

“Creed: I Believe In Jesus Christ”

Date: July 8, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: Creed, series

Theme: Jesus, Christology

Texts: John 1:1-5, 14; Philippians 2:5-11

The second major affirmation in the Apostles’ Creed is the belief in Jesus Christ. Hindus, Muslims, Jews and the vast majority of the world’s people believe there is a God. But what sets Christianity apart from these other faiths, are its specific beliefs about Jesus.

Some of the world’s religions affirm that Jesus was a prophet, an important teacher or a religious reformer. Even among atheists, there is general agreement that Jesus was “a great moral teacher.”

Yes, the Christian faith affirms that Jesus was indeed a prophet, a religious reformer and a great moral teacher, but much more than this. Today we’ll explore some of the essential beliefs about who Jesus was and is. We say, “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord.”

Let’s explain what it we mean by those words. We’ll start with the name *Jesus*. The name of Jesus is the Greek form of *Yeshua*, a common name in the first century, sometimes translated as “deliverer” or “savior.” His name is a sign of what he would do, “save people from their sins.”

But saving people from their sins involves far more than simply forgiving them. It means that Jesus begins to change *who we are*. It involves a spiritual transformation that shows us a better way and gives us the ability to pursue it. Jesus came to save us from our sins – to deliver us from the power and the lure of sin, by changing our hearts.

The second word to describe him is “Christ.” You know, of course, that Christ is not his last name, but is instead a title describing a particular

role he came to play. Christ is from the Greek word for “anointed one,” the word drawn from Hebrew which has the same meaning as Messiah.

At the coronation ceremony of a king, oil was poured or smeared on the king’s head by the priest, signifying the king was set apart for God’s purposes and he belonged to God. Christians claim Jesus as their King. They give him their highest allegiance. He is our Christ, our Messiah.

Next we come to the phrase: “God’s only son, Our Lord.” The word “Lord” is much easier to explain than the rest of that phrase. When we claim that Jesus is our Lord, we are saying that he is the one to whom we belong; we agree to follow His bidding. We seek to live according to the way he lived and the way he taught us we are supposed to live. We not only follow Jesus, we worship Him and bow before Him.

But what do we mean when we say that Jesus was God’s only Son? The Bible teaches that all human beings are God’s sons and daughters. So, what does the Creed mean by saying that Jesus is God’s *only* Son? Well, to speak of Jesus in this way is to speak of the special and unique relationship which Jesus has with God.

Jesus is not just *a* son of God, but *the* Son of God. Here’s the point: saying that Jesus is “God’s only Son” is shorthand for something much deeper. The phrase will ultimately take us to the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. But how, precisely, was Jesus God?

If you struggle to explain or make sense of the Incarnation or the deity of Christ, you’re in good company. The church wrestled with these questions for nearly 300 years until finally at the Council of Nicaea in 325, they settled on language clarifying what the church believed.

Some critics like to suggest that the church “transformed” Jesus from a simple rabbi to a divine figure, centuries after his death. But we have

proof in the scriptures that the earliest church believed Jesus was special and unique and that the best way to describe him was to proclaim that he shared the same identity as God.

We read two examples in worship this morning – from the Gospel of John and from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, declaring that God and Jesus were one and the same. It is this belief in the divinity of Jesus that makes Christianity different than other world religions.

Which brings us to the next two phrases of the Creed: “who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary.” For some people it is simply beyond belief that Mary, the mother of Jesus, conceived Jesus apart from intercourse with a man. I completely understand the skepticism.

A few observations about this particular doctrine: It is only mentioned twice in the entire New Testament. Paul, the great theologian, never thought it was important enough to mention in any of his writings. And it is very possible the word used to convey “virgin” could also mean something else in Hebrew. Not everyone is in agreement on this doctrine.

Is it possible to be a Christian and not believe in the virgin birth? Given how little the doctrine is referenced in the New Testament, the answer seems to be yes. And yet, I wonder if it is really such a hard thing to accept, considering how awesome and powerful God is.

And is it possible, in a world where gods were thought to procreate with women, that God might use this very idea, accepted by pagans, to be the means by which he would bring forth his son? Is it possible that the virginal conception and birth was considered by God to be a beautiful means of expressing the deeper mysteries of the Incarnation – namely how Jesus was uniquely God’s Son, and how God took on human flesh in Jesus

The Creed goes on: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried.” It’s interesting to note that neither the Apostle’s Creed nor any of the other creeds offer a particular understanding of HOW his death atones for human sin. *Atonement* is the word that theologians use to explain how Jesus restores us to right relationship with God, and none of the creeds tell us which particular theory of atonement is the right one.

So, for many people, they are content to say, “He died for the forgiveness of sins,” but they can only offer, at best, a very superficial explanation of how that works. Entire books and seminary courses are offered on atonement, trying to explain how Jesus’s death makes us right once more. For most of us, we can’t explain it, but we affirm it.

Next we come to a phrase that has not been repeated in most United Methodist churches, but which is said in other denominations. *He descended to the dead*. This phrase is the early church’s answer to the question – what was Jesus up to between the time of his death on Friday afternoon and his resurrection early Sunday morning?

The Jews had long believed that at death, one’s soul made its abode in the realm of the dead, also known as Sheol or Hades. It was understood to be under the earth. Within this underworld were two realms – one for the righteous, called Paradise; and another for the unrighteous, often referred to as Gehenna, after the valley in Jerusalem where the city’s garbage was burned. In the underworld the dead awaited their final judgment.

They were spirits, alive and experiencing either blessings or curses, but they were not yet clothed in their new heavenly bodies. They were not yet in heaven, but were living in the shadowlands.

The church came to believe that Jesus, during the time between his death and his resurrection, offered salvation to those in the clutches of

death since the beginning of time. This is purely speculative theology, about which we have very limited information in the Bible to support it. But I think there is great power in the image of Christ descending to the realm of the dead, tearing the doors off the hinges, and offering salvation to those who had died from the beginning of time.

Finally we come to the climactic conclusion of the affirmation of Christian belief – affirming our faith in the resurrection of Jesus: “On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father and will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

In our last sermon series, *The Case for Christ*, we spent extensive time explaining why it is both credible and reasonable to believe that Jesus truly did arise from the dead. It is the foundational belief of the Christian faith. It literally changed the lives of the disciples from cowards to bold prophets, so certain were they of the reality of Christ’s resurrection.

So, what does it matter what we believe about Jesus? It’s our defining story. Jesus demonstrates who God is, what God is like and what God’s will is for our lives. His life and ministry, his death and resurrection shape how we see ourselves and how we see the world.

Faith in Jesus Christ offers us a very unique perspective on the world. We are born with a purpose. Our lives have meaning, and when this mortal body dies, we’ve only just begun to live. When God sought to communicate his love for us, he sent Jesus. It was in God’s Son that God’s message, God’s Word, came to us and became our defining story.

Through Jesus, God was saying: I am. You matter to me. I love you. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why*, by Adam Hamilton, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016, pp. 35-77.