

I BELIEVE IN GOD

Matthew 28:16-20

Second Wednesday in Lent

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 28, verses 16 through 20. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 28, beginning at verse 16, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sometimes when I meet someone new, and they learn that I am a pastor, they ask me, “So, what does your church believe?” And I usually say something like, “Oh, lots of things.” Then I ask if they are familiar with the Apostles' Creed.

To those who are unfamiliar with the creed, or even just Christianity, it's a great tool to introduce the faith.

To those who are familiar with the creed, and have learned a bit of Christian doctrine, this might seem very basic. Someone might think, *Yeah, but what else?* We should not be so quick to move beyond the creed. Most of what we believe is in the Apostles' Creed. And if it's not in the Apostles' Creed, it's probably in the Nicene Creed. And there is very little left over that isn't in the Nicene Creed.

These creeds don't go into great detail. The Athanasian Creed goes into a bit more detail about the doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. But the Apostles' and Nicene creeds are quite short, especially when we recognize that they summarize the teaching of the entire Bible. So they don't explain each article of doctrine. Instead, they kind of outline it. They give us a summary. And they don't recount all the little stories about Abraham, Moses, David, and Ehad. But they do tell us the main story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. So the creeds are kind of like a roadmap, where we can see the whole picture at once and we can see how it all fits together. Then we can zoom in on one part at a time.

So when we're first learning the faith, the creed gives us the general knowledge of Christianity. And then, as we grow in grace and the knowledge of God, it helps us keep things in perspective. The Bible is so rich and deep, that when we explore one part of it, or when we become really interested in one specific article of doctrine, we can just dig and dig until we get lost in that thing. The creed helps us keep everything in perspective.

For example, you might get really interested in creation. And there's a lot we can study about the creation of the world. People devote their entire careers to studying it. And that's good. We need those people. But then you might confess the creed and think to yourself, *Hmm, I don't*

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know much about Christ's descent into hell, or the Holy Spirit, or the resurrection of the body. The creed helps us keep each individual article of doctrine in context with the rest of the Christian faith, and it reminds us to study the other articles as well. Sometimes when I look at the creed, I ask myself, *What here have I not taught on for a while?* Then I look for an opportunity to teach that article. A mature Christian should, sooner or later, develop a deep understanding of each phrase in the Apostles' Creed.

So that's what we're going to work on this Lenten season. We're going to be studying the Apostles' Creed. And I'm not sure yet if we'll get all the way through it this year. Some of it might spill over into Lent next year. And that's okay. It's not something where we should just try to get through it so we can say that we did it. It's better to just live in it for a while and give each part the attention it deserves. That's when we will experience the most growth in our spirits.

The Apostles' Creed is, of course, doctrine. Some people say they don't like doctrine. I don't really believe that. The word doctrine simply means "teaching." Christian doctrine is the teaching of who God is and what he does. And I'm pretty sure most Christians care about that. More likely, if you say you don't like doctrine, that probably means that you don't like *Christian* doctrine. That's actually quite natural. Our sinful hearts despise God and everything about him. We should be aware of this, and we should look for those places where our hearts resist God, because it's not always obvious. So if you think you don't like doctrine, I want to challenge that thought. What don't you like? Do you not like learning about God? Do you not want to know who he is, what he's like, and what he's done? That could be what's going on if you say you don't like doctrine. You may feel an itch that when you come to church, you really want something else. You may want to hear that you're good enough the way you are. Or you may want to learn how to become better, so that you won't need so much forgiveness. Or you may want to hear things you already know and believe, so that you can feel good about being right. Studying doctrine isn't about being right. It's about becoming right. It's about learning, more and more, the truth of God. This necessarily involves putting aside errors we might believe, and humbly submitting to the Word of God. It doesn't mean accepting whatever I say. It may mean testing what I say. It may mean correcting me if I say something contrary to Scripture. But it certainly means accepting correction from Scripture.

Another reason you might say that you don't like doctrine, is that sometimes it's hard to understand, and sometimes the pastor or teacher is kind of dry. Learning it might not always be fun. So I will try to point out why a particular doctrine matters. Doctrine is never meaningless. But I can't promise to make it fun. Not everything is supposed to be fun. Some things are just hard. And it's valuable to do things and learn things simply because they are good.

Jesus wants us to study doctrine. In the passage we just read, Jesus commands his disciples to **"make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"** (28:19-20). When Jesus instructs his apostles to teach us everything he has commanded, that's exactly what the New Testament is. It's Jesus' apostles teaching us what Jesus commanded them to teach us. And when we read the New Testament, we see that Jesus and his apostles' felt the same way about the Old Testament.

The Apostles' Creed is simply a summary of biblical teaching. Every word and phrase very clearly comes from the Bible. So let's consider the creed.

Tonight we're going to focus on the very first words: "I believe in God."

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What does it mean to believe? We talked about this on Sunday, so I'm not going to give you the whole thing again. But faith, as the Bible speaks of it, has three aspects to it. If you were here on Sunday, do you remember what they were? Knowledge, assent, and trust.

First, faith means that we know something to be true. Faith is not less than knowledge. When we say we believe in God, we're not using the word the same way as if we say, "I believe the weather will be nice this weekend." The weather may or may not be nice; we don't really know, but God is who he is. He is real and objective. So faith does not say, "I believe in God, even if he's not real, or even if he's something else than what the Bible says." If the God we confess is not true, there's no sense believing in him. Biblical faith is not less than knowledge. It includes knowledge, but it is more than knowledge.

Second, to believe in something means that we assent to it. We affirm or confess it to be true, like when we confess the creeds.

Third—and this is really the difference between knowledge and faith—we trust in it. To believe in God means that we know he is true, we confess him to be true, and we trust in him. He is our hope for this life and the next. We trust that he is good, and he is for us. So when we confess that we believe in God, that's different than anything else, because it includes this trust and dependence on him.

We don't speak this way about other things. If someone asks, "Do you believe in hell?" or, "Do you believe in the devil?" We can say, "There is a devil, but I don't trust in him," or, "Hell is real, but I'm not hoping to go there." We can't say that we *believe in* these things, and the Bible never talks about believing in the devil, or hell, or sin, or death, or anything evil. The Bible speaks of these things as real, but it does not speak of believing in them, because belief includes trust.

We believe in God.

So who is God?

In the Scriptures, he has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The creed teaches us this by how it is structured. There are three paragraphs: one about the Father, one about the Son, and one about the Holy Spirit.

The basic truth of the Trinity is that there is one God, and there are three persons who make up this God. They each possess the fullness of the Godhead. They are equal in power, wisdom, love, glory, majesty, honor, etc., etc. And all three members are eternal. And it's not that each one makes up one third of God. They are each fully God. They are distinct persons, who each possess the fullness of deity, and they are united in one Godhead. They each share the same divine nature. The simplest way I can put it is this: one God, three persons, and each person is fully God.

There are, however, distinctions between them in regard to their relationships to one another. There is a hierarchy within the Trinity, even though they are equal. The Son is subordinate to the Father. This does not imply inferiority; they are equal, but there is an order to their relationship. And the Holy Spirit proceeds both from the Father and the Son. Together the Father and the Son send him to us, so the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son, but is not inferior to them.

Being God means that one is infinite in power, wisdom, love, glory, majesty, honor, etc., etc. The nature of God is infinite, and one cannot be sort-of infinite. So there is an order to the relationships between them, but the divine nature is the same.

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If this is confusing for you, perhaps an analogy will help. The Trinity is like ... um ... well ... nothing. That shouldn't really surprise us. God is a totally different being than we are. He is infinite. He has no bounds or limits. Everything in this world is limited in some way. So there is nothing in the whole creation that compares to the Trinity. There is nothing else in all the universe that is one thing, yet also three distinct things at the same time, while all three distinct things possess the full nature of the one thing. Outside of the Trinity, such a thing does not exist.

There are no good analogies. But that hasn't stopped theologians from trying. So I'm going to give you a couple bad analogies. They get a little bit right, but a lot wrong. So they're a little bit helpful in showing what the Trinity is, but they're more helpful by showing us what it's not. So I want you to know these are bad analogies.

One popular analogy is to an apple. An apple is one thing, yet it has three parts: the core, the fruit, and the skin. What's wrong with this analogy? The three parts don't all have the same nature, and they don't each possess the fullness of the apple. You can take the skin, but that's not an apple. You can take the core, but that's not an apple. You can take the fruit, and it might be the best part of the apple, but it's only part of the apple. It's not the apple. This heresy is called "partialism." It denies that each member of the Trinity is fully God. Analogies with triangles or three-leaf clovers are also partialism.

Another popular analogy is to water. Water is one substance, and it always maintains the quality of being H₂O, but it can take three different forms: vapor, liquid, and ice. The idea is that sometimes God appears as Father, other times as the Son, and other times as the Holy Spirit. What's wrong with this analogy? While it maintains the singular nature of the Godhead, it limits him to one person at a time. This heresy is called "modalism." The idea is that God takes on different modes. This heresy denies the three distinct persons of God. It's easily refuted by the account of Jesus' baptism, where all three persons of the Trinity appear together. We just read about this on Sunday. The Holy Spirit descends on the Son while the Father speaks from heaven (Mark 1:9-11).

Different analogies might capture a part of the truth of the Trinity, but in doing so, they always end up denying another part. So it's better to simply remember the basic revelation of Scripture, that there is one God, three persons, and each person is fully God.

The doctrine of the Trinity is taught in many places in Scripture. Most of the references are in the New Testament, but not all of them. Even in the Old Testament, there are several passages demonstrating that God is more than one person (e.g., Gen 1:2, 26). Some of them speak of a relationship between God and the Messiah, but they also speak of the Messiah as being God (Ps. 110; Mal. 3:1). And there are several passages that specifically speak of the Holy Spirit. The distinction between the three persons is there in the Old Testament, and it becomes clearer in the New Testament.

The word "trinity" never appears in the Bible, but the concept is clearly taught. As you read through the Bible, you will see several places where it is revealed that there is only one God. You will also see several places where God is revealed to be a plurality of persons. And if you make a list of these persons who are revealed to be God, you will come up with three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You won't come up with two, and you won't come up with four. You will come up with three, and exactly three, and they will be these three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of the clearest passages is what read from Matthew 28, where Jesus commanded his disciples to go and baptize. This isn't the institution of Baptism. Baptism had been going on for a

few years now, beginning with John, and then also with Jesus and his disciples baptizing people in Israel. But here Jesus commands his disciples to take this Baptism and his teaching to all the nations. He says to baptize “**them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**”

There’s one really interesting thing that I want you to notice about this. How many names are there? It looks like three, right? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But how many names does Jesus say there are? Just one. It’s “**The name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**” God has just one Name. Of course, he has different titles or words that we call him by, like Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the individual persons. Or for the full Godhead, we might call him “Yahweh,” “Adonai,” or just “God.” But when we say that God has just one Name, we mean that he is one. There is one God, and he is three persons. We see this in many places. One of them is here, where Jesus speaks of the one Name of God, but also the three persons of God.

Now you might be thinking, *So what?* That’s interesting, and maybe a bit confusing. I hope you see it as more marvelous and mysterious than simply confusing. But you might also be thinking, *So what? What difference does it make to me that God is three persons in one Godhead?* One of my goals as a pastor is to help you see that all theology is practical. It matters to us.

The big reason this matters is that the atonement requires that God is more than one person. Our problem as human beings is that we are sinful, and we fall under the wrath of God. So, in God’s justice, it is good, and right, and necessary for him to punish sin. So the only way to save us is to take our place and bear our sin for us. God did this by sending his Son for us (1 John 4:10). In order to save us, God must be both the one who punishes sin and the one who bears that punishment. Therefore, it is necessary for God to be more than one person. There must be a Father to pour out the wrath of God, and there must be a Son to absorb that wrath. And in order for the Son to be a willing sacrifice, and not just some helpless victim, he must also be of one mind with the Father. It is actually necessary for our salvation and for the forgiveness of our sins that God is distinct persons who are united in one Godhead.

Now why does it have to be three persons, and not two or four? I don’t know. Maybe somebody does, but I don’t know. But it is that way. And as we go through the creed, we will see the different things each person of the Trinity does for us. Wrapped up in the doctrine of the Trinity is everything about God and what he has done for us. We will explore this throughout the rest of the season of Lent. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals what the Father did to create you, what he continues to do to preserve your physical body. It reveals what Jesus did to redeem you and forgive your sins. It reveals what the Holy Spirit is currently doing to preserve you in the Christian faith, and what he will do to raise you on the Last Day, transform you in body and soul, and grant you everlasting life. All of this is wrapped up in the doctrine of the Trinity, because it reveals who God is, and how he loves. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And he manifests his love for you as these three persons in one Godhead. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.