

# CROSSINGS

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## Cannot

Why is Luther's two-stroke theology (law/Gospel) so unappealing to Americans? Look no further than the story, "The Little Engine That Could." From little on, each of us is hard-wired to think that if we just say to ourselves "I think I can," we will be able, e.g., to pull a heavy train full of toys over a high mountain to the needy children on the other side. Or play Bach's "Air on a G String" on the violin. Or meet the newsletter deadline. Or make ourselves acceptable to God. Whatever.

I admit there are more profound explanations of why people would rather cobble together their own peace than accept true peace from the hand of God, through the forgiveness of their sins. As Luther said, people have a "preference for law." He called this *opinio legis*. But ideas use stories to hold our minds. And that classic story must deserve at least some credit for shaping us that way.

A fundamental faith in the effectiveness of repeatedly telling oneself "I think I can!" is more insidious theologically because it does hold true in many areas of life. Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." He ought to know! Whether it is strictly "self-talk" (intrapersonal communication), or whether the encouragement comes from another person ("You can do it!"), the active ingredient is: *believing in yourself works*.

I bring up the children's story because it crystallizes a notion which should be antithetical to Christian faith. According to our faith it is God who saves, not we ourselves. But this very story has roots (tentacles?) in the church, as Wikipedia informed me to my dismay:

*The story's signature phrases, such as "I think I can," first occurred in print in a 1902 article in a Swedish journal. An early published version of the story, "Story of the Engine that Thought It Could", appeared in the New York Tribune, 8 April 1906, as part of a sermon by the Rev. Charles S. Wing. A brief version of the tale appeared under the title "Thinking One Can" in 1906, in Wellspring for Young People, a Sunday school publication. This version reappeared in a 1910 book, Foundation Stones of Success.*



In a culture where the peppy self-talk of a children's story carries as much weight as the Golden Rule, OF COURSE people will be put off to learn that Martin Luther was proud of his book "On the Bondage of the Will", and that he told parents to teach their children: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him." (Can't you just see the poster on a kindergarten wall in some Saxon church: "I believe I cannot . . . I believe I cannot . . . I believe I cannot . . . I believe I cannot . . .")?

The church's real problem in every age is not poor attendance or giving or involvement. It is forgetting that the road to *Credo* always goes through *Kyrie eleison*. The false gospels Paul dismissed in First Corinthians 1 (signs, wisdom) both came across to him as ways to avoid preaching the cross of Christ.

Jesus was the most critical person the world has ever known. Can you top this? "But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." And *he was the most loving!* He said "Unless you all repent, you will all likewise perish." And yet he called all to come to him *so he could give them rest*. (Luther did not invent two-stroke theology.)

Two strokes. Law. Promise.

Promise wins, giving peace and salvation. To those who repent. "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

"Whaa-at? Can't we simply believe in God? Just turn over our hearts to his control? Doesn't that take care of it? Can't we just be good? Doesn't the church simply need to encourage the good in us? Isn't that best done by staying positive?"

All I know is the road to *Credo* goes through *Kyrie eleison*.

David believed in God. His credo (literally "I believe") is to be found in Psalm 23, for us to enjoy and adopt.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff--they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.*

We might recite the Apostles' or Nicene Creed better if we would think of them as belonging to the same genre as this psalm. The Apostles' Creed is not a recitation of a string of authorized theses about the triune nature of the deity. It is a declaration of trust. We say "I fear, love, and trust *this* God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the one through whom we have forgiveness of sins—and not the other ones, who didn't and don't. I've stopped looking for a better god." David likewise asserts, in Psalm 23, that he is in a trust-and-reliance relationship with Yahweh. I'm with Him; so I'll be fine. Yes, he uses first person singular. But his

boast is not about his personal great faith, but God's great faithfulness.

To drive home this point, on Good Shepherd Sunday this year we used Psalm 23 at the point in the service where the creed usually stands. I justified it in my sermon by saying that we have the faith of David because of Christ. It was a one-time thing, all right? I am attaching the sermon.

Without proof, allow me to suggest that Psalm 23 was written after Psalm 51. David got to "I believe" by way of "Lord, have mercy." It was not the little lamb David, who "was ruddy,



and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome," who wrote "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." It was the lying, murderous adulterer who had been socked in the nose by Nathan's judgmental parable, then suffered the death of his baby, who would never be allowed to build a temple. Who finally arose, took a bath, put on a new suit, and went back to work. Chastised, chastened, humiliated, broken, yes, but lifted up. THAT David, the old goat with crooked horns and a droopy eyelid, smelly from years on the battlefield of life, THAT David averred, midway through a tumultuous career, having lost dear friends and sons, bashed-up, broken, the David who knew darn well what it meant to walk "through the valley of the shadow of death," spelled out his amazed faith in a psalm which, I'll bet, his friends were astonished to hear come out of his mouth. "Goodness and mercy shall

follow *him* all the days of *his* life?" they mused. "You're kidding, right?"

David could as well have written "Amazing Grace," the hymn in which John Newton says "Credo," and we agree:

*Through many dangers, toils, and cares I have already come.*

*'Tis grace has led me safe this far, and grace will lead me home.*

The Word of God worked in two-stroke fashion with David, and it does with us. Like him, albeit in very different circumstances, repent and believe. And the Lord is good to us. And we shall live in the house of the Lord our whole lives long. Enjoying the table spread before us in the face of the people we'd rather be out there fighting; but we eat slowly because of the host whose rod and staff are enough for us. Psalm 23 is the temple David built.

The road to *Credo* goes through *Kyrie*. We confess our sins, we are forgiven, we confess our faith, and "out of" that faith we live. (Romans 1:16) Bada bing, bada boom!

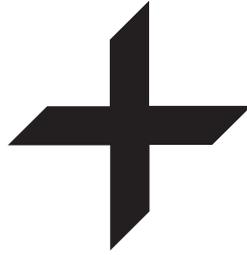
I am enamored of a recent purchase, a book by *New Yorker* cartoonist Roz Chast. "Can't we talk about something more PLEASANT?" is a winsome memoir in which Chast relates, through cartoons and text and photos, the intimate details of her recent experiences with her aging and dying parents. (I am indebted to Pastor Mark Fischer of Lincoln, Nebraska, for calling my attention to this recent work of hers. Mark attended one of our recent conferences, and found the Crossings Method compelling and useful for his ministry.) Chast has a wonderful way of bringing out the deep issues which play out through all of life. If you have access to the March 10 issue of *The New Yorker* you can read an excerpt, but you won't regret purchasing the whole book, published this month. It starts:

*She: So . . . do you guys ever talk about things?*

*Dad: What kind of things?*

*She: PLANS.*

*Mom and Dad: (Questions marks over their heads.)*



## *The road to Credo goes through Kyrie eleison*

*She: I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU GUYS WANT!*

*They: (Stunned silence)*

*She: Let's say something HAPPENED.*

*Dad: (to Mom) Heh heh—Good one.*

*She: AM I THE ONLY SANE PERSON HERE???*

*She: You know what? Forget it. Never mind.  
Que sera, SERA.*

*LATER THAT SAME DAY . . .*

*She (eating alone): Whew!*

*They (smiling, enjoying their dinner without her): Whew!*

Can't the church talk about something more pleasant? Than death. Than sin. Than judgment. Well, not if we want to get to *Credo*.

It would be nice to live in the land of *Credo*. A place of green pastures and still waters. Where one's cup overflows, and one's head gets anointed with oil. Where everyone gets along. Where the order of the day is love. The lion lies down with the lamb. Goodness and mercy track us (that's the literal meaning of "follow us") all our days.

But we cannot get there from here. We *cannot* by our own reason or strength. Not without going through Kyrie Eleison Gulch. Not without a new heart being created within us. Not without a new and right spirit.

The Crossings Method was invented for this: to help us do our exegesis, prepare our sermon, live our life in such a way that we do not cave in to the temptation to simply talk about something more pleasant than judgment, death, cross. The Crossings Method walks us through the full judgment of God, all the way to condemnation, so that the grace of God becomes available. So that *Gospel*, not law, becomes the means by which we get all the way up and over that impossible mountain, whatever it may be, with not just toys for kids but life and salvation for all.

Crossings Conferences are held for this reason, too. We get together now and then to encourage one another to lift high the cross.

The Crossings Community is about this. We do not "think we can," we know "Christ has" and "God will."

Now, the sermon I preached a few weeks ago.

**"The Way to Credo"** A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Psalm 23 is a creed. A statement of faith, of belief, of trust, of confidence in God. It is the credo of a monarch. David declares that it is *thanks to the Lord God* he has food and drink and refreshment and peace. *Thanks to the Lord God*, he is not afraid when bad things happen. *Thanks to the Lord*, he will be all right even if he has enemies. And, ultimately, *thanks to the Lord*, everything will be all right. That was David's creed.

A creed is not a description of how you decide to feel or how you always think. David, for example, did not always trust the Lord. We know he was tempted to think that it was his position that got him what he wanted. He sometimes used that position to obtain immorally what he thought would make him happy. But that sort of thinking got him in trouble. In the end, he found his way back to *credo*, to saying "I believe."

This Sunday, we're going to do something unique. After the sermon, when we usually say the Apostles' Creed together, instead we're going to recite Psalm 23. To make a point. I want you to *feel* how Psalm 23 is a creed, a "*credo*," to use the Latin term for "I believe."

The Creed we use every Sunday is the Apostles' Creed. It stipulates our faith in Jesus Christ. It specifies what we believe about Jesus Christ. But when you boil it down, what it is really about is not the conveying of some information or an opinion about the Three-in-One who is almighty and invisible. What we say, in the Apostles' Creed, is "God helps us." We confess that we have faith in God. This God. The God who this and that. We believe. I believe. I trust. I have faith.

I am not saying that *all you need* is faith. Paul says "Faith, hope, and love abide—these three. And the greatest of these is love." Love is the most important thing. Faith—*is how we get to love*. How we get free of the things that make us *not* love. Our conviction, based on the testimony of the church based on the New Testament, is that the way we get to love is by way of faith. Looked at in that way, the *key* thing is faith. Because it helps us get to the *greatest* thing, love.

The Creed says, in Christian terms, if you boil it down: "**God helps us.**" That is a wonderfully confident statement. We may not feel it all the time, but there it is—the faith of the church is that, notwithstanding evidence to

the contrary, **God helps us.** Equipped by the Holy Spirit with this confidence, we are bold to love others, to deny ourselves, to give ourselves for others as Christ gave himself for us. We become better custodians of others because of the faith we have in God.

So it is important to say the Creed. To remind

ourselves and others that God helps us. The hymn "Amazing Grace" says this in other language; "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." And, "Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will see me home." We can't just ditch the Creed and love one another, because it is our faith in God which helps us to be people who help others. That takes courage, especially when we "walk through the darkest valley."

David's way of saying "God helps me" is "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." It is good that he uses the singular, because that way he is not generalizing about God's help—he is specifying that the help of God reaches David. Himself. Not his brother, not his sister, but himself. And that makes David a man "of faith."

We say "God helps me" whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed. We affirm our faith.

But how do we get to faith, to *credo*? The Bible and the world are full of people who struggle with faith. People deny God, abuse God, ignore God. They think God has abandoned them. They think God likes other people better. In short, they do *not* believe "God helps me." But then, something happens, and they do! They come to believe that God helps us! The Bible is full of this drama, of people not believing and then believing. And full of invitations to us, to believe that God helps us—specifically through Jesus Christ.



How do we get to "I believe? What is the "way to *credo*?"

It starts with "Kyrie." "Kyrie, eleison."

We begin our worship saying "God, help me!" That is the first step on the way to *credo*. Then, through the promise revealed in Word and Sacrament, we are led to believe that "God helps me," the confession of faith. We travel from wishing God *would* help to *affirming* that God helps. Not just some people, but me. Us.

We go from *Kyrie* to *Credo*. In the span of an hour. And we go out the door, having been fed by the Holy

Spirit with Word and Sacrament, thanking God that we can go in peace and serve the Lord.

From *Kyrie* to *Credo*. From "God, help me!" to "God helps me!" Or, as the body of Christ, united with one another, from "God, help us!" to "God helps us!" From wishful to convinced. From anxious to glad.

### **From "God, help us" to "God helps us!"**

I am convinced that David could not have

written Psalm 23 before he wrote Psalm 51, the one we use on Ash Wednesday, the psalm which he is supposed to have written after he was shown his sin over against Uriah and Bathsheba. Psalm 51 is David's "Kyrie," his "God, help me."

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit. Etc.*

"God, help me," he prayed, in the midst of the dark night of his soul.

"God, help me," is what we pray in the *Kyrie*, or actually already in the Confession of Sins. And somehow or other, a few minutes later, we are no longer in request mode. Our prayer has turned from a cry for help into a declaration of faith. Just like in Bob Marley's song "Three Little Birds":

*Don't worry about a thing, 'Cause every little thing gonna be all right . . .*

And why? In our case, not because three little birds are singing it, but because of what Peter says in the Second Reading today:

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,  
so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness;  
by his wounds you have been healed.*

The purpose of my substituting Psalm 23 for the Apostles' Creed today is not to offer a substitute faith or to negate what is said in the Apostles' Creed. That is our faith, the faith into which we are baptized. We have the faith of David because we know the love of God revealed in Christ.

We are not baptized into a set of thoughts, a cosmology, a theology. We are baptized into the confidence-in-God which is expressed by David as "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Because Jesus Christ turned out to be in fact the Good Shepherd he claimed to be, because he was willing to lay down his life for the sheep, because he claims us as his own, because he says he will not let go of any of us . . . *because of that*, we have faith in God. And we affirm, like David, that "The Lord is our shepherd, we will not want; goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Amen.

Marcus Felde

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