

Cynthia Briggs Kittredge
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 11 Pentecost

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

In our preaching this month of August we are addressing why we do what we do in the liturgy on Sunday mornings. Last week Morgan led us through the gathering greeting, the collect for purity and the collect of the day, the reading of Holy Scripture and preaching the Word of God.

Preaching is the Word of God mediated through a person, Scripture made flesh in a particular body and voice, with the particular rhythms and turns of phrase of the person preaching, the scripture read through that preacher’s imagination and on behalf of the community come together at that time. My topic today is not preaching, but what comes directly afterwards.

Right after the sermon, we all stand, turn toward the cross at the east of the church, and recite together the creed, in the Eucharistic service, it is the Nicene Creed, developed at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. “Let us stand and affirm our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed.”

Unlike preaching which mediates the Word through personality, the creed has very little if any “personality.”

It’s always the same – Rite One and Rite Two, yes, but it’s the same pattern and the same words, beginning “We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty” travelling through the Son, “eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...” the Incarnation, “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven” – to crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, the promise of judgment, then the Spirit, the Church, one baptism, for the forgiveness of sins.

From the minute you stand and begin, “we believe in one God,” it’s like you are getting on an express train with no intermediate stops from its opening, until it reaches its destination: “We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen”

Many of us say it from memory, occasionally stumbling over variations from rite to rite, but many let automatic pilot take over and the creed carries us along.

When I was a little girl in the Episcopal church where I grew up, it was this line that send my mind and heart spinning: “the only begotten son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made...” What could it mean, all those begottens!? But how beautiful to describe one Lord, Jesus Christ.

The creed is the theological outline of the story that makes us who we are. It is the summary of our “faith.” It delineates “the” Faith.

But what does it mean to have faith? Is it believing that certain propositions are true -- “who proceeds from the Father and from the Son”? Is it a certain disposition of trust? Is it the power of positive thinking - of hopefulness? Yes, yes, yes.

The writers of Scripture use many stories and characters and terms to express what faith is. On this summer morning, our lectionary gives us the definition of faith from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And the writer of the sermon that is Hebrews follows this line by naming a whole series of famous people from the past, the great heroes of faith. And faith for this writer is to be able to see into the reality of the divine world that is invisible to the eye. The heroes of faith have the capacity to see into the reality of the divine world that is invisible to the eye. It is the world of God, “maker of all things, visible and invisible.”

In 2010 in America most of us are used to being on our own and independent, and we think of faith the same way sometimes, as something we do as individuals. But the biblical view of people is of people connected by blood and flesh and sharing similar characteristics with their family members. Faith, then, is something that we possess together and something we learn from others and even inherit from our ancestors. Abraham and Sarah were beloved parents for the people of Israel and parents also for the Christians in Hebrews. The early Christian writers drew on the story of Abraham and Sarah in lots of different ways, and took from its rich narrative comfort and consolation, inspiration, and more than anything else companionship in lonely and difficult times.

Remember the story:

God chose Abraham and Sarah and promised them what every red-blooded human being wanted in those days... land and kids, and Abraham and Sarah didn't have either one.

Abraham was promised it, but he didn't own it, so he camped out there. He didn't belong; he wasn't secure enough to build, he had no guarantees, so he wandered, he “sojourned.”

We can draw insight from this picture of Abraham's faith, setting up his tent, like Jacob and Isaac, and getting it soaked and torn and pulling it up and heading out again for another site. This is an image for our own faith. God promises, but there's lots of wandering around and complications and deviations before you arrive and even when you do, complications abound. The wandering people of God, as they are depicted in Hebrews, may be a very apt image for the church right now, having lost its guarantees and its centrality, searching, looking forward in hope, trying to head in the right direction. We don't really get to settle down for a long, secure stay in our own well-built house. I think that this wandering may be the model for Jesus' exhortation to possession-less disciples, able to travel lightly and to respond to God with more quickness and agility.

Abraham obeyed God, but he didn't know where he was going.

In a recent Op Ed piece in the *New York Times*, David Brooks, summarizes an article by a professor at Harvard Business School who is a Christian.¹ Clayton Christenson addressed a commencement speech to graduating seniors. He says that in the well-planned life, you first spend a great deal of time deciding what your life's overall purpose is. Then you allocate time, energy, and talent to achieving that purpose. "When it is done, life comes to appear as a well designed project, carefully conceived in the beginning, reviewed and adjusted along the way, and brought to a well rounded fruition." But David Brooks suggests another kind of life that he calls "the Summoned Life." In this kind: "Life isn't a project to be completed; it is an unknowable landscape to be explored." Abraham's faith is more like an unknowable landscape to be explored. The person leading the well planned life emphasizes individual agency and asks, "What Should I do?" The person leading the Summoned Life emphasizes context and asks, "What are my circumstances asking me to do?" Abraham and Sarah were summoned.

Besides having no permanent home, Abraham and Sarah had no children. Children, for biblical people, is the synonym for life, for the future, for family. But one night God called Abraham and asked him to go out and look at the sky and try to count the stars. God promised him as many kids and grandchildren as the number of stars he saw. Sarah was summoned and promised children too – in some versions she laughs, "ridiculous!" Here she is the heroine of faith. Sarah stepped outside her tent into the desert air, under the canopy of the Milky Way, she believed God. Through her faith God gave her power, the power to conceive, ... power to conceive... even though the facts said, she was barren, and evidence showed her husband, as good as dead.

The God of Israel, who made the sky and made the beach, brings deadness teeming, infinite, flourishing life. So sure enough, from these fore-parents, Sarah and Abraham, descended generations and generations, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore...."

The only begotten Son of this same one God came down from heaven and was made human and he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, he suffered death and was buried. The facts say "dead," but God promises life and is life. On the third day he rose again from the dead according to the scriptures and ascended into heaven.

Sarah and Abraham believe the story of creation, of new life of life from death - when they don't see. They are the story of life from death. They are our heroes, too, our great, great grandparents, and our companions when we do not have faith by ourselves.

Another translation: "Faith is the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen." Less a subjective feeling and more an objective reality. The children of Abraham and Sarah, Jesus risen from the tomb – the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

The Nicene Creed is a summary of the story that makes us who we are.

¹ NY Times, August 2, 2010.

When we recite this story, in its formulaic, never changing pattern, when we say it Sunday after Sunday, service after service, even if we are perplexed by all the begottens and wondering at its loveliness, when we say it, we are changed. We are made by it. The creed forms us.

The creed doesn't have any particular personality - not like mine or Morgan's or any other preacher you know. The there-ness is its power – that it has belonged to all our ancestors in Christ, our everlasting companions in faith.

We don't have to fill out a questionnaire about whether we like it or not. We don't have to sign a copy of it before we walk through the doors of the church. We simply stand and profess our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed; we just say it together, come rain or come shine, in sickness and in health, and it makes us who we are.

It is the express train that we don't have to drive. We simply step on, hold on, and with all the company of the faithful, are delivered safely to our destination. “We look for the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the world to come. Amen.”