

ORTHODOXY: *The Picturesque Life* - week 1

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presbyterian Church of Newton, KS - Jan. 12, 2020

When I proposed to my wife Sondag, I took her to restaurant overlooking the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles named Castaways. It's where we had gone on our first date. And I surprised her with multiple gifts, it was also around the time of her birthday, so she thought the gifts were for that, and then the last gift was a card that had my proposal written in it.

And in the proposal, I told her I love, but I did not promise her anything. I didn't promise her a big house with a picket fence, I didn't promise her a fancy car, a fur coat, or even a diamond ring. I said that I love her and said, *"Because I love you, will you join me on the adventure God has for us?"*

I think in Western society we all have something in common, actually, it's not only I who think this, but G.K. Chesterton thinks this also. It seems we all want a picturesque life. We all want there to be something special and poetic about our life.

We imagine the splendor, maybe the adventure or fame, and the love, we can have. But in that life, we also want to be comfortable, we want life to be inviting, we want an idea of welcome. We don't want unemployment or sickness. What helps then is picking the right companion for this adventure called life.

Let me read from a book called *Orthodoxy* by G.K. Chesterton. I'm basing this series on this book he wrote in 1908 and to some degree, I think he was ahead of his time. In *Orthodoxy* he writes of the beliefs commonly held by all Christians, but he writes in a very poetic and imaginative way.

He writes in the introduction,

"If a man says that extinction is better than existence or blank existence better than variety and adventure, then he is not one of the ordinary people to whom I am talking. If a man prefers nothing I can give him nothing. But nearly all people I have ever met in this western society in which I live would agree to the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance... We need [in life] to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome." Pg. 10-11

We all want this wonder in life, but we want life to welcome us. We want variety and adventure, but we want it to be safe. So how do we get it? Let's look for that together this morning.

Chesterton writes of his book, rather humorously, that he tried to write a heresy. He tried to write what he deeply wanted to be true in life, this picturesque and adventurous life that welcomes us, and when he finished, he found the book described orthodoxy. Orthodoxy meaning simply what Christians have always believed. And then he found

this grand and welcoming adventure was best described in, of all things, the Apostles Creed. Quite fitting, because if you distilled down what all Christians have always believed and agreed upon throughout Christian history, it's this. The Apostle's Creed.

Does anyone still remember the Apostle's Creed by heart? We don't say it each Sunday, but maybe we should. The Apostles Creed is what Christians have always believed. It's what all Christians have held in common and if you believe this you're orthodox in your beliefs, meaning you believe what the Bible says and what all Christians have believed since Jesus' resurrection.

Would you say the Apostle's Creed with me, as it is printed in your bulletin? It may be a slightly different translation than you remember, so feel free to say it the way you remember it. This is where Chesterton begins to find the picturesque life.

Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;

he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

Does that sound like what you believe? That is what I believe to be true and I think Chesterton is on to something when he says that when we're trying to paint the perfect picture of life, a life of adventure and romance, reward and safety, the truest image of that life is reflected in the Apostle's Creed.

If you want something more out of life than what you have already found? If you're tired of the emotional ups and downs of an unsettled life, then I invite you to join God the Father Almighty, the best companion ever, for this picturesque life. It's an adventure for sure, but safe.

See when we know our Father in heaven first, then paying the rent and sickness and loss don't matter as much. I mean they do, we need to be responsible, God calls us to that. And sickness or loss are very painful and I wish they didn't exist, but when we're first on this adventure, we start to get the perspective that they don't matter as much,

because we start to get a bigger picture of life. What we do now is just the start, the preamble, the prelude, the introit to the full adventure that awaits in heaven. The Christian perspective on life is then not limited to hope in physical things or hope that everything will go the way we want. That'd be my adventure as I'd write it.

Chesterton proposes that if we believe most in ourselves, then we will go crazy. The overconfident Napoleon of France and Julius Cesar of Rome being examples from history. But if we believe most in Jesus and our Father in heaven, then we will find in orthodoxy, the grand life that we want. John 3:16 and 17 speak of the eternal life we're promised. **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

It takes faith to believe this, I know. But then as we journey forward, we find the Father is more stable than the world around us. Let me say, if you don't believe this, you are welcome here. If you're unsure about this you're welcome here. It takes faith to belief this, and that's ok. But I think you'll see as we ponder the other options with Chesterton, that the Apostle's Creed feels more true what life is like. It's a better explanation, than what others have proposed.

See there are somethings about life, that just seem clear, even obvious. Early on in Chesterton's book he writes

about "four fundamental ideas" that he realized he always had. They weren't because of learning in school or attending church. They were fundamental to how he saw the world. Pg. 49

I want to look at these. Four fundamental ideas about the world.

He believed... **1. This world does not explain itself.** Pg 65.

Chesterton didn't see the world explaining itself. He knew about natural explanations, but they weren't satisfying.

I've found this to be true for myself. The idea that the world came about from a big bang is fine with me, I believe God could create that bang when He said, "**Let there be light.**" But the Big Bang theory makes me ask, "What created the thing that went bang?"

The usual answers I've heard are, "Well, given enough time and the right conditions, something happened, and that's what started it, that was the beginning." So then I ask, "What created 'enough time and the right conditions'?"

To me and to Chesterton, the world's existence does not explain itself. We need a creator. Rather than a natural explanation, **I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

Genesis 1 tells us that God created the world. And the word for “create” in Hebrew is “*barah*”. Which is creating out of nothing. You and I we create out of something.

A few weeks back I made crepes for breakfast for my family with Nutella and banana filling. *Is there any other way to eat crepes?* Now I did not create the crepes, I made the crepes. How did I make them? I used eggs and flour and butter and milk and then mixed them all up. I didn’t make them out of nothing. If I could do that, then they would have been some pretty amazing crepes. So I made the crepes out of ingredients; I did not *barah* the crepes out of nothing.

Chesterton says the Bible tells us of the “*unnaturalness of everything in the light of the supernatural.*” Pg. 80. We exist because God created us and we know this because God revealed it to us in a personal way. God didn’t wind up the world and walk away from it.

And that leads to the second thing Chesterton believed inherently. **2. There is something personal to the world, something to give it meaning, like a work of art.** Pg 65.

We find that something personal in Jesus. Jesus, the Son of God, who became human. The Apostle’s Creed says, **I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...**

John 3:16 says, **“For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son...”** Why? Because while the world, the galaxy, the cosmos is a masterpiece, we’ve also got some problems. If God creates the world and then *“Houston, we have a problem”* and God had walked away from it, from us, then God isn’t good.

If we are part of a created world and something goes wrong, we need help. We need another orthodox belief about God as Christians. What is it? Is it that God walked away? Or did God say, *“You got yourselves into this, you get yourselves out of it?”* No, if God walked away like that, then shame on God. But God hasn’t walked away, He’s walked closer. That leads to the third thing Chesterton always believed.

3. The purpose of this artist is perfect in it’s original design, despite the defects.

What does that mean? It means God has a purpose for us, even though we have the ability to mess up His creation. That’s kinda scary when we think of how bad we can mess things up, in little ways or huge ways, but there’s dignity there that God wants to redeem that.

When God made everything and everyone, He had a plan back in the beginning to bring it to fullness through a relationship with Him, despite our freedom and our flaws, despite our penchant for certain shortcomings, despite our outright appalling human behavior at times, despite our,

you get the point.... God wasn't done with us when He created us out of nothing. Thankfully! He created us with a good plan for us. Some big theological words come to mind: justification, redemption, salvation, sanctification.

But that doesn't let God off the hook, if we're suffering here and God made us, how does our Creator respond to the defects we see in the world and in our lives?

The Apostle's Creed says, Jesus... **suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.**

Jesus suffered with us and for us, because of the defects. Because we were created with the ability to mess things up. But we don't need to blame God for the defects.

Have you heard of the rock band U2? Bono the singer is a Christian has often been asked, *"How can you believe in a good God when there's so much pain in the world?"* To which Bono replies, *"Have you looked around, this is our world. Why are you blaming God for what we do to each other?"*

But if God doesn't deserve blame for causing our problems, what does Jesus do if He cares about our problems? Jesus died for us. You know that seems extreme, but when a wrong is done, someone has to pay for it, right? I mean, it's true. If you get offended or treated rudely by someone, you either suck it up, pay it

down yourself, or what? You might give it right back to them or make someone else in your life pay for it. You might wipe it off with “*Stick and stones may hurt my bones, but names will never hurt me.*” Or you might abuse your body in some way to make it pay for it.

But Jesus rescues us from sin and the slow death it leads to. And as picturesque as it may seem. As impossibly adventurous as it may be that someone would die, so that we can live for eternity. As hard as it may be to realize that because you’re worth so, so, so much to your Creator that He calls you His children and your brother Jesus would die for you. It’s true.

You know I’ve heard of giving a kidney to a sibling, but I’ve never heard of anyone giving both kidneys to their sibling. Yet Jesus gave His life for yours, because you’re worth that much to Him. As amazing as that sounds, when you get it through your head and start to live from that belief that you’re worth it, worth so so much, then there’s an true order to life once we know that Jesus saves us.

Once we know our Creator saves, the one who spoke the world into being by His Word, sends His *Word-become-flesh* to save us, then we see the order to life that allows our lives to flourish. Chesterton saw this, **The perfect purpose of this artist despite the defects.** We are worth it.

You know there's a Christian hope we have, I've said it often, it's redemption. It's hope that despite the defects, God can bring good from them, now or in heaven. Despite the defects there's hope.

And then Chesterton says he always thought this fourth thing, that...

4. ...the proper form of thanks to the personal God in the world is humility and restraint. Chesterton believed in an "obedience to what made us."

Now I gotta think about that. That's not what's modeled for us in our world. Humility and restraint are not often seen through the media. It doesn't grab the headlines. And sure, we're glad Mother Teresa had humility or Billy Graham, but that's not going to get us very far with the goals we often have for life.

But then the Apostle's Creed continues to say there will be judgment, so maybe humility and restraint aren't just important for famous people and world leaders, maybe it's important for everyone. I think it is. The Apostle's Creed says, **On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

"...judge the living and the dead". I don't always like rules, do you? Sometimes they don't make sense immediately, or they seem cumbersome, but then

sometimes we learn later on that it would have been helpful if we had followed them.

When I was in college I worked at Goldstein's Bagel Bakery near Glendale, CA. I actually was hired and trained to help open the store. During the training, as you can guess, they taught us how to cut bagels in half.

It sounds pretty simple, right? Every adult knows how to use a knife and has cut bread and probably at least one bagel. So then how do you cut bagels? Probably cradle it in your hand and slowly cut through, keeping the bread knife away from the outer edges of your palm. At least that's the way I've seen most people cut bagels. But when you're about to cut 100 or more in a day? You need a better way.

How would you cut 100 bagels? It's more difficult than you think. To cut 100 bagels, you have to follow some rules. Never cut towards your hand. Lay the bagel flat on it's bottom. Put only your palm on the bagel. Flex your fingers back as high as you can. Sounds like a rules, don't they?

Then you cut halfway through the bagel and before you finish, you turn it up on it's side, put your hand on top again, then cut down through the rest of the bagel safely to the cutting board. Fingers safely above the bagel. No breadknife swinging out to the side after cutting through.

Most people want to cradle it, slowly cut until it, then kinda pull it apart. Good luck with that. You'll cut your hand as soon as you stop paying attention or try to cut fast. So when it comes to slicing bagels, it makes sense to learn some rules and keep them. They'll help your day go well, because you won't be wrapping a wound before breakfast.

We can see that some rules are good for us. But when we consider the maker of the rules, why would we follow someone and let them be our leader? Because they have a good plan for us, right? That's the only reason. If they want to harm us, then we shouldn't follow them.

So does God have a good plan for us? That's probably the biggest question people face when deciding to follow God's way. *Does God have a good plan for us?*

The Apostle's Creed says what the good plan is. **I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

We'll dive into those good things in the next few weeks. They are wonderful and full of hope. The Apostle's Creed, then describes this paradoxical kind of life: this safe adventure we're on. God the Father Almighty, who spoke the world into being, invites us to be His companion in this picturesque, safe adventure called the Christian life. There's not a better adventure or companion to have.