

This I Believe
Voices That Shaped the Church
Hebrews 11

Call to Worship

There's a tradition in Hasidic Judaism known as the legends of the Baal Shem Tov. This is one of those stories.

One day the Baal Shem Tov called his disciples and said, "I have been the connector between you and God for a long time, but now I am dying. When I'm gone, you must do this for yourselves. You know the place in the forest where I call to God? Stand in that same place, and do the same things I did. Light a fire, just like I showed you. Say the prayer I taught you. Do all these things, and God will come."

The Baal Shem Tov died. The first generation of his followers did exactly what he told them, and sure enough, God came to them as God always had.

Then that generation passed away. The second generation had forgotten how to light the fire the way the Baal Shem Tov had done it. But still, they faithfully went to the same special place in the forest. They said the prayer their parents had instructed them. And sure enough, God showed up, every time.

A third generation came along. They'd forgotten how to light the fire, and they couldn't remember the exact place in the forest where they should stand. But they said the prayer. And again God showed up.

By the fourth generation, no one remembered how to light the fire, or where the special place was in the forest. No one who was alive could remember the words of the prayer that the Baal Shem Tov had taught his followers. But there was one person who remembered the story about the fire, the forest and the prayer. He told that story—over and over again. And sure enough, God came.

Missionaries and Sunday School teachers and grandparents carried their faith to you. So that you would not forget. So that you would know how to stand in the place where God shows up. And sure enough, God comes. Again.

Sermon

My stepson Ryan came home from his first year in college with the logo of his football team colorfully and permanently etched onto his shoulder. He assured his appalled parents that his loyalties would never change. Ryan is over 40 now. That tattoo isn't quite as massive or blood-red as I remember it. But even Ryan wonders now whether playing college football is the memory he wants inscribed on his body for the rest of his life.

Tattoo removal is a booming business. In this county, there's a program that removes tattoos for free. It's aimed at young people finding their way out of gangs rather than football teams, but the idea is the same for everyone who re-thinks some timeless truth they once attached permanently to their body. We change. Hopefully, we get wiser. We let new people into our lives. We love differently. We change

our minds about what matters, what's most important. Sometimes we regret filling our skin space or our history with permanent promises.

Even our beliefs change, as the events of our lives shape and re-shape the way we see things. The image of God you had as a child should change. You grow, and you learn that not everyone in the world looks like you, that bad things do happen to good people.

Change is a good thing. New beliefs means you're thinking and learning; that your faith is something alive, not just something you swallowed once and forgot, like a multi-vitamin. In fact, *metanoia* is the Greek word that Paul used in the New Testament most often to describe what happens to people of faith. Metanoia *means* changing your mind. And it happens not just once, but over and over again. *The Christian Century*, a journal that I read regularly, publishes every ten or fifteen years a book of essays by theologians called *How My Mind Has Changed*.

It's not just theologians. All of us should be testing our beliefs against the experiences of our lives. You have to adjust your picture of God when someone dies who 'shouldn't have', or when thousands of people are killed in an earthquake. When you come to an ethical dilemma in your work or your family or in what you hear in the news. Jesus' words should sound different now than the way you heard them as a child in Sunday School. How do you hold on to a belief that all people are basically good, and that no judgment ever is a good thing, when every day there are stories of intentional cruelty and almost unimaginable acts of violence? It's not disloyal to ask questions of God or doubt your beliefs in those moments; it's thoughtful and honest and true.

And yet... Isn't religion supposed to be something that *doesn't* change? Shouldn't there be some beliefs that are so central, so *fixed and true* that you just accept them as they came to you?

In this season of our exploring what it means to say *This I Believe*, we come today to the great creeds of the Church. The Creeds are statements of faith that the Church has adopted to say 'These are the beliefs Christians hold in common.' If you've been a Methodist for a long time, you may have grown up saying the Apostles' Creed every Sunday in church.

Apostles' Creed
United Methodist Hymnal No. 882

Look just across the page at Number 880. That's the Nicene Creed. That's the statement of faith we said every Sunday in the Orthodox church where I grew up.

Both of these creeds became official statements of the Christian Church during the fourth century, shortly after the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion. The process of working out the creeds' language and adoption happened in councils—big meetings of theologians and powerful people with high positions in the Church. And of course it's easy to be cynical about what comes out of meetings like that. There are politics in every setting. No doubt there was trading of one bit of language for another, a statement that got in there because its author was powerful or popular or wanted to be the next bishop.

But I think it's unfair, inaccurate, to dismiss these creeds as just the product of politics. Flawed as their processes might have been, those councils were looking for language that had already proven that it could bring people together around a common faith. The Apostles' Creed was spoken in Christian communities as early as the year 150. They called it The Apostles Creed because people remembered hearing the original disciples of Jesus say those words. Think about how early that was in the development of a new religion. People were still trying to work out who Jesus was, how he fit into the Jewish tradition that he came from, but that he also contradicted sometimes. This way of talking about him—this creed—was tried out and tested by local communities of people who were trying to be followers of Jesus. Its words said something important—what they wanted their children and grandchildren to remember—about who Jesus was, about what parts of his life mattered. As you can see on the page in front of you, it's like a 100-word summary of the Gospels. But the people's understanding kept changing.

If you compare the language of the two creeds—on the right and left pages of the Hymnal—you can almost get a picture of history happening. The Nicene Creed, which was written almost two centuries later, includes a lot more fancy words. About Jesus: "...eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...through him all things were made." Those ideas come directly out of the Gospel of John, written about a hundred years after Jesus was born. A hundred years of people imagining what it meant to have God come to earth in a human body. No one had even begun to put those thoughts together in the first years of this new religion, when The Apostles' Creed came into use. Decades later, those words seemed to capture a more developed, nuanced, understanding of who Jesus was, why he did the things he did, how he was related to the God that people had believed in for much longer.

People didn't stop thinking about these things once the creeds were written down. Writers, theologians, professors, priests, everyday people of faith kept thinking and re-thinking their faith, adjusting their beliefs. They would find new insights from the Bible, understand something that had not made sense before. There were arguments about what was truth; trials for heresy—beliefs they thought were dangerous untruths. As Christianity grew as a global religion, as the events of history changed the world, as our understanding of science and race and gender has expanded, the way we describe God and Jesus—that's changed too.

And still our tradition holds on to these ancient creeds as a statement of the Church's most essential faith. Still, there is value, I think, in reciting this creed even if its words don't speak *our* opinions, beliefs we came to on our own. Why?

The word *religion*, if you trace it back to its root, means to *re-connect*. To take something that has come apart and put it back together again. Embedded right in that word is the idea that we're doing something *again*, not for the first time. That's what it means to be part of a religious tradition: we're repeating actions, beliefs, rituals, ways of knowing God, that people who came before us have found to be true and good and valuable. You might have a mixed sort of reaction to hearing that. I do. I kind of like thinking for myself. I'm not sure I want to sign on to anyone else's experience of God. I think that's what people are telling us when they say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." They're saying, "I want to figure this out on my own. I don't need to know how anyone else has found God; my experience is mine alone."

Here, in this church, we don't stop thinking for ourselves. But we gather and form our spiritual lives together—because we believe there is value in putting our feet in the footsteps of people who have come before us. Wisdom in repeating the words and singing the songs and doing the motions that have helped other people make meaning of their lives.

In that reading from the New Testament book of Hebrews that we heard this morning, there was one line that I wonder if you caught. I never had until I read it again this week. It went like this:

*By faith Joseph recalled the exodus of the Israelites at the end of his life,
and gave instructions about burying his bones.*

The Joseph they're talking about here is not the father of Jesus; it's the Joseph of the Old Testament. Joseph with the many-colored coat, whose brothers dropped him in a hole in the ground when they got fed up with his bragging. Joseph who found his way to Egypt and used his wits to become wealthy and powerful in the Egyptian Pharaoh's court. Joseph who forgave his brothers after many years and made a way for their families to immigrate to Egypt when there was a famine in their own land.

So here's the weird thing. When Joseph died, the *exodus* had not happened yet. Joseph didn't know that one day the Israelites would be slaves in that country where they'd found food. He didn't know there would *be* an exodus, that his descendants would have to slip out of their slave quarters in the middle of the night and walk across the Red Sea as God held back the waters and they escaped to freedom.

But Joseph remembered that God had promised, a long time ago, that the Israelites would have a homeland. And he knew they weren't there yet. And so, just before he died, Joseph said, 'When you leave Egypt, take my bones with you.' His literal bones. The people of Israel did what he said. They took a box filled with Joseph's bones, and they carried it through the wilderness for forty years. I imagine every once in a while someone would ask, "Why are we still carrying this thing?" They kept it with them so that they would remember how God had saved Joseph once before. Carrying those old, dead bones with them helped them remember that God would save them too.

Being 'religious' is about having the humility to see that we are not the smartest or the only spiritual people who have ever lived. It's about taking our place in the next generation of all those people of faith who have come before us. People whose stubborn and expectant trust in God can connect us to God again.

We don't say the creed when we're overflowing with new insights or inspiration. Understanding and believing every word of it for yourself is not actually the point. We say it when we *don't* feel faithful; when we've forgotten what faith feels like, and how to do it for ourselves. When the rock under your foot slips a little, and you're not sure there *is* any solid ground underneath you. When you're just going through the motions, reciting words that might that day feel meaningless. To say "I believe" about words someone else wrote isn't inauthentic. It means "This is where I am choosing to stand. And I'm staying...so that I'll be here when God shows up again."