

I BELIEVE IN JESUS CHRIST...

The Apostles' Creed Sermon Series, week 2

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Philippians 2:5-11, Colossians 1:15-17
 Mathew 9:35-38, John 14:8-10

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Last week, we established that *"we believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."* As Christians, our faith begins with belief in a Supreme Being, a Creator. In fact, we believe that the very existence of the universe as well as our existence bear witness to a God who is intelligent, powerful, and mysterious. But with the creed's including of the word "Father," Jesus' primary way of addressing God, the creed also emphasizes that God is personal, intimate, and relational. Yes, God is the force and power behind everything, but we also know that God has all the attributes of personhood, because scripture says that we humans are created in the image of God. When Christians look at the universe and one another, we see the creativity, joy, beauty and majesty of an intelligent, powerful, and loving God.

This belief fundamentally impacts our perspective of the world, our place in the world, as well as our individual lives. To believe in an Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth is humbling. After all, we are quite small in the scheme of things. And yet, we are God's children. We matter to God and our fellow human beings also matter to God. Faith in God makes us humble, it leads us to love, it compels us to praise, gratitude and worship, and it gives us a desire to understand God's will and to do it. To believe in God and to put our trust in God allows us to live daily with greater peace, hope and purpose.

Last week I mentioned that 85% of the world's population believe in God; Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists all believe in a higher Power. But what makes Christians different is our belief that God made himself known through Jesus. Jesus said, *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... the words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works"* (John 14:9-10). In Jesus, Christians believe that God became like one of us; God walked on this earth as a human being. We believe Jesus *"is the image of the invisible God"* (Colossians 1:15). In other words, the God we cannot see, who is powerful and mysterious, can be seen by looking at Jesus.

Whereas last week's statement about God was fairly short, today's statement that distinguishes the Christian faith from every other faiths is a good bit longer. *"I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead."* Some of the world's religions affirm that Jesus was a prophet, an important teacher, or a religious reformer. Even among atheists there is a general agreement that Jesus was "a great moral teacher." As Christians, we agree with all these statements, but we believe so much more about Jesus. The part of Christian theology that focuses on our belief in Jesus is called "Christology." Today, I am going to try to share a simplified overview of what Christians believe about Jesus, and why it matters. But even simplified, I realize that it's still going to be a lot. If you zone out and need a copy of my message to review what you missed, please let me know after worship and I'll make sure you get a copy.

I want to begin by pointing out that Jesus did not leave any written documents, and most of the people he ministered to could not read or write. There are very few

Roman documents in existence from the first half of the first century, and we would not expect any to record the life and crucifixion of a Jewish peasant in a "backwaters" place in the Roman Empire. However, Jesus is mentioned in writings describing the Roman Emperor Nero's persecution of Christians in the middle of the first century. And a man by the name of Josephus wrote a comprehensive history of the Jews near the end of the first century and in his lengthy writing there are several references to Jesus. However, the earliest and most extensive information we have concerning Jesus comes from the 27 documents of the New Testament which were written between AD 50-95.

Even though the four Gospels are biographical in nature, they are not strict biographies of Jesus. They were written by people who had come to believe that Jesus was the Christ, God's Son and their Lord. In other words, they were written by Christians for Christians, or for those open to becoming Christians. All the Gospels draw upon earlier sources and eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, and even though there are differences among them they paint a remarkably consistent account of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

The earliest New Testament documents are not the Gospels, but the letters of Paul that were written to small Christian communities across the Roman Empire. Paul's conversion is thought to have occurred within a year or two of Jesus' death, so Paul was a contemporary of Jesus. He was a man who started out persecuting Christians only to become a leading Christian evangelist. Occasionally, a skeptic will try to argue that Jesus was a mythical character made up by the early church. However, the evidence for his existence is overwhelming. There is more evidence about a man named Jesus who lived in Palestine and died on a cross outside Jerusalem than almost any other human being from ancient times.

Belief in "*Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord*" is largely about choosing to believe what the earliest Christians believed, taught, preached, and wrote about him. What we know is that Jesus was born sometime before 4 BC in the Roman province of Judea when it was ruled by Rome's appointed King Herod. According to scripture, it was God who wanted him called "Yeshua" (Hebrew) "Jesus" (Greek) meaning "deliverer" or "savior," "...because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Sometime after Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, his family moved to the small village of Nazareth, a village of poor peasants. Jesus' parents were Mary and Joseph and they were devout Jews. Joseph was a woodworker or possibly a stone mason. Besides one story about Jesus when he was 13 years old, there is very little known about his childhood and young adulthood, and that's because the focus of the four Gospels is Jesus' final years of life.

According to the documents we have, Jesus left Nazareth when he was about 30 years old to be baptized by his cousin, John. He then spent forty days in the desert; it was a time of testing and a time of communing with God to clarify his mission. Eventually, Jesus made the village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee his home base, and he called ordinary people to be his disciples. He devoted much of the next three years to ministering in the villages and towns around the Sea of Galilee. "*Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness*" (Matthew 9:35). His ministry was marked by compassion for the sick, the marginalized, and those who were "lost." He told stories to teach people about God and God's will for their lives, and his best-known teaching is "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and You shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 22:37,39).

There were those who thought that Jesus might be the long-awaited "*Messiah*" which is a Hebrew word meaning "*anointed one*" or "*God's chosen king*." Its Greek equivalent is "*Christ*." Christ is not Jesus' last name, but a title describing his role. It's clear that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah, but as with many other things, he interpreted the role differently than most. He was not concerned with overthrowing the Romans but emphasized the presence of God's kingdom whenever people loved God and neighbor. The enemy Jesus sought to deliver people from was not the Romans but hate, indifference, pride, and hypocrisy. Jesus came to save people from the sin that alienated them from God and one another. He came to save people from fear, hopelessness, and ultimately death. The suffering and death that happened on "Good" Friday clearly revealed the evil of human sin, but it also demonstrated the power of divine grace. Following his crucifixion, Jesus was hastily placed in a borrowed tomb, and on the third day, the tomb was found to be empty.

The real question about Jesus isn't whether he lived, did the things I just described and died, for even skeptics would agree that my outline is a fairly accurate summary of Jesus' life. But even though other faiths and many atheists affirm that he was a good man and great moral teacher, the authors of the New Testament saw him as much more. *They saw Jesus as the "Christ, God's only Son, our Lord."* To proclaim Jesus as the Christ, God's Messiah, and anointed King is to emphasize that our highest allegiance is to him. Such allegiance should naturally and significantly impact our daily life choices.

The Creed also identifies Jesus as "God's only Son." Last week, I emphasized that we are all God's children, so what does affirming Jesus as God's only Son mean? To speak of Jesus in this way is to acknowledge Jesus' unique relationship with God. It was a uniqueness that began from conception. Jesus is not just A son of God, but THE Son of God. Saying that Jesus is "God's only Son" is shorthand for believing in the divinity of Jesus. When Jesus taught, he taught with an authority the other religious leaders did not have; large crowds were drawn to him. When Jesus spoke, many people felt they had heard God's words. When Jesus touched them, they felt they had been touched by God. When they answered Jesus' call, they felt they were answering God's call. Jesus did things that ordinary people could not do. Skeptics dismiss his miracles as fabrications, but believers view them as events and signs that point to Jesus' unique identity.

In the New Testament, the most frequently used title for Jesus is "*Lord*." It appears 537 times in the New Testament. In Greek the word is "*Kyrios*," and it means master, ruler, sovereign or king. The term signifies the highest authority in an area. When the Old Testament was being translated from Hebrew to Greek, the translators settled on the Greek word "*Kyrios*" as the best word to replace the Hebrew word, "*Yahweh*," which is the name used throughout the Old Testament for God. So, from the earliest of times, Christians used the word "Lord" for both God and Jesus.

The theological term for God taking on flesh and coming to us in Jesus is "incarnation." *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). Paul said, *"though he was in the form of God, 'he' did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death..."* (Philippians 2:6-8). The Incarnation was not simply God walking in our shoes, it was also about God meeting us on our own ground – becoming one of us so that he might reveal himself to us in terms that we could understand. If you struggle to make sense of how Jesus could be both human and God, know that you are in good

company. The church has wrestled with that question throughout the centuries. Perhaps some mysteries are just not adequately explained by human words, and when it comes right down to it faith is not about factual proof and definitive answers, faith is a life choice that is taken to heart.

It is general accepted that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate sometime around AD 30 and was hastily buried in a borrowed tomb in which a large stone was rolled over the opening. This description is very consistent with first-century burial practices. When I was in the Holy Land, I saw several tombs including one that many think Jesus may have been laid in. It's also generally accepted that some women returned to the tomb about 36 hours later to find the stone rolled away and the grave empty. However, the resurrection of Jesus has been difficult for some people to believe – some consider it a hoax or lie. And yet, those first disciples were radically changed by their experiences with Jesus following his resurrection. Men who had fled and hid, became bold and courageous, risking their own lives to proclaim what they had seen and experienced following Jesus' resurrection.

Others who came to believe in the risen Jesus also found their own lives changed. At some point you and I decide to trust the first disciples whose accounts are written about in the Gospels. We choose to believe that Jesus' resurrection was not only God's response to human mortality and our fear of death, but God's response to all that is wrong in the world. It's a sign of God's victory and the triumph of good over evil, love over hate, and life over death. At that point, we might even admit that faith in the resurrection of Jesus has changed us; it's changed how we live our lives and how we face death, both our own and that of others. Because of Jesus, we believe that we were born with purpose, our lives have meaning, and when this mortal body dies that's not the end.

As Christians, we believe that when God wanted to communicate his love for us, he sent Jesus to be our defining story. In Jesus' life and teachings, God showed that he cares about those who are lost and those who are made to feel small. He showed us how to love, forgive, and serve. And as we do those things, we not only make the world a more just and compassionate place like heaven, but we experience joy because being like Jesus is what it looks like to be authentically human. In Jesus' death on the cross, God showed us the depth of his love as well as the costliness of grace. And in Jesus' resurrection, God defeated sin and death.

There is so much more that could be said about Jesus, but I know your brains are likely in theological "overload." Although, when it comes to overload, I am reminded of Karl Barth, the great twentieth-century theologian, who devoted fourteen large volumes to the theological discipline of Christology. Even though I've read excerpts from those large volumes, I have not read all fourteen volumes, and I do not plan to do so in retirement. However, Barth was once asked by a student if he could summarize in one sentence his theological work, and Barth responded with the words to a song his mother had taught him as a child: *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* If you remember nothing else from this sermon, I hope you remember that Jesus loves you. Knowing that can make all the difference! Let us pray...

Gracious God, your majesty and holiness is beyond our ability to comprehend. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, whose life, words, and deeds communicate to us your boundless love in a language we can understand. In the name of Jesus Christ, your only Son our Lord we pray. Amen.