

“God: The Great I AM”

September 9, 2018

Back to Basics series

Two weeks ago, my sisters and I hosted an open house to celebrate my parents' 50th anniversary. It was a wonderful gathering: our immediate family, my cousins and extended family, my mom's high school friends, church friends and pastors, my friends and my sisters' friends, country neighbors (think a couple of miles away!) and farming friends, and even a man in his mid-90's who has known my dad since he was a kid!

I had to think of a lot of names and faces I haven't seen in a long time, and it reminded me of where I come from, my parents' witness of faith and love in marriage, and the sacred community formed around my family. It reminded me of going “Back to Basics” and thinking about my foundation for why I am who I am - and God's grace that surrounds all of us.

Today we start a series on going “back to basics” and looking at the foundations of our Christian faith. We don't all start at the same place. We come from different families, traditions, and experiences, so it's important to consider what we believe and why it matters. Beliefs shape us and motivate us to act - hopefully for the better, but we know that beliefs can also bring out the worst in humanity.

We'll look at Moses' encounter with God and other passages, but the Apostles' Creed is also a starting place. It took this current form in the 400s AD, represents years of history and tradition as people of faith sought to figure out how to express what we believe. And you might imagine it's difficult to get a whole group of people to agree on a common creed. Even as we say it together, you might have some questions. And it's important to approach all of this with humility and be willing to share where we struggle.

Creed comes from the Latin *credo* which means “I believe.” I can say, “I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth,” but what does it mean? Why does it matter? What difference does it make?

Friends, we're facing a reality where it's a struggle for people to claim faith in God or those who are uncertain, and some people reject the existence of God altogether. Some have been hurt by others who have used God as a weapon or reason for hate or hypocrisy - saying one thing and doing another. Some have never heard Good News. Some have no interest in considering a relationship with God who is portrayed by some in the Christian church as less than loving and inclusive.

And, I don't blame them! I wouldn't believe in that God either, so we have a challenge – not to convince people of something or convert the whole world on our

own, but to know what we believe (and what we don't believe!), why it matters to us, and to live the faith we claim. The importance of honest witness cannot be underrated. It's OK to say that we have questions and struggles. Being open to good discussion and being able to share what we believe matters.

I remember a young woman who was a science teacher and was struggling with the idea of being able to live her faith and hold the truth of science. She felt like it had to be either one or the other. Can I believe both? she asked. Yes, we can hold faith together with science as people have done for centuries. Einstein, Planck, and others talked of a power, force, and energy responsible for the creation of the universe. Maybe we don't use the same words, but we claim God as Creator.

The creeds are based on Scripture as a foundation, which is filled with titles and images to describe God. God is Creator of all that is - seen and unseen. And God is in relationship to all of creation, continues to be involved in creation and renewal, and calls us to care for creation. Deuteronomy says that the Lord our God is One, and we worship God alone even as there are many other people and things who seek our worship.

We believe that God is Three in One - Trinity. We understand and experience one God in three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - three expressions of one God. More on that as we go through this series. Is anyone else confused by the idea of the Trinity?

The Psalms offer lots of images of God. "The Lord is my shepherd...he leads me." God is a protector and guide, both gentle and forceful. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" God's creation is amazing and brings us to a place of awe and wonder. "God is our refuge and strength" means that we have a foundation on which we can stand, a shield of protection, and a place of strength and safety. "O Lord, you've searched me and you know me." God knows us - really knows us - and is close to us.

God is described as a loving Father who offers security, affirmation, correction and direction, guidance and forgiveness. God is described as a loving Mother who comforts, fiercely protects, and deeply cares. God searches for the lost and celebrates when the wanderer comes home. God often speaks in a "still, small voice" and sometimes in a burning bush, so we have to listen even and especially amid the distractions that surround us.

SHOW MEDIA: "I Am God"

"I am" is a powerful way to understand God, but God tells Moses that God is personal. God sees, hears, and knows the pain of the Israelites in Egypt. God listens

and pays attention. God is compassionate, which literally means “to suffer with” others. God feels what we feel. God is relational.

It’s so interesting to consider the ways we understand God - all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, but also as close to us as our very breathing and with us. I can’t imagine what Moses must have felt like - shepherding the flock and then all of a sudden seeing this holy fire. And just to be clear, Moses is roughly 80 years old when he encounters God!

This conversation is so interesting because Moses is reluctant. Perhaps we can relate. *Who am I to go to Pharaoh?* For us, the questions might be different. *Who am I to serve in this particular ministry? Who am I to be a leader?* That tells us something about God, too. God is unpredictable. God’s call on our lives isn’t something we control, and sometimes we’re called to the unexpected. We find ourselves doing and serving in ways we never would’ve imagined!

But there’s another piece. God promises that he will be with Moses. Again God is up close and personal - not far removed from us, but involved in our lives. God is present and active. Yes, I know it’s sometimes hard to believe, and there are seasons when we don’t always feel God’s presence so strongly, but God is there.

And it’s interesting when Moses asks for a name. *What am I supposed to say if someone asks who sent me?* The answer: I AM WHO I AM, or some translations say I WILL BE. Moses asks for a name, and God offers a name, but really, it’s not a name to describe God fully. Part of the issue here is that in Moses’ time, knowing a god’s name meant that you had that god’s power.

Whether Moses is seeking power isn’t clear, but he does want answers. And the answer is that God’s power can’t be captured or contained or defined in a name. And yet, I AM tells us something - God is dependable, faithful, and wants a relationship with us. God wants us to trust in God’s presence and power to set us free.

Remember that God told Moses that he was standing on holy ground and told him to take off his shoes. I remembered a moment when I saw this play out. In a church I served, a young man walked into the sanctuary barefoot – not a typical thing to do! I’m sure people wondered why, and eventually I found out that his one pair of shoes was too dirty to wear into church. It really was holy ground for him – holy space.

Moses encountered both the presence and mystery of God, and that’s we can claim, too. God is present and active, and yet we can’t fully understand God with our human intellect and ability. That doesn’t mean we give up on trying, but it does mean that we come to this with a good dose of humility - knowing that we don’t know it all, but that we can share our faith, stand in hope, and live in love.

God is Creator; God is One; God is Trinity. God is present and active in our lives and wants a relationship with each of us. And that leads to the most important foundational piece of what we believe: God is love. Hear it from I John 4:

⁷My dear friends, we must love each other. Love comes from God, and when we love each other, it shows that we have been given new life. We are now God's children, and we know him.

⁸God is love, and anyone who doesn't love others has never known him. ⁹God showed his love for us when he sent his only Son into the world to give us life. ¹⁰Real love isn't our love for God, but his love for us. God sent his Son to be the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven. ¹¹Dear friends, since God loved us this much, we must love each other.

¹² No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is truly in our hearts.

¹³God has given us his Spirit. That is how we know that we are one with him, just as he is one with us. ¹⁴God sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. We saw his Son and are now telling others about him. ¹⁵God stays one with everyone who openly says that Jesus is the Son of God. That's how we stay one with God ¹⁶and are sure that God loves us.

God is love. If we keep on loving others, we will stay one in our hearts with God, and he will stay one with us.

When I looked around at the room of people celebrating my parents' anniversary, I felt joy and comfort - and love. I felt God's presence and grace in a powerful way because people showed up, spent time, and sent cards. God and love are inseparable, and our call to love because God loves us is crucial. Every act of love is a testimony to the presence and activity of God in our lives and in our world and it matters. Every act of love shows the world that God is real.

So when we say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth," what do we mean? Why does it matter? What difference does it make? Are we more humble because God is God - infinite in wisdom and power? Are we more grateful because God loves us more than we can even imagine? Maybe a bit of both...

I invite you to take some time to think about it and maybe even record your thoughts - write it down, dictate it into your phone, share it with a loved one, and keep it somewhere. What do you believe about God? Why does it matter to you?

Earlier this year, actor Chris Pratt shared his faith when he accepted the MTV Generation Award. MTV may not be the first place we look for spiritual truths, but when I heard Pratt, I was moved. In his list of 9 rules for living, Pratt said, "God is real. God loves you, God wants the best for you. Believe that, I do."

Friends that is a creed – what he believes! It was a simple statement, but an invitation to anyone who was listening to consider their own faith and what they believe. May we be just as willing to share what we believe.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE