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Sunday March 3, 1974

"WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT GOD"
No. 1, in a series on the STATEMENT OF FAITH

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-2, 26-27

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. . . .And God said, let us make man in our own image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them."

Scripture: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Today we begin a series of sermons based on the Statement of Faith. We use this Statement from time to time as part of our worship. To refresh our memories, turn to the inside back cover of your hymnals and while you remain seated, let's say the Statement of Faith in unison.

THE STATEMENT OF FAITH (in unison)

Now keep your hymnals open to the Statement of Faith and notice that in format it is primarily a recital of the activity of God. God is not described in abstract terms, but is described by what he has done, is doing and will continue to do.

These acts of God are framed between the opening statement, "We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father," and the closing doxology of praise, "Blessing and honor, Glory and Power be unto him." In between, in the main body of the Statement are seven sentences which state God's activity, according to our Christian belief.

God calls the worlds into being; He seeks in Holy Love; He judges men and nations: In Jesus Christ, God has come to us; He bestows upon us his Holy Spirit; He calls us into his Church; and He promises to all who Trust Him. Each one of these seven statements will become the theme for one of the sermons in the series.

The seven sentences are cumulative in meaning. Each successive sentence carries forward, as well as adds to, the testimony of the preceding ones. Thus the recital, beginning with God's creative activity, continues through his seeking "to save all people" and "judging men and nations," to his coming in Jesus Christ, his gift of the Holy Spirit, his calling into the church, and reaches its climax in his promise of eternal life in his kingdom which has no end.

Note also that throughout the Statement of Faith, active verbs are used and they are in the present tense, with one exception, in order to suggest the ongoing activity of God, which links past and present together and continues into the future.

This morning, we are concerned with the opening phrase and the first of the seven statements and what those words say to us in the here and now. Listen again to the opening sentence, "We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father and to his deeds we testify."

Note particularly that the statement begins with the pronoun, "WE." We believe! Our faith, our belief is not only an individual matter, but grows out of a community of faith. The community has a long history, it has a memory. As individuals we have short histories that often need checking against the community's longer history.

When we say, "We believe," we are saying that this is what the Christian community has held in common throughout its history and that this is what binds us together. It is what gives us our power and our energy.

And what do we believe? First of all, we believe in God. All things begin with God, all religions, all creation, all human beings and whatever is. The opening sentence of the Bible begins with God, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God has always been. There is nothing prior to or before God. God was not created.

Sometimes we ask, "Who made God?" And the only answer we can give is--"God always was and always will be." Heaven and earth may pass away, but God remains. God is the Eternal Spirit, as the Statement of Faith puts it. And if we didn't have the word "God" to signify what we mean by God, then some other word would have to be invented.

God is the glue, the energy, the force that holds all things together. God infuses all things. God is not a thing or an object. Yet God is in all things and that means that everything that exists is related in profound dimensions to everything else.

To believe in God is to believe there is a basic intentionality at work throughout the cosmos, a basic purpose and that life has meaning. Take God out and the structure falls into a heap of meaningless pieces. The universe becomes a chance arrangement of atoms and human beings become an accident or a machine.

To say, "We believe in God!" is to make a affirmation about life itself. But now the belief becomes more specific. God is not only the Eternal Spirit, but we believe God is that force and power which became focused uniquely in Jesus Christ, in time and space. More than that, God is also our Father, which is a way of saying that He is our creator; that he is also focused and living in us. We'll say more about this later.

The word "Father" is used by way of analogy. It might be more helpful to say that God is our father and mother.

And to say that God creates all of us and is part of all of us is also to say that we are all brothers and sisters. We are not orphans. We are not alone.

But the meaning of the word "God" and what we believe about God, will become clearer as we examine each week the activities of God as proclaimed in this Statement of Faith. So let's now move on to the first of the seven major sentences which begins to describe what God has done and is doing. And here again, the opening statement, like the Bible, not only begins with God, but with his creative activity. God calls the worlds into being, and so we want to look particularly at two words -- "calls" and "Worlds."

1. God calls the worlds into being! This is another way of saying that behind all of creation is God. God orders creation. He calls all that is, into being. It is his power and his power alone that sustains creation.

Now all this may seem obvious to us, but it's often not so in practice. We're all more or less familiar with the cult of astrology. In our time we are aware of it in the form of horoscope columns in the newspaper. Each day such columns which organize our lives and the world under the signs of the Zodiac, tell us what to expect. "The stars cannot lie," or "Olga knows," are some of the slogans. Even though many people do not claim to believe much in such fortune telling, yet there are those who base their lives on these daily prophecies.

Belief in astrology or horoscopes asserts that the course of the planets determines life on this earth down to the smallest detail and even our own lives are under the sway of the stars. Such a belief gives us human beings only a very limited course of action and decision. It predestines us to a certain kind of life depending on what sign we were born under.

Thus people in previous centuries, like some today, scanned their horoscopes to discover what was in store for them and what they might do to take better advantage of the chances provided by more favorable constellations or at least escape a threatening planet.

Such a belief is based on the premise of a kind of mechanistic universe which God somehow set running like a machine and then stepped aside. It is really an anti-Christian, anti-Biblical point of view.

Our Statement of Faith proclaims, as does the Bible, that God "calls" the worlds into being. It is God who is in charge and we are not at the mercy of the planets or stars or moon.

The stars have no power in themselves. In a sense we can even say that the stars , including the sun, in no way create light, but are merely intermediary bearers of a light which existed without them and before them. The light itself, the energy comes from God who is the source of all things.

This is good news! It means that what may happen to me, or to you, or to the United States, or Russia, or my children or your professional career, the course of an illness--none of this depends upon the orbit of the stars or any other anonymous intermediary power--black cats, walking under ladders, knocking on wood, lucky numbers, charms, or good luck pieces. God is the beginning and the end.

Look then at the second word in the phrase, "He calls the worlds into being." This is a statement of faith for the space age. God has created everything that is, not only this tiny earth on which we live. And God is still at work, creating. Science tells us that new universes are being launched at this very moment, stars exploding, planets being formed.

Furthermore, whatever we discover in the future, God is the creator of that too. There is much that we do not know; worlds that we are unaware of, forces our senses and even most sophiscated instruments cannot detect, yet it is our faith that God is the creator of all that we have and will discover.

God is also the creator and calls into being the worlds of mind and thought and spirit; the worlds other than the physical; the world of life after death and all that goes with it. If we find living beings on other planets, it is our faith that God is still One, the same God who is behind all, through all and in all.

And the Statement of Faith continues -- "God creates man in his own image.

First of all, we do not mean by image, physical resemblance. In the image of God means that there is a part of God, a capacity for God, a thirst for God, a divine spark within each one of us. It means we are capable of deep love; we are capable of working with God in creation, we are capable of deciding.

Secondly, it means that we are of infinite value to God. That which He creates, he values.

In Jesus Christ, we see God most completely in a human being. Jesus himself could also see the image of God in others. Because he could see this, he could love prostitutes, bullies,

criminals, cheaters; he was able to do this because he saw through the corruption and the degeneration of human beings. His eye caught the divine original which is hidden in every person. We are to do the same. Try it! You'll see every person differently when you see them as being in the image of God.

But since God created us in his image, with freedom of choice, with mind and will, He also exposed himself and each one of us to the possibility of being reviled, despised, denied, and ignored. We can choose not to live up to our full potential as human beings made in the image of God. This is always the risk of love. It is the risk we all take on a lesser level when we choose to love someone, to give ourselves to someone; we may be rejected.

This leads us to the final words of the first sentence-- God creates us in his image and "sets before him the ways of life and death."

Here is involved the whole area of choice and decision. All of life is choosing and not to decide is to decide. What makes us human is the ability to decide. We can know right from wrong, good from bad. We can choose to live or to die. God sets before us the ways of life and death.

Human beings alone, among all organisms, know that they evolve and grow and we are capable to some degree of directing the course of evolution. We do this all the time, for example, with medicine. When, for instance, the application of insulin makes it possible for uncounted numbers of people to survive and reproduce who otherwise might have died, the next generation of human beings is already altered.

We have set before us always, the ways of life or death. Our Christian faith is that we are able with God's help to choose wisely and decide responsibly. We don't have to be wicked or foolish. In every situation we can make either a wise choice or a foolish choice. We can act in ways which draw us nearer to death or to life.

As we can see, death as used here means more than physical death. We can die in the sense that we sell out; that we give ourselves over to a kind of slavery so that we are no longer free but more of an object at the mercy of all things around us. We can try to excuse ourselves by saying, "I couldn't help it." But of course, we can help it. In each

situation we have to decide one way or the other. The Statement of Faith therefore reminds us that we cannot avoid decisions, we cannot wait for someone else to decide for us. Rather we are to be responsible human beings and God sets before us the ways of life and death.

This also means that the "ways of life and death" are to be found in our common experience and in the study of history and through a study of the Bible. We are to discern the signs of the times. The "ways of life and death" are evident if we only have eyes to see.

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father, and to his deeds we testify.
He Calls the worlds into being, creates man in his own image, and sets before him the ways of life and death. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. Try to state to the other members of the group what you personally believe about God. Does what you believe seem to agree with the interpretation given in the Statement of Faith and in this sermon?

2. What are some of the things which seem to make it difficult to believe in God? Share your doubts as well as what you believe.

3. Does the image of "God as father" cause any problems for you? Does it seem to make God too much in the human image?

4. Has the "space age" and space exploration caused your belief about God to change? Have you found your concept of God growing? In what ways?

5. Sometimes people think of God as a "resident policeman," a "parental hangover," a "grand old man," a "heavenly bosom," a "managing director," or in some other image. What kind of images do you have of God?