

Heb. 3:1-6

April 30, 2023

Colossians 1:13-23

This We Believe – Part II

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...

Last week I began this series of messages on the Apostles' Creed, talking about how important it is to know what we believe. What we believe guides how we live – the choices we make, how we treat others, how we govern ourselves. The Apostles' Creed is a summary – from the Bible - of the faith of believers, proven over time and around the world as a solid foundation for all Christians.

In a world of competing ideas and worldviews, the Apostles' Creed distills the important truths of the narrative that we share and live by. It's kind of like grammar for correctly telling the story of God whom we know through Jesus. It helps us discern truth from falsehood, as we ... *contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*, Jude 3.

The first part of the Apostles' Creed says, *I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*. What this means is that God is beyond anyone or anything we know, for He created it all. Yet He has chosen to reveal Himself to us in a personal way: as the Father of Jesus, and our Father. He loves us (His creation) and seeks our love in return. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*, Deut. 6:5. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*, John 3:16. We understand who God is through Jesus Christ.

When people ask what Christians believe, we can answer that it has everything to do with the person of Jesus *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*, John 14:9, He said. This person, Jesus, is the clearest revelation of God that humanity has been given. This is why the Apostles Creed has so many words about who He is and what He has done.

I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord

All Christians must answer one question: Who is Jesus Christ? We not only have to answer the question of Christ's identity, we must also try to understand what that identity means. What does it mean to call Jesus God's "only Son" with a capital "S?" What does it mean to claim Him as "our Lord?" Christians have always believed that it means that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, the divine presence, in the flesh, on this earth. This belief sets us apart from any other religion: God has made Himself known to us by becoming one of us. That's made all the difference in the world! Some say that Jesus never claimed divinity, but here's what Jesus Himself said, *I tell you the truth before Abraham was, I am*, John 8:58; *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*, John 14:9.

The first disciples knew that in meeting Jesus they were meeting the living God. This was the Creator (and our Father), Sovereign, Judge, and our Redeemer, attested to in the Scriptures of the O. T., right there in human form in Jesus! Another of the Church's historic statements of faith, the Nicene Creed (hymnal #880), spells it out: "The only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father." (See also Hebrews 10:5-7 which quotes Psalm 40:6-8 and applies it directly to the coming of Christ.)

Yes, sometimes we call believers "sons and daughters of God," because ... *to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, John 1:12.* But our status is always understood in the context that we are God's creation, whereas Jesus is Son with a capital "S" because He is not a creation but the very same as the Father. *He was with God in the beginning, John 1:2. (Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba', Father, Galatians 4:6.)*

So, who is Jesus Christ? Actually, we are answering that question throughout life, in the way we think, live, act, and treat our neighbors. Due to the nature of the question, the answer can mean the difference between life and death. If you say, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God," then you either reorganize your life around Him or you live against that truth. If Jesus is another prophet or great teacher, then life goes on without much change. But if Jesus Christ is of one being with God, the sovereign of the universe, then certainly He is Lord of all. We don't normally use that term these days, "lord;" maybe "ultimate guide, boss, and mentor" would better express it for us. Yet, as my Lord and your Lord, wouldn't we certainly want to follow His lead?

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary

Christmas marks the human birth of the Lord Jesus, but it does not mark the beginning of His existence. As the Son of God, He existed with the Father long before He was conceived in Mary's womb. So, what about this "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin..." business? Now, this may sound preposterous to many post-modern folks, but it is no more preposterous than other notions post-moderns live by.

Our minds struggle with the virgin birth and other miracles. Why can't we believe Jesus when He says, With God, all things are possible? Yes, a virgin birth is incredible. But so is creation! Indeed, it is incredible that the Great One, who spoke creation into existence, would become a baby who couldn't even feed Himself!

Jesus is not a product of human evolution, the highest achievement of humanity. He was the intervention of the transcendent God into human history. "The incarnation is like a dagger thrust into the weft of human history"

(Hoskyns). To affirm the Virgin Birth is to affirm that He was actually Emmanuel, God with us, fully divine ... yet born into this world like any other human.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried

He took on our full human nature and body. Nothing was held back. He did not go halfway – He went all the way from birth to death. Pontius Pilate was Roman governor of Judea at the time. Crucifixion was the punishment of Rome. Jewish punishment would have been stoning. The point is: Jesus is not a myth, He really lived and He really died, He was really buried. We're not making this up.

[A footnote here in our UM Hymnal #881, 882, says “Traditional use of this creed includes these words: ‘He descended into hell.’” That phrase expresses the complete humanity of Jesus, in that He experienced death; but 18th century Methodists left this phrase out because too many people thought it meant he was sent to judgment.’ See also I Peter 3:18-20; Eph. 4:7-10.]

...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.

Of course, this is the crux of the matter: Jesus is the One who rose from the dead. Death is not the end. The Jewish and Roman authorities could have put a stop to the whole “Christian thing” by simply producing His body. But they didn’t because they couldn’t. Jesus was and is one with the Father almighty. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... And God said ‘Let there be light.’ Gen. 1:1,3. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made, John 1:1-3.* Of course, He ascended! Nothing could keep Him from heaven.

We don’t always act in accordance with who we are. But there is no difference between what God does and who God is. Jesus expresses the true nature of God – all the traits and characteristics of God’s nature, God’s very being, are made clear in Jesus – and He will be the measure for all humans who will one day stand before Him, both those living and those who have died.

A Creed For the Whole Church

John Wesley knew what so many of us today have forgotten: The claims we make about God and Jesus will shape how we view the world, will bear significantly upon the way we live, how we treat others, and how we will order our society. Not all ways of looking at the world are equally virtuous or healthy or true. The witness of the church through the centuries is that the most virtuous and truest way of looking at the world is through the lens of our creedal faith. In Christ we learn of a God who cared enough to become what we are. He

became flesh, one of us, but without sin, in order that he might raise us to Himself.

From Kathleen Norris (she writes in *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*): “I recently read an article that depicted a heated exchange between a seminary student and an Orthodox theologian at Yale Divinity School. The theologian had given a talk on the history of the development of the Christian creeds. The student’s original question was centered on belief: ‘What can one do,’ he asked, ‘when one finds it impossible to affirm certain tenets of the Creed?’ The priest responded, ‘Well, you just say it. It’s not that hard to master. With a little effort, most can learn it by heart.’

“To learn something by heart is a concept more in tune with the ancient world than with our own, and the student, apparently feeling that he had been misunderstood, asked with some exasperation, ‘What am I to do . . . when I have difficulty affirming parts of the Creed - like the Virgin Birth?’ And he got the same response. ‘You just say it. Particularly when you have difficulty believing it. You just keep saying it. It will come to you eventually.’

“The student raised his voice: ‘How can I with integrity affirm a creed in which I do not believe?’ And the priest replied, ‘It’s not your creed, it’s our creed,’ meaning the Creed of the entire Christian church. I can picture the theologian shrugging, as only the Orthodox can shrug, carrying so lightly the thousand-plus years of their liturgical tradition: ‘Eventually it may come to you,’ he told the student. ‘For some, it takes longer than for others . . .’

“Some will think that the Orthodox theologian’s advice to just keep repeating is foolish. Like repeating the earth is flat, the earth is flat, and somehow that it makes it true. Others may take his remarks as suggestion that people not think for themselves. But they miss the point. The Creeds, the Orthodox priest’s advice, challenge the notion that the Christian faith is simply an intellectual endeavor. It is an incarnational one, and there is a big difference; the flesh consists of not head alone but heart as well.”ⁱⁱ

The Creed summarizes our faith for us, so that we can know what we believe, know how we should then live, and know what to witness to others. By saying out loud, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son ... was crucified, died, and was buried; 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...” and not simply “I believe in Jesus, a good teacher, a man whose life is worth imitating,” is to place oneself under an obligation to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile, to take up one’s cross and die.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Next week we’ll consider what it means to say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Who is the Holy Spirit, and how does He relate to God and the continuing presence of Jesus?

Beliefs matter. Beliefs have consequences. Let us believe God’s truth in Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine, The Essentials*, 43-44.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace, A Vocabulary of Faith*, (Penguin Putnam Inc. NY, 1998), 64-66.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Mills "The Flatlanders' Creed" *Touchstone*, March 2000, 17.