

Feb. 27 - 28, 2010
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Christ Church
Teaching Series
The Creeds Sermon

Last evening we began our worship in a different way than we began it today - we began by saying the Nicene Creed together, where it actually always comes right after the sermon.

But the reason we did that is because during this season of Lent, the sermons are going to focus on different parts of the liturgy in our worship, and each weekend, we'll look at another part of what we say and do together, as we come together in worship.

This morning, we'll say the Nicene Creed in its usual place. And I think that with what we're going to learn about that creed, we may find ourselves thinking a bit more about what we're saying together, and how it came to be what it is...

Last week Hillary preached a very good sermon about scripture and how we use those words in worship and in our lives - and how important that is...

And if this sermon had a title, and we don't do titles of sermons here at Christ Church - but if we did, it would NOT be titled - "Everything you ever wanted to know about the Creeds of the church, but you were afraid to ask".

When I was in seminary, we did learn just about everything we wanted to know about the Creeds - and it took a long time and it took a lot of lectures to learn all that...and some final exams to make sure that we did.

So, this will not be a seminary lecture, but maybe more like a snapshot, or a Reader's Digest version of the Creeds, and I usually like to tell a story or something like a story in sermons that people can hopefully relate to and remember and hang onto -

something that ties in with the readings - the music - something that helps us get through whatever we're dealing with in our lives.

So, I guess we'll just see how the Spirit leads here...and maybe that's something to remember...that the Spirit always leads and guides us, in our lives.... even when we don't realize that's happening at all..

So, first of all, let's do a little learning, so we can get an idea of what the Creeds are, and where they came from - how they came about.

And first of all, the word creed comes from the Latin word credo - which means - (this will be your exam) "I believe".

So, a creed is a belief statement, and in the framework of the church, and the liturgies in worship services, a creed is a faith statement that we say together - about what we believe.

There are three creeds in the Christian Church, and the earliest is the Apostles Creed - which was named for the Apostles but it wasn't written by the Apostles - it wasn't written by any of them.

But it was called that because it was a pretty accurate statement of what the Apostles and the early church believed. And it began to really take its form in the very early third century and it went through various stages until it finally became what we have today.

We say it in Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, when we have baptisms and when we come together to celebrate the life of someone who has died.

And skipping the Nicene Creed for right now, the third Creed - which is hardly ever said anymore, and was also named for somebody who didn't write it, is the Athanasian Creed...

which was named for Athanasius, a bishop of Alexandria. And it was named for him because it incorporated his beliefs - especially about the nature of the Trinity. But it was actually written in the 6th century - and he was dead by then.

Some churches occasionally use the Athanasian Creed on Trinity Sunday - we don't - but I had people say it together one Trinity Sunday in a church where I served - just so they could get an idea of what it was, and the great detail of what it says about the Trinity, among many other things - about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit...who they are - what they do...

But it also says very strongly at the end, that if you have done good works in your life, you're going to have eternal life, and if you have done evil in your life, you are going to be condemned to the eternal fire...and we know what that means.

And, it says, at the very end of the Creed...the last sentence - if you don't believe every word that is said in this creed, you will not be saved...

Pretty strong words....

And so, on Trinity Sunday, we said that creed instead of the Nicene Creed and after the service I had a lot of people come through the door kind of smiling and they said "that was one long creed!" And it is!

And somebody else said to me, "Well, if I had to say that every Sunday I would have to stop coming to church, because I can't believe every word it says..."

And somebody else said, “Well, if we used that Creed every Sunday, the sermon would have to be really, really short!”

So - I don't mean to make fun of that Creed, because it was written for a purpose back then...it wanted to explain absolutely everything about what we were to believe.

But, the Nicene Creed is what we're used to saying. And we say it together every weekend at any of our worship services - after the sermon - and then later in the liturgy we come to the Lord's Table together for Holy Communion.

And unless we had heard seminary lectures, or learned during education hours, or read books or gone on the internet to read all about the Creeds and especially the Nicene Creed,

we would not know that the words we say - finally came together the way they are, out of conflict. Conflict of beliefs - between people and cultures and religions - and it got pretty violent.

And there were even interventions by police and armies.

The whole process of beginning to put the Creed together in the Council of Nicea in 325 and then finalizing it in 381 was messy. It was emotional - it could be cruel and violent and very argumentative.

and that lovely old hymn, “They'll know we are Christians by our love”, which wasn't written back then, but if it had been - could not have been sung and believed very much, by folks who were in the midst of the turmoil and controversy about the meaning, the theology and the wording that various powerful church leaders wanted in that faith statement of the church.

Because they did not agree.....at all.

But thankfully, underneath all the conflict, the words finally came together out of love and care - and compromise - because the people who were given this holy task wanted to somehow explain the mystery of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit - and Resurrection and Forgiveness of Sins and Eternal Life....

They wanted to explain all that...in the best way they could.

It was all a mystery - they knew it was a mystery, but they did their very best to put the mystery into words. So that people could say ‘I believe this.’ “We believe this...”

Sometimes in our own lives, we try to explain mysteries and we do our very best too, but we can only go so far, because mysteries can never be fully and completely explained.

We want things to make sense and we try to understand things that we can't fully

understand, because it would be so much easier if we only knew. And sometimes we just say, well, this is what I believe. This is what gets me through...

So, now you know that there's a lot of background to these very words that some of us know by heart and believe, and some of us try to believe, and some of us want to believe, and some of us aren't so sure...but there's something about saying them together in our worship...

that joins us together with every other person around the world in churches who say this creed every time they come together in a service of Holy Communion - when they come to the Lord's Table.

And that to me, is a powerful communion of souls and saints, and it somehow brings us all together whoever we are and wherever we are.

Those who have gone before us have said these Creeds and those who come after us will say them too, and unless and until there is a major revision of this creed, this is the way it will be.

When I would be part of teaching confirmation classes in various churches, one of the things I liked the young people to do was to begin to think about how they might rewrite the Nicene Creed and use their own words to make it say what it says.

And they took that very seriously and they did it. And I wish that I had some of those creeds with me right now to share with you, because some of the wisdom and thoughts they had were beautiful and moving and might even bring tears to your eyes, because of the way they looked at, and experienced God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit working in their own lives.

They knew it was a mystery, but they did their very best...

And on the day they were confirmed, the bishop let the whole congregation say that Creed. And as we said together what these beautiful children had written from their hearts with great care, it did bring tears to our eyes, and it was holy time...because we knew each of these children....

I can share something else with you though, that was written about 50 years ago by Christian missionaries for the Maasai people in Kenya and northern Tanzania.

And this creed, like the Nicene Creed, was written to help these people express their faith as they lived it within their own Maasai culture.

So...see what it says to you....picture these beautiful Maasai people all saying this creed together

We believe in the One High God, who out of love created the beautiful world and

everything good in it. He created men and women and wanted us to be happy in the world.

God loves the world, and every nation and tribe on the earth. We have known this High God in the darkness, and now we know him in the light.

God promised in the book of his word, the Bible, that he would save the world and all nations and tribes. We believe that God made good his promise, by sending his son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor, in a little village.

Who left his home, and was always on safari, doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love.

He was rejected by his people, nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord.

We believe that all our sins are forgiven through him. All who have faith in him must be sorry for their sins, be baptized in the Holy Spirit of God, live the rules of love, and share the bread together in love, and announce the good news to others, until Jesus comes again.

We are waiting for him. He is alive. He lives. This we believe....amen

So, what do we believe - really? What might we write? Who is God in the Great Mystery for us?

And as the Maasia Creed says, we have known God in the darkness and now we know him in the light.

I pray that as we continue to move into this season of Lent, that wherever we may be in our own darkness, that we know that God is there too and never, ever leaves.

And that wherever we may be in the light - however that light happens for us - and shines on us and shines in us - that we know that God is there too. Jesus is there too....

always...always and everywhere....no matter what.