

“Credo, Part Two: God”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for September 8th 2019 (13th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Exodus 20: 1-11

Let's not beat around the bush, since the Apostle's Creed most certainly does not beat around the bush. Having opened with the affirmation—"I believe"—the Creed jumps right into the middle of things, with its bold opening statement: "I believe in **God**". Mind you, much the same can be said of the Nicene Creed, which adds one key word to the formula—"We believe in **one** God..." making explicit what is only implicit in the Apostle's Creed, namely the "oneness" of the God in whom we believe. More on that shortly. But first note that our own United Church's "A New Creed" is no more reluctant on any of this, beginning somewhat more elaborately with the powerful words: "We are not alone, we live in God's world..." and then repeating—less we miss the point—"We **believe** in God."

While it is certainly true that all of these creeds will have much more to say **about** God, the first point all three of them make—with, as I noted earlier, the Nicene Creed doing so most emphatically...

...what all of these creeds offer prior to any further statements or qualifiers, is their shared insistence that we are speaking here not of gods, but of God. With that as our starting point, we encounter a very large piece of what it means for us to offer ourselves as the Church...to offer ourselves as a Gospel people.

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Consider...consider that it is likely impossible to name an ancient culture devoid of gods and goddesses. The one glaring exception to that rule is found in ancient Israel: whose culture (and religious evolution) moves in an entirely different direction. In what may well be the most ancient of any Biblical creed—known as the She'ma—Moses is heard to inspire his people with these immortal words: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"ⁱ: testifying not only to God's unbroken and unbreakable **unity** (God's oneness), but to the **uniqueness**—the one and only-ness—of God. While it cannot be denied that we Christians are no strangers to other numbers...

...above all the number three!...

...the starting point for our distinctively Christian creeds is that same number offered to ancient Israel. We too begin with an affirmation not of the gods, but of God in the singular. I believe...we believe...in God.

Nor is it incidental that the great spiritual challenge to be found throughout the Bible—Old and New Testaments alike—is not so much the challenge of atheism, rather

the challenge of idolatry. While scripture is certainly not unaware of the “fool who says in his heart that there is no God”ⁱⁱ, those same scriptures are far more concerned with our human tendency to construct and worship idols. Nowhere is the centrality of that concern more clearly demonstrated than through the first four of the commandments: the 10 commandments, the great commandments: the first four of which seek to establish lines of demarcation that set off the one true God from all other claimants to that throne. Hence (in God’s own words): no other gods before Me. Hence: no seeking to make a visual likeness of Me. Hence: no loose or casual chatter about Me. Hence setting aside one day per week as a sabbath day—a holy day with which to honour Me.

And I hasten to add! The word holy is the **key** word that needs to be associated with the Biblical image of God. There are many other words rightly associated with this, our God: words that we will come to know more fully...including the two words which immediately follow in the Apostle’s Creed:” Father Almighty”. But for now, it is the singularity of this God that points to “holiness”—i.e. being “set apart” from anything and everything else of which we can possibly conceive—it is this God’s singularity that leaves us no choice but to place “holiness” as the key attribute with which we need to speak of God. Moreover, it is this radical fixation...I hesitate to use the word obsession although it is not entirely out of place...it is this radical fixation on God’s singularity—on God’s holiness—that leads to the rightful classification of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as what are often referred to as the three great monotheistic faiths. While it’s true that a historian of religion would want to qualify that use of the term “monotheism”, I am going to let that word stand. And I am going to do so in order to make the further point that there are both cautions that need to be named but also things to celebrate about our heritage as a faith community that begins with the affirmation that we believe not in many gods but in the one God! Let’s start with the cautions.

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Those cautions have to do, primarily, with the hard-to-dismiss accusation that there is a link between monotheism and violence. As far back as the early 18th century, Scottish philosopher David Hume argued that monotheism is less tolerant than polytheism. More recently—especially since the horrific events that transpired 18 years ago this month, on September 11th—a number of commentators have asked whether there is, in fact, a tendency within monotheism to give birth to a certain kind of religious fanaticism. That’s a question, quite frankly, that ought not to be swept under the rug or dismissed out of hand. Whatever else monotheism entails, it entails a clarion call to place one’s trust into the hands of the One God—the holy God—source of all that was and is and evermore shall be. Alas, the shadow side of such unswerving commitment most certainly can include the troubling phenomenon of religious fanaticism which—under the right set of circumstances—can lead to violence. It would be foolish to deny that danger even, though it would be terribly naïve to think that such violence would disappear with the disappearance of belief in the one God. Whatever else the 20th century proved, it proved that you can be a confirmed pagan—Adolf Hitler—or a confirmed atheist—Jozef Stalin—and still pile the corpses pretty high. Nevertheless!

Jesus' reminder to the disciple who unsheathed his sword as soldiers came to arrest Jesus, at one of the critical points in Matthew's Gospel...Jesus' insistence that this disciple should put his sword away since "*all who take the sword will perish by the sword*", is a reminder that we all can stand to hear.ⁱⁱⁱ Devotion to the way of God—devotion to the way of the One God, the Holy God—is never truly advanced through the sword, whether it be in service to a Holy War, a Ji'had or a Crusade. There may very well be times when war becomes a necessity; from the perspective of the Christian faith, it should always be regarded as—at best—a tragic necessity.

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Having named...having acknowledged...the shadow side of belief in—faith/trust in the One God...I would be remiss were I to fail to name the very significant difference such faith makes possible. And here I need to tell you!

I found myself chuckling a couple of weeks back, when I read the results of the surveys you recently completed so that our MPSC—our Ministry Profile and Search Committee—could create a profile of the sort of minister you hope they will be able to find when the search begins. I chuckled because one of the strongest responses involved a near unanimous affirmation of the value of "practical" sermons: a chuckle that derives from the fact that you have graciously been putting up—for the last six years—with one of the most impractical preachers on the face of the planet. But you know, when push comes to shove, the question of God's singularity—

...above all the affirmation of the Holy One as source of all that was and is and evermore shall be...

...that affirmation stands in **my** world as a highly practical affirmation: one well worth laying down as foundational for the lives we lead. And yes: to turn to the wonderful world of mythology. I think—for example—of the character of Wotan, in Richard Wagner's magnificent *Ring Cycle*. Wotan, the chief of all the gods, and yet a god left with no choice but to enter into deals and deceptions in order to get his own way. I think, as well, of the figure of Zeus—the chief of all the Greek gods—who, cuts an impressive figure in *The Iliad*, Homer's classic depiction of the Trojan War. Nevertheless—imposing a figure as he undeniably is...

...beyond the obvious fact that Zeus is a notorious womanizer who spends much of his time hiding his lovers from his jealous wife Hera...

...more impressive is the fact that he is ultimately no less a puppet in the hands of fate, than any of the other characters in Homer's epic. To put it succinctly: the ancient pagan world, no less than the modern world from which all of the gods have been banished including the God of the Bible, those are worlds from which questions of ultimate purpose and ultimate meaning appear also to have been banished. When even the chief of the gods can do nothing more than bring out the scales of destiny, when even the chief of the gods can do nothing other than resign

himself to blind fate: such a world is one in which it is very hard to confidently embrace a belief in the ultimate meaningfulness of the lives we puny mortals lead.

And I am reminded...reminded of the claim—most recently popularized by President Barack Obama who borrowed it from the Rev. Martin Luther King, who borrowed it from a 19th century Unitarian Pastor....I am reminded of the claim—the bold claim!—that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”^{iv} I love those words...although I hasten to add that a dispassionate study of history doesn’t tend to provide the detached observer with any such assurance. In truth: both in our personal lives and in the life of humanity taken as a whole...times of chaos...times of wanton cruelty and destruction...alternate with times when it is possible to hope that history’s arc is, in reality, bending in the direction of justice, the direction of truth, the direction of peace. Which is my way of suggesting that our trust in the benign slope of history’s arc has more to do with our faith in God—the One God, the Holy God—who is history’s ultimate source if our conviction is correct concerning this, our God, as source of all that was, and is and evermore shall be.

And that sets us free, you and I: sets us free truly to embrace the lives we lead, the challenges we face, the opportunities we have been given, the possibility of choosing love over hate and life over death: we are set free to embrace it all with the confidence that comes from knowing that this world—and our lives as a part of this world—have a deeper origin and a more glorious destiny than we would dare even to imagine were we nothing more than a swirling mass of atoms or nothing more than the “playthings of the gods”. That there will be more for us to say of this God—who, trust me, regards us as far more precious than “playthings”—that there will be more for us to say as we move further into our creed: **that** goes without saying. But for now...for now we have already arrived a not too shabby first stop along the way.

I believe in God! We believe in one God. Perhaps most magically of all: We are not alone; we live in God’s world. We believe in God!^v

May it be so! Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Deuteronomy 6:4

ⁱⁱ Psalm 14:1

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 26:52

^{iv} <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>

^v In order, the opening words to The Apostle’s Creed, The Nicene Creed, The United Church’s A New Creed.