

## **What We Believe**

### **Acts 2:1-41**

#### **READ Acts 2:1-41**

This is an important day in the life of the Church, not just for New Harmony and not just for Methodists, but for all Christians, because today, Pentecost, is celebrated as the birth of the Church universal. The occasion described in this passage from the Book of Acts is the story of a bunch of frightened, committed, devoted, and confused people who received a power that changed them, and through them, changed the world. These followers of Jesus Christ were just a few weeks removed from the drama of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and only about 10 days removed from the Ascension of the risen Christ to heaven. They had been told to wait there in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised His disciples in the Upper Room before His Crucifixion and had promised to them all just before His Ascension. While they waited, they continued to live in the faith they had grown up in. They were gathered as faithful Jews on the day we celebrate as Pentecost. The word “Pentecost” is from the Greek word that means “fiftieth”, so 50 days after Passover, the Jews observed the Feast of Weeks – one of the festivals mandated to the people of Israel during the Exodus and described in Leviticus 23. To these bewildered but faithful people, the Holy Spirit came with power, and everything changed.

This day is often mistakenly thought of as the first manifestation of the Holy Spirit, falling into a really bad concept of God as a sequence of Old Testament God, Gospel Jesus, then Holy Spirit. That is terrible theology, violating every principle of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is manifest throughout the Old Testament, going back to Genesis 1:2, where we are told of the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in Creation. We will come back to this, and you’ve heard it before, but the fullness of the Triune God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit – has been real and present and manifest in all His aspects and facets and glory from before the beginning. Any other concept of God is wrong, and frankly, heresy.

This particular manifestation of the Holy Spirit is significant for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that it represents the fulfillment of a specific promise made by Jesus. He told them He would provide for them, and He told them to wait for the fulfillment

of that promise. Here, God delivers, as God always does to those who wait faithfully. This was an extraordinary event, which would obviously have made a permanent impression on all who experienced it, both the gathered fellowship and those who experienced it from the outside. Some of you, maybe many of you, maybe all of you – not for me to know – have had that sort of experience of the presence of God in which things you could never explain in human terms became real in you or for you. It is life-changing if we allow it to be.

But I read the whole story this morning because I want us to see something here that we might miss if we stop with the violent wind and the preaching in all languages. I want us to see what happened here to Peter.

This is the same Peter who 50 days ago denied knowing Jesus. This is the same Peter who 47 days ago walked away from the empty tomb muttering to himself and scratching his head wondering what had happened. This is the same Peter who was cut to the quick by the risen Christ asking him three times by the lakeside “Do you love me?” But Jesus had changed Simon’s name long ago to a word meaning “rock” and proclaimed that the Church would be built on that rock. Tradition holds that the place where these 120 believers were gathered on the day of Pentecost was the southern steps of the Temple mount, a very public place, and likely crowded on this day with people from all over the known world gathered for the Feast. Those steps are made up of stone blocks half the size of this room, with steps of smaller blocks that allow you to go up and down without climbing. With the extraordinary power of the Holy Spirit, Peter draws this whole crowd up and shouts: “Hey, all of you, listen! This is important. Let me tell you what it means to be a follower of the One God. Let me tell you what believers in the One God believe.” This rough, likely uneducated fisherman from Galilee was transformed, and delivered a sermon that converted 3000 people on the spot to a faith – to Christianity – that they may not have ever heard of before. Peter could do that because the power of the Holy Spirit enabled him to clearly describe what he believed, and why. 2000 years later, our challenge is to claim that same power and tell the world what we believe.

The world outside the Church, I am certain, is thoroughly confused about what we believe, partly because we do such a poor job of articulating it. If what I am about to tell

you is true, we do a poor job of articulating what we believe because we don't know ourselves.

About three weeks ago, the Christian Science Monitor had a story about the results of a world-wide poll of followers of various faiths. The primary object had been to look at the variety of views among Muslims around the world, but the part that caught my attention was the results from among Christians in the United States. The poll subjects were asked "Do you believe that your religion is the one true faith?" Who said yes? Only 12 percent of mainline Protestants – Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians – and only 34 percent of people who described themselves as evangelical Protestants – a category that would include a lot of members of those mainline denominations, plus Pentecostals and non-denominationalists – answered that question in the affirmative. I found that shocking. Something less than one-third of the people who identified themselves as Christian claimed Christianity as the one true path to right relationship with God. Turn those numbers around, and it reads that more than two-thirds of the people who call themselves Christians in the United States believe that there are other equally valid paths to right relationship with God. If these numbers are anywhere close to correct, some huge and deeply troubling fraction of people who call themselves Christian do not know what that means. Real Christian discipleship is extraordinarily demanding; Christ demands your full allegiance, your highest priority, and the subordination of your own will to the will of God. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this costly grace: the grace of God is freely given, but it costs us everything to claim it. If there was an easier, less demanding path to right relationship with God, why would anyone choose to be a Christian? Just do some yoga, burn some incense, and try to be a nice person. The answer is that there is no other path to right relationship with God than through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christianity is the one true religion. We need not apologize for that, nor apologize to or for those who are excluded from salvation by that truth. Peter had no problem with that on the day of Pentecost, and neither should we.

So can we articulate what we believe? There is another trap here that many fall into, that when we are asked to describe our beliefs, we start talking about what God has done for us or what God is doing in us. That is important, but our faith cannot be properly described

in terms of what God has done for just us. God is not some sort of cosmic ATM, dispensing favors to earn our faith. What if the favors aren't there, at least in the way we want or expect? What if life is dealing us nothing but misery, at least in human terms? God never loves us less; God never loves us more, because God loves us completely all the time, regardless of the circumstances of our lives. Faith is not about what God does; faith, rightly grounded, is about who God is – grounded in the nature and character of God. That is what Peter is talking about in the sermon on the day of Pentecost.

How can we do that? How can we stand in front of a crowd or look one other person in the eye and say: "Listen. Let me tell you what I believe. Let me tell you what it means to be a Christian."?

We do that every Sunday, in one way or another, through our affirmations of faith. A Houston, Texas pastor named Jessica LaGrone tells this story about a young friend of hers.

Conversation among a group of friends one evening turned to religion. As this young woman's friends went around discussing their convictions, it was clear that most of these people weren't really sure what they believed. They spoke in vague generalities, and some of them weren't able to articulate what they believed at all. Finally, she realized that everyone was looking at her. Somebody said: "Well, you're quiet, what do you believe?"

She opened her mouth without even knowing how she would answer. She started out: "I believe... I believe in God." Then out of nowhere, she heard herself say: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord." Almost unable to stop herself, she continued until she had recited the Apostles Creed from beginning to end.

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That is one of the reasons we use creeds and statements of affirmation that have been developed out of Scripture – to help us organize how we think about our faith and to help us articulate it.

The insert in your bulletin shows you how this works in the creeds that we use the most. The first two are ancient, dating from the earliest days of the Church. The other two

are more contemporary. But as comprehensive statements of what it means to be a Christian, they all share some important concepts. In the context of our modern culture, where we have so many competing versions of faith, so many different descriptions of what it means to be in right relationship with God, we need to grasp these concepts.

Maybe the most important thing that these creeds share is the complete affirmation of faith in the Triune God – the Trinity – in all the fullness of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When Peter talked about God in his sermon on Pentecost, he was talking to people who already shared some level of understanding about God. People who would have readily agreed that God is all this and so much more:

- Independent. God does not need us or any part of creation for anything, but we and all the rest of creation glorify God and bring Him joy.
- Unchanging. The entire story of God and the relationship of God to His people is the story of God’s love for His people and His desire for each of us and all of us to be one with Him. That never changes. God never changes, which should be extraordinarily comforting to us. God will never stop loving us, no matter how much we disappoint Him or offend Him or even reject Him.
- Omnipresent. God exists in all space and all time. Past, present, and future are all the same to God. See God in your past – Feel God in your present – Imagine God in your future, because God is already there, and He already loves you there.
- Revealed. God is unknown only to those who refuse to know Him. God is revealed in Creation, in Scripture, through His continuing presence with us.

When Peter began talking about Jesus Christ is where the distinctive nature of Christianity becomes most evident. Jesus Christ was God Incarnate, God in human form. The prologue to the Gospel of John expresses this beautifully.

**READ John 1:1-4, 14**

If we understand this properly, the statements of Jesus Himself about being one with the Father, and this: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (*John 14:6*) are self-evident. No one can come to God except through

God. Simple enough. But if you do not believe what we say we believe about Jesus being God Incarnate, none of this makes sense. No mere human can be the pathway to God. God Incarnate in Jesus Christ is the exclusive claim of Christianity, and it is the distinctive belief of Christianity that makes it the one true religion. We believe in the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and any belief system that denies that Jesus Christ was God Incarnate does not believe in that same God. That is a hard teaching in a culture that seems to value inclusiveness above principle, but is the truth and we are obligated as Christians to claim it and proclaim it and bring the world to it.

Peter said in verse 36: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” It is in the Lordship of Jesus Christ that the Christian faith becomes so completely demanding. For us to accept Jesus as the agent of our forgiveness and our Savior and Redeemer is only the beginning; it is in surrender to His Lordship that we are saved. Paul said this clearly to the church at Rome: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (*Romans 10:9*) It is in surrender to His Lordship that faith moves from intellectual assent to the fullness of life in relationship with God.

And it is the continuing and continuous presence of the Holy Spirit with us and in us that strengthens us to live that faith. On this day of Pentecost, we purposefully celebrate that Holy Spirit, that manifestation of God with us, that makes His presence real, that delivers the gifts of the Spirit that we need to be the people of God, that empowers us to the fulfillment of our commission as disciples of Jesus Christ to bring the world to God, one person at a time. Those believers in Jesus Christ who were gathered in faithful waiting on the day of Pentecost experienced that manifestation of God’s presence, received those gifts, and began to change the world. As we are gathered in faithful waiting as today’s believers in Jesus Christ, we should be prepared to receive gifts of the Holy Spirit, and begin to change the world.

The world should look at us and be prompted to ask us what we believe – if we are really living out the Christian faith, the world should be demanding us to tell them so they can claim it for themselves. Maybe this day was on Peter’s mind when we wrote in his first general letter to the Church: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” (1 Peter 3:15) Those people passing by on the day of Pentecost needed to know what was going on there, and Peter, empowered by the Holy Spirit, told them – and they believed.

Because of God’s great love for us and as a gift of His grace, we have access to that very same power if we will claim it. The world wants to know what we believe, what Christians believe, what you believe. What are you going to say?

[The Apostles Creed]