

Credo I – “I believe in the Holy Ghost (Spirit)”

March 5, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
The First Sunday in Lent, Year A
(Part 1 of a Sermon Series)

Text: *“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

-- John 14:16-17, NRSV



(Casper David Friedrich, “Evening Landscape with Two Men” (1830-1835), in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia)

Most of us know several things by heart when it comes to our Christian faith and our life in worship: the 23rd and 100th Psalms, John 3:16, the words to “Amazing Grace”, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed. How we came by that knowledge has much to do with Sunday school teachers and parents who loved God as much as they loved us and the habits of being in church nearly every Sunday. As content goes, one could do worse in forming one’s system of belief.

The Apostles’ Creed has been with us in the form we know it for over a thousand years. However, portions of it were part of the sacred oath one took from the earliest moments of the post-

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resurrection understanding of Christians. The word “Credo” is the Latin for “I believe” – it is the header for our confession that says, “I own this!”, “This is my sacred oath” . . . This was the original meaning behind the word sacrament.

The Apostles’ Creed, like its early cousin, the Nicene Creed, was developed as a way to combat crazy thinking and as a marker or symbol that identified the true community of faith. This was necessary as various ideas and charismatic leaders would try to lead people astray from the true faith of the early apostles of the Church.

The Apostles’ Creed is such a document. That it is over a thousand years old in its present form is a tribute to a uniformity, orthodoxy and truthfulness within the tradition of Christian piety that is hard to ignore.

The Apostles’ Creed is in three sections or articles. Each article pertains to a person of the Trinity: God the Father (article 1), God the Son (article 2) and God the Holy Ghost (article 3).

We will focus on the third article for our series this Lenten season; partly because the other two seem self-explanatory, while this one seems loaded with unusual phrases and ideas. While the first two seem to be singular in focus, number three seems to be “a little bit of this and a little bit of that” . . . What is it we are actually saying when we come to these words in the third paragraph? It may be the Church’s ancient creed, but what does all this mean for me?

Let us see as we begin our Lenten journey.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

“I believe in the Holy Ghost.”

“Whaaaaat?”

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I used to watch the show “Ghost Hunters” on the SyFy channel because it was entertaining, but what does this first line of the third article of the Apostles’ Creed mean?

Call it a relic of the Old English, but when the early English translators of the King James Version of the Bible were trying to give a name to the words in Hebrew and Greek for “Spirit”, they chose “ghost.” This leads some to think of the third person of the trinity as “spooky, but nice”, like “Casper, the friendly ghost,” but this is just wrong-headed! Let it go.

The Hebrew word is “ru-ach” – often rendered “wind” or “breath”; the Greek word is “Pneuma” – as in air; think pneumatic tools . . . What to do with wind or breath or air? Especially when it comes to making this look like God? The word “ghost” today means a pale, shadowy apparition. The word “spirit” on the other hand means “the life principle.” But such a definition makes of Spirit, or ghost, an “it”. The Holy Spirit is not an “it”. Do you remember the Addams’ Family on television in the sixties; the bizarre family that was ghoulish and wacky? Do you remember “Cousin It” – a midget mop-top of long, stringy hair and sunglasses – Cousin It was a “thing.” . . . The Holy Ghost – the Holy Spirit is not a thing, or an “it.”

If we learn nothing more today than this, we will do well . . . What the creed says is “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” By saying this, this way, we are saying that the Holy Spirit is a person. In fact, one third of the Diving Godhead we profess to believe in.

We have an image for God, the Father Almighty, and whatever that stirs up in us: from da Vinci’s cloud-rider with the reaching finger touching Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel to George Burns’ character in “Oh God!”, or Morgan Freeman’s version in “Bruce Almighty”, or the soon-to-be-released movie, “The shack’s” depiction of God as a graceful wizened black woman.

We have a record of the historical Jesus and his ministry in the incarnation. We celebrate the moments of his birth, his ministry, his exaltation, passion, death and resurrection – he is most like us – this was God’s point after all in choosing this path to save us . . .

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But how do we personalize the Holy Spirit? . . . The Holy Ghost?

He is God, the Spirit . . . do we conceive him as a kind of person like one of the three spirits who came to Ebenezer Scrooge? Perhaps a quiet, but active kind of person, like Harp Marx – tooting a horn or whistling when words won't do . . . No.

What do we do with the Holy Ghost? What do we do with the Holy Spirit? That can enable our belief in him – maybe start there – with “him”, not “it”, person, not dove . . .

The words of Jesus instruct us here: “ . . . I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate (or Helper), to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him because he abides with you, and he will be in (or among) you.”

To help you better believe in the words at the beginning of this third article, think of all the people who have helped you in your life; people without whose help you would not be as organized or as encouraged, or as enlightened, or as nurtured, or as warm-feeling, or as blessed . . . This happens to us in our everyday through many different people. The Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost is like that; he is a helper . . . He is an advocate. An advocate can never be a thing, can never be an “it.” . . . “Things” and “its” cannot know our needs the way a helper or an advocate can know what we need.

Listen to these words of the Apostle Paul: *“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”* (Romans 8:26-27, NRSV) This is very good news! -- among the most winsome of all Scriptures, at least to me, because I know that the Holy Spirit knows me well enough to pray for me, when I am unable to pray; when all I have is a sigh or a groan at the edges of my life's story . . . And the Holy Spirit, the One I profess to believe in is at work in me – God is at work in me – for the

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Holy Spirit is God at work in me, helping me, advocating for me that I may find help and wholeness, strength and encouragement.

We begin our look at the third article of the Apostles’ Creed by coming to understand that we are in league with God, the Holy Spirit; the One Jesus said was coming to help and advocate for us – like the painting from Casper David Friedrich that graces the front page of the sermon (and the cover of this week’s bulletin) – One who relates to us like a friend in time of need; the One who is the active working out of God’s presence in our everyday who knows our every weakness and keeps working for us, in us and with us, even when we are at our lowest and poorest. . .

Like food for any outing help us take each step forward, so we break bread at this table in the observance of Holy Communion; to begin our Lenten journey with God the Father our Creator; Jesus the Son our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as our Sustainer.

As we journey towards Jerusalem and all that takes place there, that means new life for us among the ashes of our humanity, let us begin with the realization that we do not go it alone, we have one with us who helps us who helps and advocates for us, even in our weakness . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit and that is Good News!

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.