

We Believe in God the Father Almighty
Genesis 17:1 – 8
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
May 15, 2016

I once asked a class of adult Christians to take fifteen minutes and write down everything they believed about their Christian faith. They dutifully did so and afterwards we shared with one another these rather quickly crafted statements of faith. As we did so, a very interesting discovery was made. As the first person read his statement, several others in the room said something like, 'Oh, I completely forgot to mention that.' They would then begin frantically amending their statement to include what had been unintentionally omitted. I think every person in the room found themselves revising their statements as they listened to the statements of the others being read aloud. Next I asked one of the class members to use his watch and to time us as we said together **The Apostle's Creed**. Reciting **The Apostle's Creed** takes about forty-five seconds. In forty-five seconds we were able to affirm the basic outline of our faith, touching upon its key elements. And, since we recited together, we affirmed our faith in a manner calculated to draw us together upon a common foundation of faith, shared by all who can with sincerity and conviction say those words.

There are three great Christian Creeds that have achieved near universal affirmation by the Christian Church: **The Apostle's Creed, The Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed**. Of the three, the oldest is **The Apostle's Creed**. The tradition says that it was written by the Apostle's themselves, ten days after Christ's Ascension into heaven, with each of the remaining eleven apostle's adding a particular clause to the creedal affirmations. The content of the **Creed** is clearly apostolic in nature. It has the ring of the apostolic teaching of the New Testament and for this reason this creed has achieved near universal ascent from the company of God's people throughout the world.

A Creed crystallizes and summarizes. This is the role of a Creed in the believer's life. I know some Christians, and some churches, reject the idea of Creeds. They will say, "*We have no Creed but the Bible.*" I can sympathize with the motivation behind such sentiment, but I believe that it is ultimately mistaken. The Bible is a big book. A Creed is simply a way to enable us to get a grip upon the big picture the Bible tells.

The story the Bible tells is the story of God's revelation. God reveals himself over time. Our passage today from Genesis 17 is an example of God's self-revelation. From it, we learn that we believe in God. We are theists, not atheists, agnostics nor polytheists.

We Believe in God: We are theists, not atheists, agnostics, nor polytheists
When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "*I am God...*

We believe there is a God. We believe that he does exist -- the LORD appeared to Abram. You may be thinking that this is rather basic, and so it is. But there are in our world those who deny any belief in the reality of God. We call them *atheists*. A *theist* is one who believes in God. In ancient Greek, if you put the 'a' in front of the word, you negate the meaning of the word. Thus a *theist* believes in God, while an *atheist* negates or rejects a belief in God. An *agnostic* is somewhat different. *Agnosticism* refers toward a general skepticism of belief. In ancient Greek, *gnosis* was the word for knowledge. Again, putting the 'a' in front of the word negates its meaning or intent. An *agnostic* is one who says we have no *knowledge* of God. God may be out there. But we do not know. Hard-edged philosophical *atheists* are really rather rare in the world. Few people are willing to make such a dogmatic denial of God's existence. The result is that many who are not people of faith prefer to describe themselves as *agnostic*, or perhaps as *secularists*, rather than as *atheists*.

In contrast, one of the first realities we declare when we confess our faith is that God exists. He is real. He is not silent. And, in doing so, we are also saying *I believe in God*. In other words, God's existence, his presence, has some concrete and practical impact upon my life and how I lead it. This is an important point to grasp because the most common form of atheism in our world today is practical atheism. A practical atheist is not a person who has rejected God. A practical atheist has bid God a fond farewell. If a Gallup pollster calls a practical atheist on the phone to ask him survey questions regarding his religious belief, this person may say that he believes in God. Yet, in spite of what he says, he lives his life as an atheist. His belief in God has no impact, no meaning upon how he lives his life. Sadly, this type of atheism is very common.

The first thing Abraham is taught, and what all men and women should know, is that God exists. The second follows closely: we believe in God the Father, Almighty.

We believe in God the Father, *Almighty*

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "*I am God Almighty*"; walk before me, and be blameless,

A theist is one who believes in God. An atheist believes there is no God. A polytheist believes in many gods (small 'g'). The great majority of religions in the world are polytheistic. We in the West tend to think in terms of the three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. But the religions of the world tend to be polytheistic: Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism, Shinto, the tribal religions of Africa, Asia and the Americas, as well as the ancient religions of Egypt, Greece, Rome, Babylon, and the Norse. Polytheism is the natural inclination of the human heart apart from God's redeeming intervention.

Those who believe in polytheistic gods see the many gods as having authority or dominion over various key elements of human life. There are gods to be approached and propitiated for the harvest, or to have children, or for healing from disease, or to protect oneself and one's family from evil, or to guard a community or village from natural catastrophe. In polytheistic religions you have to learn the rules and expectations of particular local deities for the spheres of life and nature are divided among them.

In contrast, when we say that we believe in God Almighty, we are saying that all of the spheres of existence belong to him and his authority. Nothing is left out. Jesus Christ is the King of kings, the Lord of lords, over every square inch of the universe. The local deities of polytheistic religions are imposters, false gods, for they possess no true authority or influence over anything. God alone is God. There are no others.

The name God gives to Abraham is El Shaddai. The Lord is all powerful. He is all sufficient. God's absolute power and authority will be revealed concretely to Abraham and Sarah shortly in the birth of their son, Isaac. Given their age, Abraham and Sarah rightly belong in the geriatric wing, not the maternity ward. But the God who reveals himself is El Shaddai – God Almighty.

Before we move to the next point, let us take note of the instruction God gives to Abraham. God tells Abraham to walk before me, and be blameless. Abraham is to live his life before God's face; to live his life knowing that God watches, that God is present, that God has an interest in how Abraham's life unfolds. This is what it means to walk before God. The word translated blameless means undivided. This is God's expectation for exclusivity. God, and no one else. When I married Lois Ann I promised that my focus upon her would be undivided, forsaking all others. This is what God is asking of Abraham, exclusive loyalty. Walk before God and no others.

The first thing Abraham is taught is that God exists. The second is that God is all powerful. The third is that he Father is a person, not an impersonal force.

We Believe in God who is a person, not an impersonal force.

⁴“Behold, *my covenant is with you*, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

⁵No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

When Luke Skywalker goes off to fight the evil empire in Star Wars, do the other characters say to him *God be with you*, or *God will be your co-pilot*? No. What do they say? The Force will be with you. The Force, while clearly god-like, is not personal. It is not a person, but an impersonal force guiding, directing and strengthening the heroes of the story.

When we say that God is Father, we are saying that God is not merely a great cosmic force in the world. He is not Aristotle's *unmoved mover*. He is not a cosmic watchmaker who has wound the world up only to leave it to run on its own. He is not the cosmic consciousness of the New Age. He is not the undifferentiated monism of philosophic Hinduism. He is a person. You and I are persons. We are made in his image. The reason you and I can relate to one another, enjoy one another, and understand one another, is because God has made us as persons and our interactions with one another are therefore personal.

The God whom we confess is a God who is personal, who can be known. God relates to Abraham as a person. He is a God who speaks. He spoke in Creation, when the universe was founded upon his commanding word. He spoke by his Word through the inspiration of Moses, the Prophets, and Apostles when the Bible was written. And he spoke through his Son, when God himself becomes incarnate, revealing the length to which God would go to make possible again a personal relationship with his disobedient children.

The first thing Abraham is taught is that God exists. The second is that God is all powerful. The third is that God is personal. He is a person, not an impersonal force. Related to that, the fourth thing Abraham learns is that God is Father: the ultimate source of our care and provision in life.

We believe in God the Father, for He is the ultimate source of our care and provision in life.

⁶*I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.*

When we recite the Apostle's Creed together, the first affirmation of the creed is that we believe in *God, the Father, Almighty*. The concept of the *Fatherhood* of God is not explicitly taught under the Old Covenant. It will be the Lord Jesus who will reveal to us this important attribute of God's character. That said, the idea of God as *Father* is reflected in these chapters in Genesis. In Genesis we see God watching out for Abram, as a father would care for his son. It is God who protects Abram and Sarai's marriage: first in Egypt, and then later in Canaan. God's Fatherhood is also revealed in how he relates to Abram. God relates to Abram personally. God is a person. God is personal. And, God relates to us as our heavenly Father.

Jesus was asked one day to teach his disciples how to pray. He told them that when they pray, they should come into God's presence addressing God as Father. When you talk to another person, you carry on a dialog, or a conversation with them. If you are talking to someone who has a particular station in life, then you may address him or her according to their station. The President of the United States is addressed as *Mr. President*; the Roman Catholic Pope is addressed as *Your Holiness*; and, not to be outdone, the Patriarch of the

Orthodox Church is addressed as *All Holiness*. These are the proper ways in which we address them. Jesus has taught us that the proper way to address God is as Father.

Addressing God as Father brings us into an arena of great controversy in our day. What are the implications of our confession that we believe in God as Father? In our world today there are many who reject this language. Some Christian women simply refuse to use the word Father in relationship to God. Others seek to augment the imagery by referring to God as Father and Mother. Many of these convictions arise from a belief that the ancient world from which our faith has unfolded was hopelessly patriarchal. The masculine language used to describe the God of the Bible is seen as a corrupt reflection of ancient culture and not a true expression of divine revelation. What should be said to these objections?

First, the Christian understanding of God as Father does not mean that God is literally male. God is spirit (John 4:24). He does not have a body. The meaning of the Fatherhood of God must be found somewhere else.

Secondly, we do not have the authority to change how we speak about God. Earlier I spoke about divine revelation. What we know about God we know because he has revealed himself to us. If the Bible is divine revelation – as you and I believe – then God has told us how to talk about him. We should be thankful for those aspects of divine revelation that challenge and even offend us. Why? The little gods we fashion in our own image do not offend us. They are the gods that are encouraging to us, the gods who assure us that we are okay and that nothing extraordinary will be demanded of us. They are our kind of gods. But in contrast, when we see in the God of the Bible some attribute or character trait that offends us, then it may be that, Hansel and Gretel like, we need to turn toward the offense and permit it to lead us home to a truer understanding of God. The reason God offends is because he is not like us. We must learn the habit of the heart of turning to the offence in order to grow in a truer, more accurate comprehension of his glory and greatness.

Thirdly, there are many important insights to God's nature and character that are being communicated in the masculine language of the Bible. Calling God '*Father*' affirms his fatherly goodness towards us. He relates to us as a father, and not as one of the far off gods of the philosophers. It tells us that God provides for us, just as our earthly fathers are to provide for their household. It tells us that we should have reverence for God as we are obligated to honor our earthly fathers. It teaches us that we can trust God, just as we trust our fathers here on earth. These are only a few of the tender concepts communicated when we call God '*Father*.' In short, all that is good in the activities and relationship we have with our earthly father finds its source and fulfillment in the work and relationship of our heavenly Father.

I know that some are thinking, ‘*Okay, fair enough. But why can’t we refer to God as Mother as well? Why doesn’t the Bible refer to God as Mother?*’ This is an important question. To answer it we must understand some history. In the ancient Near East, all of the other religions we know of worshipped both gods and goddesses. Judaism was absolutely unique in its exclusive use of masculine language for God. It was also unique in that the God of the Jews did not have a female consort. There are times in the Bible in which God is described as possessing what we would call feminine attributes such as compassion and tenderness. But God is not referred to as *she*, nor is he called upon as *mother*. Why?

The use of exclusively masculine language in referring to the God of the Bible communicates a very important point about the nature of God as Creator and Redeemer. When a husband and wife conceive a child, the man comes from without in order to make his wife pregnant. In the same way the imagery of the masculine language of God is to say that God creates the universe *from without* rather than birthing it from within. The analogy is applicable in redemption as well. God implants our souls with new life from without; we do not redeem ourselves from within. Just as a woman cannot impregnate herself, so the universe cannot create itself, nor can an individual redeem himself (or herself). The use of masculine language preserves the distinction, separation, between God and his creation. Mothers give birth to their own. For this reason, religions that speak of God as *mother* collapse their understanding of God into the cosmos. God and the world about us become one. God’s transcendence is lost as he is remade into the Earth Mother.

In short, to speak about God in ways that he has not revealed means that we are traversing a path that is leading us away from the knowledge of the one true God who is revealed in the Bible. We call God ‘*Father*’ because in doing so we capture important theological insight and understanding of God’s nature and character.

The first thing Abraham is taught is that God exists. The second is that God is all powerful. The third is that God is personal. He is a person, not an impersonal force. Related to that, the fourth thing Abraham learns is that God is Father: the ultimate source of our care and provision in life. Fifthly, we say I believe, and not, I know, because we walk by faith, not by sight.

We say *I believe*, and not, *I know*, because we walk by faith, and not by sight

⁷And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you *throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant*, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

When we speak about our faith, or recite a creed, we say *I believe...*, and not *I know...* Why is this so? II Corinthians 5:7 tells us that We live by faith, not by

sight. The truths we affirm are truths that have been revealed to us by God. They are not the result of the efforts of human inquiry. We would not know them, if God, in his kindness, had not chosen to reveal them to us.

This is the inevitable result of our being created creatures. The truths we speak of in our faith are the truths about our creator, the one who has made and fashioned us. What we know about the one who has created us we know because he has told us. Let me illustrate our relationship to God our Father. One of the smartest and most observant characters in all of English literature is the consulting detective, Sherlock Holmes. Holmes is extraordinary in his powers of logic, deduction and observation. Imagine yourself in one of the stories of Sherlock Holmes. Imagine approaching Holmes and asking him what he knows about a man named Arthur Conan Doyle? Within the world of the stories, Holmes knows nothing, and can know nothing, about Arthur Conan Doyle, for Doyle is Holmes' creator. Whatever Holmes might learn about Conan Doyle, he would learn it not from his powers of observation and deduction, but because his creator has chosen to reveal himself to his creation.

And so we begin confessing our faith saying *I believe*, because in doing so we are making statements about our trust in the knowledge and truth that our creator has revealed to us about himself, his nature, and his work and activity in our world.

Next, from verse 8, we believe in God who has authority over history to issue decrees.

We believe in God who has authority over history to issue decrees.

⁸ And I will give to you and to your offspring after you *the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan*, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”

One of the best known passages in all of scripture (because it is read each year on *Christmas Eve*) is Luke 2:1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Think of the significance of that word, decree, in this passage. Caesar Augustus issues a decree, he signs an executive order, and he gives his command to his empire. Caesar's decree disrupts the world. Every person in the empire falls under the influence and requirement of that decree. You know the rest of the story: it is the decree that forces Joseph and Mary to leave Nazareth late in Mary's pregnancy and travel to Bethlehem. There in Bethlehem she gives birth to Jesus, the Messiah.

When we speak of God Almighty, what we mean by that word *almighty* is that the God in whom we believe has authority to issue decrees. If Caesar can speak his word and so disrupt the world, how much greater is God's word, his decree, spoken to the world? God's decrees are greater and more authoritative than the decrees of Caesar, presidents, Prime ministers, kings, queens, rulers

and tyrants. Presidents and Prime Ministers do not always understand that they make and enforce their decisions against the backdrop of God's sovereign purpose in history. Caesar needs tax money and so he issues his decree, believing that he has sovereign authority over all that he rules. Yet Caesar does not know that his decree issued at this particular moment in time, is to be the instrumental cause that will bring Mary to Bethlehem to give birth to the Messiah. Why is it important that Mary be in Bethlehem when the days of her pregnancy are ended? It is because through the mouth of the prophet Micah, 700 years earlier, God had issued a decree that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. God's decree trumps Caesar's decree. Caesar issues his decree thinking only of his treasury's need of taxable receipts, not realizing that in doing so, he is part of the inexorable and steadfast purposes of God.

And this leads to our final observation this morning: we believe that God's decrees come to pass. God is in control.

We believe God's decrees come to pass: God is in control – Genesis 17:19

¹⁹ God said, "*No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.*"

When Abraham hears God refer to himself as El Shaddai, God Almighty, he is saying that he, God is in control. That God is Almighty, that he is in control, is a truth taught throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament many descriptive words are used in reference to God. They are adjectives used to reveal or highlight some key facet of his character and nature. God is called: Lord, Mighty One, Most High, Everlasting, The God of Israel, etc.

Later in Genesis 17, when God comes again to speak to Abraham, God reiterates the promise that Abraham will one day have a son, an heir, and that through this son, Abraham's descendants will be a great nation. God had given this promise to Abraham before. Long before, when Abraham was about seventy-five years old. Twenty-five years have passed. Sarah is in her nineties, long past childbearing age. When God reaffirms this promise, both Abraham, and Sarah, who is listening at the door of the tent, laugh. You'd laugh too, right? [Be honest!] Sarah belongs on the geriatric floor, not the maternity wing. Laughter was – and I mean no respect to God in this point – the right and natural response to what they had heard, for what God was saying to them was well beyond the scope of human experience. And so they laughed. And God said, '*why are you laughing.*' Realizing that they were running the risk of offending the Almighty, they both denied that they had laughed. God told them he was not buying it. He had heard them laugh. Then, in verse 17:19, God issues his decree, Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. God's decree will come to pass. He is in control. He is God Almighty. God has a sense of humor about all this. He tells them what they are to name the boy. They

are to name him Isaac, which means *laughter* in Hebrew. God had determined that he would have the last laugh!

Close

Let us do a quick review before we close this message. The first thing Abraham is taught is that God exists. The second is that God is all powerful. Thirdly, Abraham learns that God is personal not an impersonal force. Abraham sees God care for him, and his descendants, through the covenant God establishes with him. God reveals to Abraham his authority over life, and history, in the fulfillment of his promise that Abraham and Sarah would have a son, born to them in their very old age.

As we close, let me ask you a question today: “Do you know the God of Abraham?” The Bible is the story of the self-revelation of God. It is the story of the covenant God established with Abraham and of how God remains faithful to that covenant, down through the ages. The covenant is begun with Abraham, but it finds its fulfillment and completion in the person of Jesus Christ. We call Abraham the *Father of Faith*. Abraham trusts God and, that trust, we are told, was counted as righteousness before God. But, Abraham is not the object of faith. Jesus Christ is the one to whom we turn in faith and belief. It is through Jesus Christ that we find the true pathway to the knowledge of God. It is upon the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross that we find forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life.

I am inviting you to Jesus Christ today. Turn to him in believing faith and be saved.

Say “Amen!” Somebody!

Genesis 17:1 – 8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, ²that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” ³Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, ⁴“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. ⁷And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”