

The Apostle's Creed Part II: The Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Isaiah 40: 27-31 and First John 3: 1-3

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Today I continue my series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed. Last week, if you remember, I talked about what it means to believe *in* God and how it is different from only believing that God exists. This week, I am talking about the language in the creed which says that God is the Father Almighty and the maker of heaven and earth. Just like last week, I again have three things to say about this phrase.

First, when we call God *Father*, we are using the very word that Jesus used to address God and we should know that this address signified something new in the life of God's people. Before Jesus walked the earth, God was thought of as being so holy that his name couldn't even be uttered. Even to this day, whenever our Jewish friends run across the name of *Yahweh* in the scriptures they will substitute the word *Adonai* which simply means *Lord*. There is something to be said for believing that God is so holy that his name cannot be uttered and his face cannot be seen. But just as a parent loves his children, knows them by name and desires a relationship with them, Jesus wanted his disciples to think of God in the same way, and so he called God *Father*. As all of us know, a Father is not just a parent but a male parent, and sometimes I am asked if we must therefore think of God as male. Well, here's my answer to that question. When I personally pray to God I think of God as male, but it is a mistake to think that it is some requirement of Christianity that we think of God as male, or that it is somehow wrong to think of God as female, or as mother. Scripture calls God both a father and a mother. The prophet Isaiah has God saying "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you." I am sure we have all

heard references to God as father in scripture, but there are thirteen separate references to God as mother in scripture as well. I don't see anything wrong with calling God *Father*. This world is full of good honorable and loving fathers. My dad was one, and I try to be one every day of my life. But when a woman has experienced abuse at the hands of her father, or if she was neglected by an absentee father, or if she comes from a culture or even a church where women are constantly told they aren't important, I sometimes think of how damaging it is to that woman for her to be told that she is only allowed to think of God as a father and never a mother. And not only is it damaging, it is even unbiblical. So while our calling God *Father* in this creed means that we are all allowed to call God Father, I think it would be a mistake to think this creed means that God is only Father. The point is that God is a loving parent, and a loving parent can be a male parent or a female parent.

Second, not only do we call God *Father* in this creed, we also call God *Almighty*. And what might that mean? Well, it obviously means that God can do anything, or that God is *Omnipotent* as you sometimes hear in classrooms that have the word *Theology* on the door. But what do we really mean when we say *Almighty* or *Omnipotent*? Does it mean that God can really do anything at all? Does it mean that God can make a square circle? Does it mean that God can ride a bicycle or eat an ice cream cone? Sometimes people ask me things like this, but frankly I don't see much point in thinking about questions like that. A God who can make square circles, ride bicycles and eat ice cream cones is not what the faith of the prophets and the apostles and all those who have gone before us was really all about. I think people forget that when all our forefathers and foremothers in the faith talked about God, they weren't sitting in Ivy League schools speculating about abstractions, as you would do say, in one of those awful Philosophy

classes. They were living out their lives in the real world, usually a world that was a little too real. And in that world when they talked about God being almighty, they were talking about God's power over the forces of evil, sin and darkness in this world. What they were talking about when they called God almighty is God's power over Pharaoh, who had all the horses and chariots of the Egyptian army at his disposal. What they were talking about when they called God Almighty was God's power over Pilate and the Sanhedrin who thought they could silence the Son of God by nailing him to a cross and putting his body in a tomb. What they were talking about when they called God Almighty was God's power over the Roman Emperors who thought they could persecute the church into non-existence. And when we consider what their lives were like, I can't help but think it must be a mistake for us to talk about God's power apart from God's love. For those who came before us and testified about the glory of this God we worship, it wasn't just God Almighty that they worshipped, it was God the Father Almighty. It was just as the creed says. One who is just God Almighty might be one we could talk about eating ice cream cones and riding bicycles, and even making square circles. But when we think about God as a Father Almighty, we quickly realize that these kinds of powers and abilities have nothing to do with the God of the bible, who loves us. The God of the bible is one whose power is the kind of power a loving parent would have who defends their child, protects their child, and nurtures their child. This is the meaning of God's power, and I hope it is this kind of power that you have discovered from God in your own life.

Finally, God is not just the father almighty, but the maker of heaven and earth. What does that mean? It means that as we worship this Almighty Father, who is both loving and powerful we should remind ourselves that the greatest expression of God's love and power is that there

is no where we can be, and nowhere we can go where God is not in control. If God created this entire world, then how can God not have control over all that he's created?

This week, as you are probably aware, this country celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first Apollo moon landing. It has been half a century since grainy television images were beamed to every household in America and indeed every television owning household in the world, as Neil Armstrong took that first step onto the moon's dusty surface and the world heard some static-filled words about one small step for man and one giant leap for mankind. I do not remember this week fifty years ago; I was not born yet. But I also know that most of you do, and I can imagine that even after fifty years, even after half a century, you are still amazed that we have the technology to do such a thing. And maybe from time to time you have wondered, where will humankind be able to go in the next fifty years? Will we go to Mars, will we go somewhere outside our entire solar system, and even if we don't develop the physical capacity to travel to some distant planet or moon, what mysteries of the universe will we be able to unlock in the next fifty years? But what we confess in this creed is that no matter where we go, and no matter what we discover, we will never be able to go beyond the limits of our loving Father. I know that sometimes people take this idea of the inescapable presence of God as something negative. Sometimes a God who is always there may seem like a God who is invading your personal space and invading your privacy. There are times in life when we just want to be alone and maybe the idea of a God who is always with us is a threat to our solitude. But I think it is a mistake to think of God that way. What God's presence throughout this universe means is not that we are always being bothered, what it means rather is that there is no where we can go where we need to be afraid.

I think it is rather tragic that sometimes people who claim to read the bible and who confess all the things we confess want to live out their lives of faith in absolute retreat from the world around them. Life in church to them is a fortress where they can escape from everything they mistrust in the world around them, it is an escape from everything they suspect of being evil and hostile once they leave the safety of like-minded people around them in the community of faith. But what they are retreating to is not really a community of faith, it is a community of fear. To have real faith in God is to live unafraid of this world we live in because it is to be unafraid of your community, unafraid of the community next door, or downtown. It is to live unafraid of those blocks with the Section 8 housing down the street, or that neighborhood with that inner-city school district down the street. And to have faith in God doesn't mean that you therefore wander dark alleys alone at night, or that you leave your house and your car unlocked and throw caution to the wind. But there is a difference between being cautious and being cowardly. Listen to the words of the Psalmist: "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?"

I want to close with this. Whenever I come to the last day of class over at Malone, I tell my students this story. I tell them that when you go to the University of South Carolina, and you go to the Thomas Cooper Library, which is the main library on campus, you go to a building which has a main floor and a mezzanine, and then five more floors underground. Each floor is probably double the size of this sanctuary and it looks like any of the floors of a typical library; there are row after row of books on shelves.

Well, during the years when I was working on my dissertation, I would usually spend every single day at that library, usually at the bottom floor because that's where all the philosophy books were. Now, when I was a graduate student, I worked on my dissertation every day for about five years. And that wasn't really slow, that's just how long it took. And one day it occurred to me that I was doing all this work—as I was going through the process of reading all this material, citing all these sources and writing and rewriting draft after draft of each chapter, it occurred to me that when I finished my dissertation, what I would have written may have made me feel really special, it may have made me feel really important, but it would represent only one of those books on all the shelves of this library. In the seven stories of the Thomas Cooper library, the spine of what I was writing was only one inch thick.

Now if you have never been humbled that is a humbling experience, let me tell you. And you see, I tell my students that story because I tell them the beginning of education is realizing not what you know, but how much you don't know.

And it is the same way I think with God. This morning I am preaching a sermon on what we mean when we say God the Father Almighty, but in some ways, isn't that a silly exercise? I can't even begin to sum up who God is in one sermon, I can't even begin to sum up who God is in a lifetime of sermons. But if this morning I have said something that has either expanded or deepened your understanding of God, the God who loves you and protects you and watches over you, then that is all I could ever hope to do. Next week, I will be talking about what the Apostle's Creed has to say about Jesus Christ, until then, abide in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.