

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost / Rally Day • September 7, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Augsburg Confession, Article I; Psalm 119:33-40

“Back to Basics – Who is God?”

Have you ever tried to talk with somebody about God and found yourself at a loss for words? Probably, this time of thing would happen when you're not expecting it, in a conversation with a friend or family member about something completely different, but then – wham – out of nowhere comes the “God topic.” People have all kinds of thoughts as to who or what God is, if they even think that God exists. Some view God as a creator who started everything up and then walked away; others may see God as something out of *Star Wars*: a disembodied, impersonal “force” that connects all living things. Just this week, one of these conversations came up on me, literally at my very doorstep. I'd scheduled an appointment to have my home's air conditioner inspected and cleaned, and Dave showed up at my door to do the job. I watched while Dave worked so that I could learn more about how my AC system worked, and we got to talking. It didn't take long before I could discern that Dave was a pretty intelligent guy, especially when it came to electronics – he'd operated his own TV repair business for a number of years before going to work for the HVAC company. And though, in retrospect, I have no idea how the conversation turned this way, just as he was about to head out, Dave started talking about man's purpose in life and his origin on earth. He told me that he believed that mankind was not originally from this world, but had been planted by a higher being – what he said religious folk might call “God” – and that our ultimate goal would be to leave Earth and find a new place to call home. For a moment I was speechless. What could I say to Dave to tell him what I believe to be true? Well, I'll share that with you in a minute.

This weekend, we're kicking off a new preaching series as we begin a new year of education offerings. We're going to take a look at some of the core teachings of our faith as Lutheran Christians, some of the elementary parts of what we believe. We're going “Back to Basics.” As a guide for our journey through this series, we'll turn to one of the more concise yet descriptive expressions of what Lutherans believe and teach: the Augsburg Confession. This document, which can be found in the Book of Concord alongside a number of other writings of the Lutheran reformers of the sixteenth century, was presented to Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, on June 25, 1530. Through it, the reformers and the German princes who supported them set out to demonstrate the catholicity of their faith: they were not teaching “new” things; rather, their beliefs were faithful to the Scriptures and aimed to clearly express the truth of the Christian faith. Each week, our “Back to Basics” series will look at specific articles of the Augsburg Confession to better understand our own beliefs and to more clearly speak about these beliefs with the people around us. We being the same way the reformers did, with Article I, asking “Who is God?”

We believe, as did the authors of the Augsburg Confession 500 years ago, as did the ancient Church when it composed the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, that there is one God: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is holy; He is eternal; He is infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, and infinitely good. Nothing is outside God's authority. Yet this one God is Three-in-One: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christians – even Christians who aren't Lutherans! – believe that this is what God's Word teaches. Other faiths, including Islam and Judaism, might say that they believe in the same God. But they don't, because they deny the Trinity. Faiths outside of Christianity do not know God as He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ. When we look to address the question of “Who is God?” our response *must* point to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **All faiths are not equal, because the revealed God is the only One Who is able to save us.**

So what does that mean? When we're talking about God's identity, it means that we can do so in two ways: as the "hidden" God and as the "revealed" God. What do we know about the hidden God? Well, we can't know much at all! God is holy and infinite, and we human beings are very much imperfect and limited. Our minds are not big enough to contain the fullness of God's presence. This is the side of God who, though powerful beyond measure, allows hurricanes, disease, and persecution to occur in our world. We cannot hope to understand the hidden God because we cannot come into His presence as sinful people. We *should* be justifiably afraid of the hidden God, for He has every right to just wipe us off the face of His earth. Truly, this is a terrifying reality!

And yet we Christians take comfort in the knowledge that God has revealed Himself. The revealed God is God as He has made Himself known in the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah, Immanuel, God-With-Us. This is the revealed God: the God Who promised not to abandon us, even though we didn't deserve His love; the God Who did not just create us but Who sustains us and all His creation every day; the God Who forgives us and suffers our punishment in our place. The revealed God carries us on His strong arms, and He has promised to bring us into His presence when this earthly life comes to an end. **We cling to the revealed God over and against the hidden God, because it is the revealed God who saves us.**

In our lives, who do we say that God is? If some of this seems a little too abstract or intellectual to you, maybe dogs and cats can help us out. I'll relate something that my parents' pastor once shared with the congregation when I'd been visiting, an illustration that might get us to consider how we think about God. The dog, reflecting on its owner, probably would say something like this: "You love me. You give me a home. You give me toys to play with and food to eat every day. You must be God!" The cat, considering the same, might say this: "You love me. You give me a home. You give me toys to play with and food to eat every day. *I* must be God!" When we live out a response to this question of "Who is God?" are we doing so from the dog's perspective, or the cat's?

Today's Psalmody comes from Psalm 119. With its 176 verses, this is the longest chapter in the entire Bible. Appropriately enough, the entire Psalm points to the value of God's instruction on our lives, the path of His commandments. The revealed God wants us to know Who He is, and He wants that understanding to shape our lives: knowing that God is God – and we are not – makes a world of difference in how we would choose to live. Knowing that God has promised to be with us, even in the face of hurricanes or persecution or even death, changes how we face those hardships. Knowing Who God is, as He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, gives us hope.

As I mentioned earlier, we're celebrating Rally Day this weekend, the start of a new year of education offerings for all our people, children and adults alike. If you have not yet done so, take a look at the courses that have been planned for this Fall. See where you might learn from God's instruction – not just for your own good, but so that you might talk with others about Who God is.

I did say that I would share how things ended up with Dave, the HVAC inspector. To be honest, I didn't really know what to say – not that Dave was looking for a response. But what I did say went something like this: "I do believe that there is a God: a *personal* God, not just a higher power that's out there somewhere. I believe that's the God Who loves us." Unfortunately, I didn't have much of a chance to say more than that, as Dave was heading out to another service call; however, once he'd left, I prayed for him. If you're like me and find yourself at a loss for words, sometimes the best thing you can do is to pray for someone, that God will continue to work in their life, that they may come to know Who He is: the revealed God Who teaches us, the God Who greatly loves us, the God Who is with us, even still.

Amen.