8-9-20 Sermon “I Believe in Jesus Christ…”

It would have been easy to spend 12 weeks preaching and teaching on the Apostles’ Creed, one week for each of the phrases that, as I shared last week, legend has it were offered by the disciples on the occasion of Pentecost that formed this Creed. Twelve weeks would have allowed time to expand upon each of the phrases, but instead I chose to break it into 4 weeks, one on each of the segments of the Creed itself and one for what the Creed then means for us in the 21st century church. Having chosen that path, there is much within the Creed that is important but that I cannot touch on. So, I will recommend to you the two books that I have used, written by two very different authors who, as one might expect, have some divergent understandings of the Creed. The first is *The Life We Claim,* by Rev. James C. Howell, pastor of Myers Park United Methodist Church in Charlotte, NC, who is also a well-known author in church circles. I’ve used commentary by Rev. Howell many times so was comfortable with his take on the Creed even though his theology and mine aren’t totally aligned. The second book is *The Apostles’ Creed for Today,* by the well-respected church historian Dr. Justo Gonzalez. He comes from a more liberation theology background and thus brings a fresh take on Scripture in general and the Creed in particular that helped expand my thinking.

So while the first section of the Creed recounts the traditional orthodoxy of the church as it pertains to God, the second section of the Creed speaks to belief in Jesus Christ as the human incarnation of God. And it is this idea, that God was revealed to us in the flesh, that is most unique about the Christian faith as compared to any of the other major world religions. None of them suggest that God became one with us by becoming one of us as Christianity does. As James Howell writes, “No other religion harbors such a crazed, scandalous idea.”[[1]](#footnote-2) So of course, this part of the Creed is the largest, which makes sense when we remember that the Creed developed as a response to the questions, doubts, criticisms, and eventual heretical beliefs that were developing in the first and second centuries. So let’s dig in to this section.

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord;*

We don’t know by what surname Jesus would have been called. Jesus, the Aramaic *Yeshua,* was a pretty common name - there are several other people named “Jesus something” in Scripture. Typically a male first name would be followed by the word *bar,* meaning “son of,” and then the father’s name.In that tradition, Jesus would have been called *Jesus bar Joseph.* But perhaps because Christian orthodoxy holds that Joseph was **not** the biological father of Jesus, he is simply referred to by his first name. Contrary to what many believe, *Christ* was not Jesus’ last name. *Christ* is a title, from the Greek *Christos,* meaning *the anointed one.* In Hebrew, the word *Messiah* is also translated as *the anointed one* or the *savior.*

In Israel and many other countries, when a new king rose to the throne, they would be anointed or *consecrated* - that is, the priest would have poured a flask of oil over the head of the king as a sign of his being ritually cleansed, blessed, and empowered by God, for the duties and role they have been given. Without using oil, we did the same type of consecration of our leadership team in worship this morning.

One thing that many people often think separates followers of Christianity from followers of Judaism is the issue of Jesus’ messiahship. In the early church, however, Jesus’ followers were still devoted and practicing Jews. As Gonzalez writes, “When calling Jesus ‘the Christ’ - the Anointed One or Messiah - the early church was affirming both its continuity with Israel and its conviction that the hope of Israel [as described throughout the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament] had been fulfilled in Jesus. For obvious reasons, many Jews objected to this. But so did those Christians who, like Marcion [who we talked about last week], claimed that the religion of Israel was all wrong and that Jesus and his message had nothing to do with it.”[[2]](#footnote-3) And he concludes, “Declaring Jesus as the Messiah, Christianity affirms its continuity with Judaism, with the Old Testament and acknowledges our debt to Abraham and his descendants.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

So, it was a **theological** claim to call Jesus *the Christ* or the *Messiah,* but to call Jesus *Lord,* in this time period, was a boldly **political** statement. The Roman Emperor Domitian laid claim to the title *Lord* in the late first century, and all citizens of Rome and its provinces were required to offer burned incense before an image of the emperor and declare that “The Emperor” or “Caesar is Lord.” Failure to do so resulted in death, pure and simple. When a Christ follower then, declared their allegiance, their loyalty to Christ as Lord over and against Caesar as Lord, it was a death sentence. Yet many did just that, becoming what we call *martyrs,* which means “witnesses,” those who bore witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. As Gonzalez writes,

“When the early Christians declared “I believe in…Jesus Christ…our Lord,” they were not making an innocuous statement. Nor are we. We are saying that our ultimate commitment is not to family, not to nation, not to church, but to [Jesus.] We are rejecting every absolute nationalism. We are rejecting any other unconditional allegiance. Otherwise, his is not truly, “our Lord,” but one more among many lords.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

Howell reminds us that it was when Adolf Hitler demanded absolute loyalty at all costs, declaring himself “Fuhrer” - the “absolute ruler” or “lord” - that German church leaders developed another creed of sorts, called the Barmen Declaration, that said, “When we say ‘Christ is Lord,’ we consciously reject pretenders who claim authority over us, who seduce us from the way of Jesus.”[[5]](#footnote-6) And of course, many of these German church leaders, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, paid for this rejection of Hitler and nationalism with their lives. To say “Jesus is Lord” is very simply to state that nothing else is, and that is not an easy statement to make and live into.

*…conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary,*

Many who struggle with affirming some parts of the Creed, often times they point to this phrase. And not to be flippant about it, but to quote from the film *The Prince Bride,* when a character repeatedly uses the word “inconceivable” to describe situations that are completely conceivable, another character says to him,“I do not think this word means what you think it means.” Allow me to explain.

In the time in which the Gospels, and subsequently the Creed were written, the word *virgin* had a more expansive meaning than it does today, as a person who has not had sexual intercourse. In addition to that, it carried a second meaning, lost over the years, of simply “a young woman,” or a “young woman who had never been married.” So today, you’ll find most evangelical and conservative Christians insist exclusively on the former meaning as almost a litmus test of whether someone is “really” a Christian, while at the same time progressive Christians often latch onto this second meaning in its historical context, if aware of it, in order to be able to claim the Creed as their own.

There are a couple of things I want to offer to you as you think about this part of the Creed. First, as we have mentioned before, the primary purpose of the Creed was to combat attacks on the faith from heresies like Marcionism. At the same time, the early Christian writers of the Gospels, of the Epistles, and other non-biblical faith writings were also combatting what is called “Imperial Theology,” that held that Caesar was “Lord,” “The Son of God,” and “The Prince of Peace,” all self-proclaimed titles that the various Caesars or emperors had made. In addition to that was the belief, the claim, that Julius Caesar himself had been “born of a virgin.” In fact, other great leaders of that time and before were thought to have been virgin-born. Making this claim about Jesus in the first century, then, at least for some, was an attempt to elevate the claim of Lordship for Jesus to be on par with that of Caesar.

But Gonzalez offers yet **another** way of thinking about this part of the Creed. He writes, “Most people today, when they hear… [these] words in the Creed interpret them in the light of modern biology. We know that conception comes from the union of two cells, one from the father and one from the mother. In that union, genes are combine from both parents, thus determining the inherited traits that the new person will have - half from the male and a half from the female. On the basis of this biological understanding, they then interpret the words of the Creed to mean that Jesus is **half** human and **half** divine.

But he explains, “This is very different from the way people understood conception in ancient times. As the ancients thought of it, conception and birth were the result of a male seed being **planted** in the womb, much as a grain of wheat is planted in the ground. The presence in the offspring of traits similar to [the] mother’s was explained much as one would explain the manner in which the soil affects the plant… The mother did not contribute an [egg] - of whose existence the ancients were unaware – but only the nourishment that made it possible for the seed to grow. Were **we** then to interpret the words of the Creed in biological terms, according to the biology of **[that]** time, we would come to a very different conclusion than we do when we apply our current biological knowledge.”

With that first century understanding of biology, he suggests, “…the purpose of these words is not to explain Jesus’ biological origin. It is rather to make two central affirmations about him: first, that his birth was **something special**; second, that his birth was **real**.”

By “something special” Gonzalez refers to the common scriptural thread of special children being born to women considered barren. Again, they had no real understanding of how fertility worked. So we have God making a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would bring forth an entire nation, yet Sarah was old and unable to give birth until God intervened. This thread continues with Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, whose wife Rebekah was also barren until such time as God intervened. And this theme is repeated in the stories of Jacob, Samson, Samuel, and even John the Baptist.

Fertility was considered a divine gift, infertility a curse. God (or the gods) kept nature on its course. But God has a purpose in history and these stories show that God intervenes in the cycles of nature in order to further that purpose.

“When Mary is visited by an angel, that purpose is revealed. Luke makes clear that that **Jesus** is the culmination of the hope of Israel [for a Messiah]. **Mary** is the culmination of the theme of the barren woman who conceives by divine intervention.

And Gonzalez says that, “For early Christians, the virgin birth was simply the culmination of the ancient theme of the barren woman who conceives. What is intended is not to explain Jesus’ biological origin but rather to make it plain that just as in past times God raised leaders for Israel out of barren women who conceived by divine intervention, now the barren woman par excellence - a virgin - conceives by divine intervention. Moreover, the child she will bear will be not only exceptional but unequalled - the Son of the Most High, whose kingdom will have no end.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

The other idea that Gonzalez posited for the reason behind this line in the Creed was to affirm that Jesus’ was a real birth.

“Strange as it may seem to us today,” he writes, “during its early centuries Christianity faced its greatest challenge, not from those who claimed that Jesus was a mere man but rather from those who claimed that he was **not really** human - that he was a purely spiritual being who **seemed** to be human but was not. While there were many who held such views, Marcion in particular denied that Jesus was born…” owing to his belief as I shared with you last week that all things physical or material, including human flesh, was evil. In Gonzalez’s view “the virgin’s conception serves to prove, not the divinity of Jesus as we might surmise, but rather his humanity. What Marcion could not accept was **not** that Jesus was born of a virgin, but simply the fact that he was *born.”*

“Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that “born of the Virgin Mary” emphasized both the uniqueness and the reality of the birth of Jesus - the uniqueness of making him the Lord of all and the reality of making him like one of us.” And in concluding his thoughts about this phrase, Gonzalez points out that over time, as the threat of Marcionism went away, the attention given this line in the Creed focused more on Mary than on Jesus. Mary’s virginity in itself, rather than the one who was born of her, became the center of attention.[[7]](#footnote-8)

**BREAK**

Now, I’ll just comment briefly on some of the phrases that follow that raise questions for some. For example, why does Pontius Pilate show up in the Creed rather than Herod, the Roman army, the Temple leaders, or even Judas, all of whom were complicit in Jesus’ death? Simply as a historical marker. Calendars in this time didn’t count time like we do today, with the year marked as 2020. History was recorded, as we find throughout the Hebrew Bible, in relation to whoever the current ruler was. So the Books of Kings and Chronicles are full of references to such and such happening “in the tenth year of the rule of king so-and-so.” That Pilate is mentioned is nothing more than a way of affirming the reality of the events described by placing them in the context of the Roman Governor who is easily traced.

*Crucified, died, and was buried* speaks to the means of Jesus’ death, and the fact that crucifixion was among the most dreadful and humiliating ways to die. It also, again, affirms the humanity of Jesus - that he did actually suffer and die and didn’t just appear to die, or to again borrow from *The Princess Bride,* that Jesus was really dead and not just “mostly dead.” Poetically, in the structure of the Creed, we see a path of descent followed by ascent for Jesus. From the point in which the Creed tells us of Jesus’ birth, we see a trajectory of descent - with suffering, crucifixion, death, burial, descent into Hell or to the dead, before we see him rise, ascend, and then sit at the right hand of God. Descent and ascent. Death and resurrection. That is the center of Christian faith, and we find it at the center of the creedal statement about Jesus.

The line, “Descended to the dead,” or “Descended into hell” appears in some versions of the Creed and not in others. Where it doesn’t appear, though, it is assumed - there is no conflict as to whether that was part of the belief, only as to whether it was part of different versions of the Creed that different denominations adopted over the centuries. It was traditional Jewish belief that the souls of dead went to a place below the earth - Hades. Hades is not the same as the idea of Hell in the sense of a place of flames and eternal punishment, but was rather a holding place where the souls of **all** the dead awaited the final resurrection. Jesus’ descent to the dead then was to free these souls from captivity to death.

But resurrection is the key. As Gonzalez offers, “Without the resurrection of Jesus there is not much to Christianity. It becomes merely one more probable philosophy among others. The teachings of Jesus are good, but by themselves they are no more than that. Loving one’s neighbor is always good, but without resurrection it is little more than a helpful practice.”[[8]](#footnote-9) Resurrection is at the center of what the Creed says about Jesus, just as it is at the center of our faith.

And finally, *he will come to judge the living and the dead.*

Our first scripture reading for today from John’s Gospel includes the most well known, most memorized line of scripture in the entire Bible, John 3:16. You know this, you see it held up on signs at all the major sporting events.

*God so loved the world that [God] gave [God’s] only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.*

When Jesus wanted the disciples to think differently about something they thought they understood, he would say, “You have heard it said…but I tell you this…” In that same vein, I tell you that I believe that this passage from John is incomplete without the next line, verse 17, which says,

*God didn’t send [God’s] Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*

My point here is this: John’s Gospel says that Jesus didn’t come to judge the world, but to save it, while the Creed says he came to judge the living and the dead. So which is it? And what kind of judgement are we talking about? Again Gonzalez:

“Christians have long had difficulties trying to decide whether ours is a God of love or a God of justice. As early as the second century, Marcion claimed that what he considered the secondary or inferior God of the Old Testament [YHWH] was a God of justice, a vengeful God, while God the Father of Jesus Christ was a God of love. The contrast between justice and love, between a vengeful God and a loving one, lead him to reject the entire history of Israel”[[9]](#footnote-10) as leading up to Jesus as the Messiah. And we know that his views were rejected by the church. Even so, similar notions persist to this day.

Our modern conceptions of justice tend to center around revenge or retribution as justice. When a robber or thief is jailed, when a murderer is executed, “justice has been done,” many say. In our daily conversation, we equate justice with someone ‘getting what’s coming to them.’ But justice is more than that. Justice is when everything is in its proper place (note the relationship between “justice” and “adjust.” Adjusting things to the proper place, size, and function is a sort of justice) or when everyone has *enough.* “Justice is when no one oppresses another, when all show mutual respect, when life and freedom and peace are affirmed. Justice is about a **restoration** to the way things are intended to be. A just ruler will not only make certain that the laws are obeyed but also that the laws themselves are just, and that they do not favor the rich and powerful so that they may become richer and more powerful. Such justice is not contrary to love but is actually a form of love.”[[10]](#footnote-11)

So when Scripture tells us that God so love the world that God sent God’s Son…not to judge the world but to save it, I understand that to mean that God wants just laws, not revenge; that God wants all people to have enough, not for some to have a lot while others have nothing. So when I, as a believer, say in the Creed that Jesus came to judge the living and the dead, I think those are the guidelines by which that judgement happens; not based on whether some specific part of my belief passes somebody’s litmus test. The Creed invites us to explore and deepen our faith and our relationship to God, not to weaponize it against someone who in one way or another believes or understands differently. The God who is love is bigger than our questions and our doubts, and the Creed is intended to help us proclaim that God’s love endures forever. Amen.

1. Howell, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Gonzalez, 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Gonzalez, 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Gonzalez, 32-33 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Howell, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Gonzalez, 36-37 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Gonzalez, 34-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Gonzalez, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Gonzalez, 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Gonzalez, 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)