

Sometimes you'll be thumbing through some sort of printed document and come across a page with nothing on it except the words, "This page is intentionally left blank."

There are a number of reasons why you might want to insert a blank page in a printed document. Suppose it's an important document. And you come across a blank page. You might be worried, or you might even panic:

"Oh no... There's been some sort of printing error. Maybe this document is missing some vital information..."

To keep people from having such potential moments of fright, these blank pages have the words, "This page is intentionally left blank."

But if you think about it, it's an absurd statement. It's actually false. This page is not blank. It has writing on it that reads, "This page is intentionally left blank." The act of printing those words on a blank page renders the page no longer blank. Those words are contradictory and false. Their very existence negates the message they're trying to convey.

And yet, they are there to serve a purpose. They are there ultimately to signal and to reassure you that the existence of that page is intentional, not an accident.

When we human beings speak of God, we have to use human words. And not only are the words human, the meaning of the words is human. We might call God "creator." But do we really understand what that means? Do we really know how God created the universe? Is the creation of the entire universe anywhere within our normal frame of reference?

We human beings might create. We can understand that. Create a work of art. Create a real problem. Create a new way of doing something. But to say God creates... What we're doing is using an analogy. We have a handle on humans creating. But when we apply that word to God, we're only making a rough sketch of an idea. God's nature as Creator transcends anything in our human frame of reference.

Or we might call God, "Father." But again, it's an analogy. God is not a father in the way a human being is. God is not a male parent who gives us half of our DNA. God is not a male, nor is God a female. God is not a parent like human beings or animals are parents. Calling God Father is really saying that God has characteristics in common with human fathers, or human parents. Or perhaps, human parents share some of the attributes of God's fatherly nature and love, and for that matter, God's motherly nature and love.

So whenever we say anything about God, our words are imperfect. The ideas those words point to are imperfect. By trying to define the infinite, by trying to describe God our words are somewhat false the minute we utter them. No matter what we say, our words fall short of the reality we're trying to describe.

If you write on a blank page, "This page is intentionally left blank," you have automatically invalidated that statement at some level. To write or say or think anything about God will also fall short and will be false at some level every time.

And yet people have encountered God in the past. People encounter God today. And as poor as our words are, they're the only tools we have to try to say something about who God is. Words are the only way we can express who God has shown himself to be in his interactions with us finite human beings.

So today and for a total of 6 Sundays, I'm going to explore some classic statements about God: The Creeds. Yes, they're human thoughts put into human words about the God whom human beings have encountered. Thus they are imperfect. They are incomplete. They are sketches, and analogies, and metaphors, and summaries. But in spite of all their inherent shortcomings, I believe they are extremely valuable for those of us who try to follow the Living God. They are valuable in understanding how our ancestors grappled with understanding the God they encountered the past. And they are still valuable as we follow this same God in the present and into the future.

Of course, if we're going to talk about creeds, I should briefly define them. The word "creed" comes from the Latin words *credo* which means "I believe" or *credimus* which means "we believe." Thus creeds, and creedal statements are simply statements and summaries of what we believe.

During the coming Sundays I'm going to talk mostly about the Nicene Creed, though I will talk some about the Apostles' Creed as well. I'll deal with both of those specifically beginning next week.

But creedal statements didn't start with the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. They began much earlier.

The oldest creeds are in Scripture. The great Jewish creed is simple—it's 6 words long in Hebrew. It is called the *Shema*, which is Hebrew for "Hear." It is found in the book of Deuteronomy: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echod*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Or "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone."¹

The oldest creed in the New Testament is even shorter. It is only 2 words long in Greek: *Kyrios Iesous*. "Jesus is Lord."² This is a deceptively powerful statement in spite of its brevity. "Jesus is Lord." It had secular and sacred ramifications. First off, for early Christians to say "Jesus is Lord" was a loaded political statement. Because their culture proclaimed "Caesar is Lord". If Jesus is Lord, then ultimate loyalty and fealty belong to him, not to Caesar nor anyone else.

And there was a powerful religious meaning as well. Jesus is Lord. Well, as we just heard in the *Shema*, only God is the Lord. To say that Jesus is Lord is to imply that Jesus somehow shares identity with God. Somehow, there was something about Jesus that shared in God's own nature and being. We'll talk more about this in a couple weeks. But for now I want

¹ Dt 6:4

² Rom 10:9, 1Cor 12:3

to note this is not a late development. This is a statement that is written down VERY early in Christians history, within 20-25 years of Jesus' resurrection.

There is a myth out there that the early Christians believed Jesus was just a regular human, and it was the later church centuries later that said he was God. Don't you believe it. The earliest Christian writings we have say that Jesus somehow shares in God's nature. Yes, it would take centuries for Christians to work out the full ramifications of what that meant. But that belief was there early on.

In fact, within a few decades of those words being written, there was a controversy that challenged Jesus' identity. It would be one of the first great controversies within the Christian church about who Jesus was and who God was. There was a minority group within the early church that claimed something strange. And it wasn't that that Jesus wasn't God. Their claim was that Jesus wasn't human. He only appeared to be human, they said. But he was just a God putting on a human disguise. He wasn't really born, because gods can't be born. And he didn't really die.

Part of the reason the creeds talk explicitly about Jesus' conception, and passion, and death, and burial was in order to defend the idea that Jesus was somehow truly human as well as truly God. More on that in 2 weeks.

Which brings up a very important point.

When we encounter the creeds in the 21st century it's like hearing someone in the room talking on the phone. You only hear one half of their conversation. But you don't hear the other half.

Or it's like Charlie Brown cartoons. You only hear the kids speak. The adults all go "Wa-ha wa-ha."

When we see the creeds, we're seeing half of a conversation. But we don't see the other half.

When the majority of the church put all these things down and said, "This is what we believe," they said those things because there was some group in the early Christian community who believed something different.

Let me say that a different way.

When you look at the creeds, every phrase, almost every word is there because there was some small fringe group in the early church that believed the exact opposite.

And so the majority had to come together and say, "no—we don't believe that—we have to stand up for this."

We still do the same thing—we don't want modern Christianity to be defined by those on the fringes: David Koresh, Jim Jones, Fred Phelps, Sun Myung Moon. Last week we had a Christian fringe group predicting the world would end on September 23 when the Earth would supposedly collide with a supposed rogue planet named, Nabiru. So periodically, even today, we modern Christians have to say, "No, that's really not part of the faith as we understand it." Our ancestors had to do the same thing in the formative years of Christianity.

For example: next week, we'll talk about God the Father, the creator of heaven and earth. Those words are there because there was a small faction in the early church that believed God did NOT create the earth. The earth was matter, it was fallen, they said. A good God would never create anything so nasty.

So this group made a distinction. They said that the Jewish "god," the "god" of the Old Testament created the earth. But he was a lesser god. They believed that it was the supreme God, the real God, the God who is the Father of Jesus Christ who sent Jesus down on a rescue mission to save all of the people trapped on the earth that was created by this lesser "god." In fact, one subgroup of this faction said that the Old Testament "god" was 36 levels or 36 degrees below the level of the supreme God, the father of Jesus Christ.

So when the Creed says that God is the "Creator of heaven and earth," those words are there to refute one minority faction in the early church that believed God wasn't the creator.

And on and on it goes. I could overload you with all kinds of names of all kinds of fringe factions: Docetists, Marcionites, gnostics, modalists, Sabellians, Arians, and on and on it goes.

These were all theological minority groups who said various things that the rest of the Christians said, "No, that's too kooky. That's not right. That's not something we can ask people to believe. That's not something we can run up the flagpole and salute."

And if you look at all of these ideas and follow them to their logical conclusions, they all take you to different dark corners where you don't want to go: God doesn't love you, or Jesus doesn't save you, or only a small minority of Christians can get into heaven.

If you study all of these groups, you would be thankful that we have the creeds we have. The creeds are like guard rails that keep us from sliding off some really nasty philosophical and theological cliffs to one side or the other. They are statements that allow the majority of Christians to stand together and say, these are some of the core things of the faith that we can agree upon. There may be other areas where we have disagreements. But these are things that most Christians believe together.

The creeds were never meant to be complete and systematic statements of the totality of the Christian faith. They are sketches. They are approximations. But they're some of the best statements we have that summarize the Christian faith.

There's no way to capture the full reality and totality of the living God in human words.

But the brief statements in the creeds have been a wonderful tool for more than 1,600 years to allow Christians to come together.

They don't tell us everything about God. But they allow us to stand up together, and say, "We believe."