]”

And then?

“The teacher suddenly panicked. Wouldn’t Charlie wonder why Jesus did not bring his brother back to life? Why hadn’t God answered his prayers and those of his parents?”

But the panic was unnecessary.
Because this quiet little boy, Charlie,
for the first time ever in class, began to speak.

After hearing the story of Tabitha, he told the class...
that his brother had died and that Jesus had raised his brother too
and that his brother was with Jesus in heaven
and that his brother was also still with him.

He showed the class a woven bracelet that reminded him of his brother.

And the class—
full of 4 and 5 and 6-year-old squirming children

they sat perfectly still.

Neumark goes on:

“There [was] a little girl in the class born with drugs in her veins, raised by her grandmother while her mother goes in and out of treatment. Her name [unbelievably!] is Heaven.

[Upon hearing Charlie’s story]
 Heaven spontaneously got up and went over
 and gave her classmate a hug.

Following her example, every child in the class got up and,
 one by one, hugged their little brother in Christ—and his father.”³

Do you know how important it is...not just to believe, but to BELONG?

The Apostles’ Creed says that we belong to one another. It says that we are part of that mysterious body, the “communion of saints,” and that this is how God reveals God’s love to us.

What kind of God do we believe in?
 According to this Creed, it is a God who comes to us in one another.

I’ve got personal experience with this one.

In less than a year here, it’s not just that I have felt very much at home with you.

It’s not just that our family has been welcomed so warmly by you.

I have experienced God’s presence...in YOU.

Can you explain that?
 I cannot explain that.
 But I know it’s true.

³ Heidi Neumark, “Companion to Strangers: Building Bonds in Sorrow and Love,” in *The Christian Century*, February 26, 2014.

What was at stake for the early church when this creed was composed was not the existence of snakes.

It was God.

The size of God.

The mystery of God.

The breadth and depth and height of God.

The Apostles' Creed was written to tell the Marcionites:

Your god is too small.

And I think the way that we see it most clearly in the Creed is the way that the Apostles' Creed handles suffering.

It's much different than how Marcion handled it.

According to Marcion, Jesus was a Savior who came to rescue us from a blundering God who contributes to our suffering. According to the early Church, Jesus is the very presence of God, a God who is found in the midst of our suffering.

Let me get at it this way...

The late Samuel Miller tells a delightful story of a former Munich comedian, Karl Valentin:

[In Valentin's show]...

The curtain goes up and reveals darkness;

and in this darkness is a solitary circle of light

thrown by a street lamp.

Valentin, with his long-drawn and deeply worried face,
walks round and round this circle of light,
desperately looking for something.

As Paul writes to the church in Rome in our text:

“...we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.
 And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings,
 knowing that suffering produces endurance,
 and endurance produces character,
 and character produces hope,
 and hope does not disappoint us...”

What kind of God do we believe in?
 Not a God who AVOIDS suffering.
 Not a God who CAUSES suffering.

But a God who suffers with us...and is able, in ways we cannot predict or explain, to redeem our suffering.

When I was 12 years old, my grandmother died.
 I was very close to her, and it was hard.
 It was the first time that I had had to deal with the grief
 of losing a beloved member of the family.

About 7 months later, it was my birthday.
 My 13th birthday happened to fall on a Sunday that year.
 So my family went to church.

After worship, my mother told me something.

She said she was quite sure that my grandmother, her mother, the one who had died seven months before...that my grandmother had been with us in church that morning.

She didn't know how she knew that. She just knew.

Can you explain it?
 I cannot explain it.
 I do know this:

Whenever we say the Apostles' Creed,
 and we come to the words:
 "I believe...in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"
 —it's not just some ancient or abstract principle.

It's personal.
 It's about a God whose love is so much greater than our love.
 Saying those words is a reminder to me that my grandmother is now alive
 with God.

The truth is, I would never have come to that conclusion on my own.
 It was passed down to me.
 What I needed was a church community to teach me that long ago.

The Apostles' Creed isn't just about belief.
 It's about belonging.
 Belonging to one another...and belonging to God.

A colleague once told me about a woman in one of his former churches.
 She was from Holland, I think...and she had lived through the Holocaust.

She was the only member of her family who made it.
 The Nazis took the lives of the other members of her family.

And one day, after church, she went into her pastor's office.

She told him that whenever they say the Apostles' Creed in worship, and
 they come to the line about the forgiveness of sins—well, she told her pastor that
 she couldn't say that phrase.

Because of what happened to her family, she could not say "I believe in the
 forgiveness of sins."

And her pastor responded that she didn't have to say it.
 He said that the Creed is intended to stand for the faith of the whole Church,
 the church universal, thru the years.

And then he said this:

“There will be times in each of our lives when we cannot say one part of the Creed or another. But that’s why everyone else stands with you to say it. If you remain silent, other voices around you will say it.

They will say it for you.
They will carry you wherever you need to go.”⁵

Now I’ve been at Westminster just shy of a year.
Still learning a lot about our church...but I do know this:

- Whenever you come to a broken part of your life, Westminster will stand beside you.
- Whenever you feel like you can’t go on, this community of faith will carry you.

Because in this community...is Christ.

Even if you fall silent, the risen Christ will carry you.
He will carry all of us, wherever we need to go.

Amen.

⁵ I am indebted to the Rev. Roger Quillin for this story.