

# *Ascension Lutheran Church*

*Pastor Hollmann's Sermon for the week of June 11, 2006*

The Mission of God (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Romans 8:14-17; John 3:1-17; the Apostles Creed)

The scene is the early church, the fourth century. You are in a baptistery, a room with a giant pool of gushing water. Standing there in water up to his waist is a young boy. The walls surrounding the pool of water are full of images: there's Jonah being swallowed by the whale; there's Noah riding in the ark; there's Moses striking that water pouring rock. Next to the boy, there in the pool, stands the Bishop and a deacon.

The Bishop turns to the boy and says: "Do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? The boy mumbles, "Yes." Immediately the deacon dunks the boy in the water. The boy emerges, water in his eyes and nose, coughing, sputtering, disoriented. The Bishop says: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, our Lord? That he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. That he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. That he descended into hell. And On the third day he rose again. That He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. That He will come again to judge the living and the dead?"

This time the boy says louder: "I do" This time he holds his nose. Down he goes, down under the flowing water. The Bishop says: "Do you 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?" "I do," the boy says. And when he comes up that third time, he is led out of the pool; led out as a newly baptized follower of God.

This description of baptism in the early church is from a Christian theologian and based on historical records from the fourth century. It's certainly an appropriate description for this morning. Today is Trinity Sunday. This is a special day in the church year in which we focus on the Trinity. As Christians of all times and places we believe in one God. We heard in our Old Testament reading this morning from Deuteronomy: "the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (6:4). As Christians we believe in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our one God is a triune God. Triune means three in one. And that's the catholic or universal Christian faith: one God in three persons, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. We affirm the equality and unity of God, and yet distinguish Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the orthodox or correct faith, the faith which we confess and hold.

This is also the faith which that young boy in the early church was baptized into. This is the faith we have also been baptized into. When we were baptized, the pastor, standing in the place of Jesus Christ himself, baptized you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism God's Triune name has become our name. We were marked with God's identity, filled with his grace and peace, and called to be his witnesses in the world.

The Apostles Creed, as well as the other creeds we use in the Church, the Nicene and the Athanasian Creeds, all summarize the essential teachings of the Christian faith. The word creed comes from the Latin verb, credo: I believe. And the creeds of the church all come from Holy Scripture and agree with Holy Scripture. In the ancient creeds we publicly confess before God and one another our faith, what in fact we believe.

The creeds are all organized and divided in three parts or sections: one for each member of the Trinity. We believe in God the Father almighty, the creator of heaven and earth. We believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Redeemer, and in the Holy Spirit, our sanctifier, the one who makes us holy. As we heard from the story of that young boy, in the early church the Apostles' Creed was originally the questions the pastor or Bishop asked those to be baptized: Do you believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? If the answer was yes, the person was plunged three times into the saving waters of holy baptism. The three creeds, especially the Apostles' Creed, tell us the central teaching of God, the God in whom we are baptized.

And so today we celebrate the Trinity, and how in baptism God's triune name becomes our name. We speak about the Trinity not because we are totally able to understand it, but because we cannot keep quiet about something so crucial and important to our faith.

The Trinity is so crucial to our faith because it is about the mission of God. The Holy Scriptures, the Bible, records the revelation of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; all that our God does for us and for the world. The creeds we use in church, especially the Apostles' Creed summarize the central teachings of the Bible. In fact the creeds are like the greatest hits of the Bible, or what's most important in the Bible for us and for our salvation, and for the salvation of the world.

The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed are very helpful for us as Christians. The creeds tell us the central message of the Bible and of the Christian faith. For the creeds reveal the mission of God: the Father, the creator; the Son, the redeemer; and the Spirit, the sanctifier. This morning we'll focus on the Apostles' Creed, our baptismal creed.

On vicarage, when I served as intern in a church while training to be a pastor, I taught a year-long confirmation class for ten and eleven year olds. My job was to teach them the basics of the faith, especially as we find it in Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Part of teaching the essentials of the faith is memorizing key Bible passages and parts of the catechism. Yet my confirmation students had a terrible time remembering anything. I remember encouraging and finally pleading with them to memorize the Apostles' Creed.

I wanted my confirmation students to know the Apostles' Creed by heart because it's so central to our faith. The Apostles' Creed gives the summary, the essential teachings of Christianity. This is the faith of the church throughout history. It's the faith we live in; the faith which we are called to share with others, especially non-Christians; and the faith, which, hopefully, we will die in.

Well eventually, after hearing me go on and on about how important the Apostles' Creed is, my confirmation students finally got it down; they finally memorized it. Well how about you? As a Christian do you know the Apostles' Creed by heart? I hope you do, If not, there's always time to learn, because as Christians we should know the central teachings of our faith. For through baptism we are witnesses of all that God does for us.

First, we believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and everything was very good. And yet, because of the actions of Adam and Eve who sinned against God, creation suffers and groans in pain, all of humanity is now born in sin. We cannot free ourselves from this sin. What's more we daily add to the original sin inherited by Adam. We have truly sinned against God and against one another, and for this we deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment.

But the creed reveals the mission of God, and so second, we confess that we believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God our Lord. For in the fullness of time God the Father sent his only Son; sent his Son to take away the sins of the world. We remember the famous words of Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning from John: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (3:16). Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross so that through faith we may have life in his name.

And the creed reveals how we receive the salvation Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. Jesus was sent by the Father to save sinners; to redeem us from sin and death. And we receive the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with his gifts. As we heard in our Epistle or second reading this morning from Romans, it is by the Holy Spirit that we say, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15). The Holy Spirit testifies that we are God's children. The Holy Spirit brings us new birth through Baptism. In Baptism we are made part of God's mission; for through the Holy Spirit we are brought into his everlasting family; called to be his witnesses. The Holy Spirit brings to us the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Lord's Supper. The Holy Spirit gathers us in his church, the community of the saints, and makes us holy.

This is the faith we are baptized into; the faith we have received from God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are baptized as witnesses of our God. As St. Peter reminds us, "always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). The Apostles' Creed is a wonderful account or summary of our faith; the hope that we have. In order to tell non-Christians about what we believe simply tell them and explain to them the Apostles' Creed. It's worked as a way to share Christianity with non-Christians for centuries, and will continue to work until our Lord Jesus returns in glory on the last day.

After church one Sunday, a parishioner approached a pastor and said, "I'm tired about hearing about mission. You know I'm just not interested in telling others about God." The pastor replied, "That's true. But in order to have interest you have to have investment." Meaning in order to be interested at all in the mission of God, we have to invest our time, our possessions, and our very lives to reaching out to others with the saving message of our Triune God. Our God expects nothing less. For our God is totally invested in us.

God the Father has sent us his only Son to redeem us from sin and give to us the gift of life everlasting. The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. Through the Holy Spirit we are born again through water and the word, born again in baptism as witness of God's grace and peace. Yes, God has provided for us. God has given us Pastor Ristau. Yesterday we gave thanks to God for Pastor Ristau. Yes, God continues to provide for us. God has placed us here in this city, in this neighbourhood to be his witnesses. It's not a coincidence that we're here. This is where God has put us. This is where God weekly feeds us with the Body and Blood of Jesus, strengthening us to be his witness. And God daily calls us through his Word to be his witnesses here in this place: to tell Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and others all that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have done for us and for the world. For God so loved the whole world that he sent his only Son.

The message of the Apostles' Creed is not just for us. The creed is public, we say it out loud, we say it to one another, we shout it out to the world. For God wants all people to be baptized into his name. And so God sends us to tell others of his marvellous deeds. How we believe in one God in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How God wants all people to receive salvation in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer sent from the Father, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is worshiped, and glorified, and proclaimed: one God, now and forever. Amen