

Believing in God
A New Creation – 1
April 8, 2018

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter, the greatest day of celebration on the Christian calendar. As Christians, not only have we died with Christ, we have also risen to new life with Christ. One of the Scriptures I referred to was from 2 Cor. 5:17:

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!
2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

This morning we are beginning a new series entitled *A New Creation*. It is based on a curriculum developed by a man by the name of Palmer Becker who is the author of a very popular booklet several years ago entitled “What is an Anabaptist Christian,” and most recently a book entitled “Anabaptist Essentials.” The series is going to be broken up into 4-4 week units, each unit representing one aspect of our Christian faith: 1) Believing; 2) Belonging; 3) Behaving; and 4) Becoming. It is important that we all see this as a work in progress. It’s important that everyone engages and that you offer feedback, especially during your Sunday school classes. At the end of the series we want to be able to make a decision on whether or not this is the curriculum we would like to use for our youth and for those who are new to the church.

I think it is very important that periodically we pause in the midst of our church life and reflect on, remember, what it is that we believe and why? Why? Because what we believe determines how we live out our lives. Many people refer to it today as one’s “worldview.” It is probably even more important today than ever before to know what we believe because we live in a world of increasing diversity and religious beliefs. It is estimated that there are somewhere between 4,000 – 5,000 known religions in the world. While Christianity is still the largest religion in the world, making up almost 1/3 of the earth’s 7.3 billion people, Islam is fast catching up, so much so that many predict that somewhere around the year 2070, Muslims will outnumber Christians in the world.

Maybe even of more concern for us Christians is the vast number of Christian churches to pick from. Many are downright heretical, meaning the espouse beliefs that are clearly not biblical. At the same time, many have the same basic Christian beliefs. So we’re going to start with our basic beliefs, what we believe about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

If one were to look at the history of Anabaptist and Mennonite churches, one might wonder just how much importance we place on “belief.” But, as a whole, Anabaptists and Mennonites have believed no less and no more than most Christians. That is where it is important to recognize the time period in which the Anabaptist and Mennonite church was birthed. It wasn’t so much that the early Mennonites believed differently than most of the others, especially on the basics, though there clearly were a couple areas where they differed because they could not find biblical support, like infant baptism and the meaning of the sacraments. But what was just as concerning for the early Anabaptists and Mennonites is that most of the other Christians didn’t seem to be living out their beliefs in their everyday lives.

So when people say that Mennonites are not a “creedal people,” meaning that they don’t follow a specific creed or statement of faith, that is really not true. For the earliest Mennonites they believed in the apostle’s creed, that which dated all the way back to at least 140 A.D. They didn’t recite it in their church services every Sunday because they didn’t feel they needed to. They were a given. Most important for the earliest Anabaptists and Mennonites, whatever it is they believed, which affected how they acted, had to be supported in Scripture, the Bible.

So this morning, as we start with belief in God, it’s important that we start in the Bible, and there is no better place to start than at the very beginning:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.

³ Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light “day” and the darkness “night.”

And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day.

⁶ Then God said, “Let there be a space between the waters, to separate the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth.” ⁷ And that is what happened. God made this space to separate the waters of the earth from the waters of the heavens. ⁸ God called the space “sky.” And evening passed and morning came, marking the second day.

⁹ Then God said, “Let the waters beneath the sky flow together into one place, so dry ground may appear.” And that is what happened. ¹⁰ God called the dry ground “land” and the waters “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

¹¹ Then God said, “Let the land sprout with vegetation—every sort of seed-bearing plant, and trees that grow seed-bearing fruit. These seeds will then produce the kinds of plants and trees from which they came.” And that is what happened.

¹² The land produced vegetation—all sorts of seed-bearing plants, and trees with seed-bearing fruit. Their seeds produced plants and trees of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. ¹³ And evening passed and morning came, marking the third day.

¹⁴ Then God said, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them be signs to mark the seasons, days, and years. ¹⁵ Let these lights in the sky shine down on the earth.” And that is what happened. ¹⁶ God made two great lights—the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night. He also made the stars. ¹⁷ God set these lights in the sky to light the earth, ¹⁸ to govern the day and night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

¹⁹ And evening passed and morning came, marking the fourth day.

²⁰ Then God said, “Let the waters swarm with fish and other life. Let the skies be filled with birds of every kind.” ²¹ So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that scurries and swarms in the water, and every sort of bird—each producing offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² Then God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply. Let the fish fill the seas, and let the birds multiply on the earth.”

²³ And evening passed and morning came, marking the fifth day.

²⁴ Then God said, “Let the earth produce every sort of animal, each producing offspring of the same kind—livestock, small animals that scurry along the ground, and wild animals.” And that is what happened. ²⁵ God made all sorts of wild animals, livestock, and small animals, each able to produce offspring of the same kind. And God saw that it was good.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

²⁷ So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

²⁸ Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.”

²⁹ Then God said, “Look! I have given you every seed-bearing plant throughout the earth and all the fruit trees for your food. ³⁰ And I have given every green plant as food for all the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the small animals that scurry along the ground—everything that has life.” And that is what happened.

³¹ Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!

And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day. Genesis 1:1-31 (NLT)

So, how big is your God? If you had to describe God to someone, how would you describe him, or her? A Bible commentator by the name of J.B. Phillips wrote several years ago that “Your God is Too Small.” Actually, every single one of us’ God is too small. And every single one of us’ view of God is incomplete and, in some ways incorrect. And even more challenging for us, we often don’t even know which ways our image of God is incorrect. Is your view of God big enough to even accept that you might be wrong on some of the ways you see Him? Or as someone else said recently, “we often try and create God in our image, or in the image of God we want, instead of God creating us in His image.” *For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known* (1 Cor. 13:12 NIV).

Psychologists tell us that often our views of God develop at a young age, in childhood, and they often are the result of our upbringing, the faith we were raised in, and even the type of parents we had. Since God has traditionally been viewed as male, then a person’s father plays a very important role in how one views God as he or she gets older. If you had a father who was abusive or walked out on you, studies have shown that it is hard to put your complete trust in God. If you’re father was kind of distant, rather stern, black & white, one who was a perfectionist with high expectations, like my own Dad, then you end up thinking that you need to earn your love from God by what you do, or how you behave, and that God is more of a God to be feared than one that is filled with grace. Of course the opposite extreme is true as well, if you had a parent who never engaged in proper discipline and just let everything go, basically saying that life is all about you, that you can live your life however you want to, then that is probably your view of God. Both extremes offer very distorted views of God.

But here is the important point. All human beings have been marred by the fall. There has never been a perfect parent during life here on earth. Parents are often the result of their own upbringing. We can blame parents all we want, and it is vitally important that we examine our past, if we are going to mature and grow, but ultimately it is up to each of us – with the work of the Holy Spirit to gain any resemblance to that which God created us – in His image. And although we were created in His image, we are far from His image, so far from His image that we can’t even often grasp His image. God is much bigger than we are. God is beyond us.

So, how do we even know that God exists? No one today has ever seen God. It is only by faith that we believe that God exists. Some of the ways we come to know that God exists are through reason, through nature, through moral laws and through inner experience. We can come to know God through nature -

1. Knowing God through nature –

The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his miraculous craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or a word; their voice is silent in the skies. Psalm 19:1-3 (NLT)

For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Romans 1:20 (NLT)

How can one look at nature – the beauty of nature, the power of nature, trees, flowers, mountains, all the stars in the sky, the moon the sun, and on and on. How can we witness the miracle of a human birth and say there is no God? God has created nature in such a way that it gives witness both to His nature and the fact that He exists. . . We can also come to know God through moral laws -

2. Knowing God through moral laws –

While eventually God would give us His ways through His law, defining what is right and good, the evidence throughout history is that there is a capacity within human beings that crosses all cultural divides to recognize that there is right and wrong and for the most part that has been consistent throughout human history. Of course recognizing that there is right and wrong, or even knowing what that right and wrong is, is far different than living it out. . . And another way we come to know God is through our inner experiences -

3. Knowing God through inner experience

God has placed something inside of each of us that draws us to him. Jesus is quoted in the Gospel of John:

Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God . . . John 17:3

We can come to know God through human reason, through nature, and through inner experiences, but God didn't just leave it at that, he also chose what is known as revelation.

God has chosen to reveal Himself in three primary ways:

1. Through revealing Himself to specific people – mostly in Old Testament times through angels, visions, dreams, speaking directly to, and to one Moses, even walking by (though he was veiled somewhat). God revealed Himself to them so His revelation could be written down, the 2nd way God chose to reveal Himself to human beings.

2. God has revealed Himself through the written Word, otherwise known as Scripture or the Bible.
3. And mostly God has revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, the living Word of God.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and lived among us. John 1:1, 14 a

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Colossians 1:15

We can learn about God from all these things, but mostly we learn about God from the Bible because not only has God not revealed Himself directly to human beings in our time, we don't have Jesus, "the image of the invisible God," in front of us today either. But we read the Bible not to gain some super kind of knowledge, or so we can say I know the Bible better than so and so, or I can quote so many Bible verses, we come to the Bible for one reason and one reason alone, "to know God."

So, what can we come to know about God from the Bible? Certainly much more than I can give in a 25-30 minute sermon. More than we can come to learn in a lifetime of sermons. But here are a few starters:

1. God is One –

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." Deut. 6:14

But as Christians we not only believe that God is one, we believe that God is three in one: God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Holy Spirit. It is at the very beginning of the Bible, in the creation account that we find the three in one God –

It says in Genesis 1, v.2, *the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*. And then at the very beginning of John's gospel we read: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning* (John 1:1-2).

2. God is relational –

He desires to have a personal relationship with everyone. The fact that God is a triune God speaks to the fact that God is relational. God didn't create us just to live as individuals', He created us to live in community, something we will look at in depth in the second four week unit.

3. God is creative – from the very beginning, the creation account
4. God is spirit

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

John 4:24

Yes, we know that Jesus took on a human body and was a man when he walked the face of this earth, but God as a whole is a spiritual being – so we can say that God is not gender specific.

5. God is love

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 1 John 4:8

God extends human beings grace and mercy, forgiveness for sins.

6. God is Just – and at the same time God is just

...his ways are perfect, and all his ways are just. Deuteronomy 32:4a

7. God is timeless

From everlasting to everlasting you are God. Psalm 90:2

God says, *“I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*
Revelation 1:8 (NIV)

God is all that and so much more. So much so that we often can't even grasp just how big God is. And then to try and grasp just how such a big God can love and care for every single one of us and want to be in a relationship with every single one of us and want to be known by every single one of us?

God is infinitely beyond us, and yet at the same time God wants to be known by us. “Known” meaning He wants to be loved by us not that we know everything about Him. If we knew everything about Him we wouldn't need faith. We are saved by faith which comes through believing certain things about Him which was the point of the original Apostles Creed, written way back in 140 A.D.

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.