

The Creed – Part 3 – Jesus Christ

This week, we move into part three of the Apostle’s Creed. Three times in the Creed, we affirm belief “in,” in the Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. As I said in the previous two weeks, the reason for this is the original connection with baptism, which resulted in the Creed having the same Trinitarian structure as the baptismal formula,” in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Jesus has always stood at the center of Christian faith; however, we know that Jesus referred to God as his Father, and to have communion with God, we call upon the Holy Spirit, affirming God is one, not only one but one in equal community. God is one, but God is never alone, and the community for which we were created is a similar sort of community where each individual finds their identity in love for others. We are only scratching the surface of the Christian faith, for if God exists, and God is as the Scriptures describe him, then we are never alone. As I concluded last week with the words of the Psalmist, who so beautifully notes, “Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we need fear no evil, for God is with us.” If we genuinely believe that God exists, there is always hope. When Jesus is with us, there is hope, for In Christ alone, our hope is found. Let’s pray, finding comfort in the hope that is found in Christ, a hope that never fades, a hope that is always there, a hope that is found in Christ alone.

Gracious God, you have been with us through many seasons of life, and we give you thanks in times of joy and celebration. Your Word says that you are close to the broken-hearted and that You save those who are crushed in spirit. Often, we forget that you are the door and the One our eyes should be fixed upon. Help us learn what true hope looks like in Christ and that when we feel all hope is lost, your Holy Spirit will fill us with your word, which is built on the solid ground that is Christ. Let us take comfort in the reassurance that you are always with us, guiding us and filling us with hope. Your presence in our lives, especially in times of need, is our greatest security. Amen.

In the vast majority of the world’s people, including Hindus, Muslims, and Jews, there is a belief that there is a God. However, what sets Christianity apart from these other faiths is its unique and specific beliefs about Jesus. While some of the different religions affirm that Jesus was a prophet, teacher, or a type of religious reformer, Christianity stands out in its belief that Jesus is more than just a great moral teacher. We, too, believe that Jesus fits the mold of teacher, prophet, and reformer, but we also know that he is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the one in whom our hope is found. This unique belief in Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of the world sets us apart and gives us a distinct identity in the world.

The earliest and most extensive information we have concerning Jesus comes from the twenty-seven documents of the New Testament, nearly all of which were written between A.D. 50 and 95, including all four Gospel accounts written by the followers of Jesus, all of which offer a great deal of information regarding Jesus. For instance, in the prologue of Luke’s Gospel, he writes these words that draw upon earlier sources who had written about what Jesus said and did. “Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the

word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account” (Luke 1:1-3)

Many of the earliest New Testament documents are not the Gospels but the letters of Paul written to small Christian communities across the Roman Empire. For us, the question about Jesus is not whether or not he existed, but that he is more than a teacher, for the New Testament authors saw him as Savior, Messiah, and God’s only Son, our Lord. For some people, the belief is that Mary, the mother of Jesus, conceived Jesus apart from a normal sexual relation with a man by the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit. I can see the skepticism, and only in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do we read about the virgin birth. Mark, John, and Paul do not mention it, and Matthew’s citation comes from the prophet Isaiah. So, given how little evidence is it possible to be a Christian and not believe in the virgin birth? Regardless, once we can accept the mystery surrounding the Incarnation of Christ, it might offer us some important truths about Jesus and the character of God in love.

There is a widespread notion that “Jesus” and “Christ” are two proper names. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and Christ is the name of Jesus in his heavenly function. Thus, some people speak about the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. However, Jesus is the name, and Christ is the anointed, or the Messiah. In the Old Testament, people were anointed, as were kings, and over the centuries, amid a history of exile and oppression, Israel came to look forward to an anointed one who would destroy the enemies of God and Israel, bringing about a new order of peace and justice. However, the Jews objected to Jesus as the Messiah, and then in the second century, when in Rome, where the Creed was taking shape, the doctrines of Marcion became a threat. Therefore, the Creed makes it clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises made to Israel by the God of Israel as the “Maker of heaven and earth.”

It is equally important to call him “the son of God” as a reminder that Jesus is the son of the Creator, who came to fulfill the purposes of the Creator because creation is good and because God, the Father, loves creation. We need this doctrine to realize that when we call Jesus Christ, we are claiming and acknowledging that there is a connection between our faith and that of our Jewish neighbors. The Creed does not only say that Jesus is the Son of God who created heaven and earth; it also says that this relationship is extraordinary. Jesus is his only Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.

We say our Lord with such ease that it is difficult for us to see what a radical statement it was for Christians in the second century and what a radical statement it should still be. Thankfully, time has passed since the first century when the title “Lord” was claimed by Emperor Domitian. No one could challenge his authority, for if anyone claimed God was the faithful Lord or any other ruler, they were tortured and put to death. In A.D. 93, Domitian executed some Christians for refusing to offer sacrifices before his image, including his nephew Flavius Clemens. He became so paranoid he inserted fire into their private parts. Did Domitian persecute only Christians? No, but he made life difficult for those he termed as atheists, those who refused to worship the Roman gods.

With time, it would seem that claiming Jesus is Lord has become commonplace and has lost its significance. We tend to think that the Lordship of Christ is a purely religious statement or, at best, a statement about how we are to conduct our daily lives. We tend to think that this is one of many commitments we have and that it exists side-by-side with our commitments to family, nation, church, political philosophy, political party, and so forth. But to properly understand the lordship of Christ limits every other lordship and every other allegiance.

When the early Christians declared, “I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord,” they were not making an innocent statement, and neither should we. We are saying that our ultimate commitment is not to family, nation, or church. We are saying that we commit to him. We are rejecting absolute nationalism and all other unconditional allegiances. Otherwise, Jesus is not truly “our Lord” but one more among our many lords.

During Germany’s Nazi rule under Hitler, it became pretty clear to many Christians that most Germans equated nationalism with Christian truth. The government demanded complete and unconditional loyalty. Nationalism, as understood by Hitler and his followers, was an excuse for anything. The organized church was made submissive to the state, agreed to what the government was doing, and even claimed that it was done in the name of Christianity. But then, some within the church understood what they had been affirming throughout their lives, that Jesus Christ is our Lord. In May of 1934, a number of 139 determined church leaders gathered in Gemarke Church, Barmen, in the city of Wuppertal and issued a declaration, a call to resistance against the theological claims of the Nazi state in which they bravely stated.

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, which we have to trust and obey in life and death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge it as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.

This was no idle statement, and many of those who affirmed it were persecuted and killed by the Nazi regime. What do we mean today when we declare that we believe in Jesus Christ our Lord? What are we denying? What are we risking? These are questions worth pondering as we repeat words for which so many have suffered.

As I move toward a close, Jesus came to save us from our sins and to deliver us from the power and lure of sin. Who wouldn’t argue that most of the world’s pain is caused by people and societies missing the mark or straying from the right path because they fail to practice love? Think about that sin has tragic consequences, shootings that become an everyday occurrence, the steady stream of government scandals, dictatorial rulers who oppress their people, proof of human struggle—all the wars, violence, poverty, and injustice. Think about recent times of mocking Jesus at the Lord’s Table. The times we have failed to say or do something we should have done to help someone to the selfishness and self-centeredness at work within us. I encourage you to be offended, not outraged, and to return words of grace. If Jesus was born to save us from our sins, he clearly has a big mission. Jesus came to save us and be our Savior, to deliver us, and until we die, or until Christ returns to establish his kingdom, we live in “the present evil age.” Jesus prayed for us like this: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world,

but that you keep them from the evil one.” Friends, follow Christ. It is costly, but you will be free. Amen.