

*This I Believe*  
*Voices That Shaped the Church*  
Hebrews 11

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 40 now. And while that tattoo isn't quite as massive or blood-red as I remembered it, 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 will remove tattoos for free. It's aimed at young people who want to find their way out of gangs rather than football teams, but the idea is the same. 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 history or our skin space 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, as you grow and learn that not everyone in the world looks like you, that bad things do happen to good people. As you understand metaphors, that saying "the Lord is my shepherd" does not mean you're a sheep.

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; it happens not just once, but over and over again. *The Christian Century*, a journal that I read regularly, and that I'm sure many of your pastors have read, publishes, every ten or fifteen years, a book of essays by theologians called *How My Mind Has Changed*.

But it's not just theologians. All of us should be testing our beliefs against the experiences of our lives. Maybe you should adjust your understanding 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, do Jesus' words mean something different than the way you heard them as a child in Sunday School? How do you hold on to a belief that people are basically good when every day there are stories of terrorism 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...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 affirmations of faith that the community of Christians all over the world has adopted as a statement of *what Christians believe*. If you've been a Methodist for a long time, you may have recognized the Apostles' Creed we said this morning as part of the tradition you grew up with. It's still

the practice of many United Methodist churches to speak that creed out loud every time they gather for worship. So let's stay with it for a few minutes.

If you have a Hymnal, turn to the page toward the back that has the numbers 880 and 881 at the top. 881 and 882, you'll see, are two versions of The Apostles' Creed. We recited the second one this morning, which has slightly more contemporary language. Number 880, The Nicene Creed, is the creed we said every Sunday in the Orthodox church in which 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. You don't have to know much about the specifics of those councils to be a little 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 it would be unfair and inaccurate to dismiss these creeds as just the product of politics.

Flawed as their processes might have been, those councils were looking for truth—language that had already proven that it could bring people together around a common faith. The Apostles' Creed seems to have been used 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 this 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 out of, but that he also contradicted sometimes. This way of talking about him—this creed—was tried out, tested, by the people who were trying to follow 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 side 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, begotten, not made...through him all things were made." Those thoughts come directly out of the Gospel of John, which was the last of the four Gospels to be written, almost 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.

And 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, changing their beliefs when they found a new insight from the Bible or understood something that had not made sense before. There were arguments about what was truth, trials for heresy. As Christianity grew as a global religion, as the events of history changed the world, as our understanding of science and race and gender have changed, the way we describe God, and Jesus, and just about everything else, has changed also.

And still our tradition holds on to these ancient creeds as a statement of the Christian Church's most essential faith. Still, we recite this creed even though its words may not speak *our* opinions, beliefs we came to on our own. Why?

There's a tradition in Hasidic Judaism known as the legends of the Baal Shem Tov, who was one of the great teachers of the Jewish faith. He lived in the 18th century. As this story goes, 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. 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.

Creeds help *us* show up. Much like the Lord's Prayer, we don't say the creed when we're overflowing with new insights or inspiration. We say it when we *don't* feel faithful; when we've forgotten what faith feels like, how to do it. 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 even feel meaningless. To say "I believe" about words someone else wrote isn't inauthentic. It means "This is where I choose to stand. And I'm staying...until God shows up again."

Speaking out loud one of these creeds of the church—and especially to do it in community—is like us telling a story about things we mostly don't remember. Understanding and believing every word of it for yourself is not actually the point. It's about placing yourself in the next generation of all those people of faith who have come before you. The people whose stubborn and expectant trust in God we heard from the Bible this morning. The people who lived with Jesus and weren't sure how to say who he was or what his words meant, but kept believing, even after he was gone. Missionaries and Sunday School teachers and grandparents who carried that 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.