

This morning we are in the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of our 6 week series on the Creeds. Today our focus will be the first paragraph of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, that speak of God as Father and as Creator.

But before we get to that, I want to step back and say a few words about the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds in general.

Last week I mentioned that the earliest Christian creed comes from scripture and is very short—2 words in New Testament Greek, 3 words in English: *Kyrios Iesous*. "Jesus is Lord."<sup>1</sup> These words date to the very early days of the church, just a couple decades after Jesus' resurrection, around the 50's AD.

There are other statements of belief in the New Testament as well. Various scholars point to various verses as reflecting possible early creedal statements of early Christians. I won't go through all that. And I won't go through all the ins and outs of the development of various early creeds after the time of the New Testament, though I will briefly mention two of them.

The earliest post-New Testament creedal statement that we have dates to 115 AD and is found in the writings of a great bishop and martyr, St. Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius writes, "Jesus Christ, who is of the stock of David, who is of Mary, who was truly born, ate and drank, was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of the beings of heaven, of earth and the underworld, who was also truly raised from the dead."<sup>2</sup>

As I mentioned last week, one of the earliest challenges to Christianity was that Jesus was not a real human, but just seemed to be one. Ignatius goes to great lengths to dispel that misconception. "Truly born... truly crucified and died... truly raised from the dead." More on that issue next week.

One other early creed I'll mention comes from around the year 160 AD from the writings of another great Christian, St. Justin Martyr. He writes about Christian baptism, and the statement of belief that is made when a person is being baptized. The statement is "In the name of God, the Father and Lord of the Universe... And in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 10:9, 1Cor 12:3

<sup>2</sup> Ignatius, *Letter to the Trallians*, 9:1-2

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61

Already in these early statements we hear echoes of language that would later be used in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

I actually printed the text of both of those creeds on the back of the bulletin and want to make a few comments about them. So you might want to look on.

First off, I put footnote #1 by the title "The Apostles' Creed." If you look down to the bottom, I put some dates. This creed didn't drop out of the sky in its present form. It developed rather slowly between somewhere around 180 AD and somewhere around 700 AD. That's a pretty long period of development.

By contrast the Nicene Creed largely was composed at two main council meetings: The Council of Nicea in 325 AD, and the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD. Basically the first 2 paragraphs were more or less written in 325, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph came from 381. In fact, the name "The Nicene Creed" is really a shorthand nickname. The proper name of the creed is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. But that's a tongue-twisting mouthful. So "The Nicene Creed" is a simpler title to use.

While we're talking footnotes, you might note footnote #3. It's by the words in the 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph that the Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son." Those words, "and the Son" were never part of the original text. They were added centuries later in the west. And that addition is still rejected by all of the various Eastern Orthodox Christians in our world.

The words began to creep into the creed in the western churches: The Roman Catholic Church, and later the Protestant Churches beginning in Spain in 589, more than 2 centuries after the creed was finalized. I'll say a tad more about this in a few weeks when we deal with the Holy Spirit.

But for now, I want to take a brief moment and look at both creeds together. First off, they each have 3 sections or 3 paragraphs: God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

But even a cursory glance will show that there's a lot more text on the right than on the left. The Apostles' Creed is noticeably shorter than the Nicene Creed. There are a number of phrases that are in the Nicene Creed, but not the Apostles' Creed. I've shown them in bold underlined italics.

But there are also two phrases that are unique to the Apostles' Creed that don't appear in the Nicene Creed. In the second paragraph, "He descended to the dead." And in the third paragraph, "The communion of saints." More on those phrases in subsequent weeks.

But for the rest of today I want to focus in on the first paragraph. In the Nicene Creed it states,

"We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen."

There are several things here that might seem a bit strange to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears. And yet, this first paragraph says some wonderful things.

The first thing that might seem strange in our culture is the notion that the universe was created by God. Is this something modern Christians can still believe?

I would say the answer is an unreserved, "Yes." I do believe that God made all that is, seen and unseen, visible and invisible, known and unknown. I preached a fairly extensive sermon on this topic on May 21. If you weren't here that day, you might want to look it up on our website.

I won't rehash everything I said in that sermon. But I did deal with the intersection between science and faith for Christians. And that sermon did win an award in a national contest for sermons dealing with issues of science and faith.

As someone with an undergraduate degree in the hard sciences and a graduate degree in theology, I have no problem proclaiming that God created the universe. As best as we can tell that moment of creation was an astonishing 13.7 billion years ago. And through nearly 14 million millennia, God has used the processes of the universe to bring forth matter, then stars, then planets, then life, and then us.

And that is so important. Many people believe that creation has no purpose. Many people believe that everything is just a random accident.

The good news of scripture, the good news that the creeds also proclaim, is that we do have a purpose. We were created intentionally. We were created in the image and likeness of God. And that same God calls us to care for our world and our universe, to share with God in being creative and loving beings.

As I said last week, there was a fringe group amongst early Christians who denied that God was the creator of heaven and earth.

The earth was matter they said. Matter is always evil, they said, only the spirit is good. So a good and holy spiritual being, like God, would never get his hands dirty by creating anything made of matter. It was fallen, they said. A good God would never create anything so nasty.

But that's not the message of scripture. God created the heavens and the earth. And in the first creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, God said that his creation was good, good, good, good, good, good and lastly very good.<sup>4</sup>

Thus as a 21<sup>st</sup> century Christian, I have no problem proclaiming with Christians for past 1,700 years, that God is indeed the creator of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31

But there is one thing I've skipped over that does cause issue for some 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians. And that is the image of God as Father.

There are two common objections to using the image and language of God as Father.

First is that it privileges males over females. As one of the early feminist theologians famously wrote 44 years ago, "If God is male, then the male is God."<sup>5</sup>

Second, some people have had abusive fathers in their lives. And those wounds are so severe that any language about God as father are off-putting and spiritually problematic.

I would have a several responses.

First, it is important to stipulate, as I have many times before, that God is not a male. Neither is God a female. Those are concepts that belong to biological beings. Genesis says that "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."<sup>6</sup> Both males and females are equally created in God's image. Somehow God is simultaneously somehow both male and female, and yet neither male nor female. Again, as I said last week, our human language and images fall short when trying to comprehend the majesty of God.

Second, I would add, that there are definitely some instances in scripture where God described as a mother. There are also many more images of God being described as a father. And there are still other images of God being described as a rock, or a mountain, or a fortress, or fire. If we lock in on any of these varied images as being the one and only image, then we've lost something of the majesty of who God is.

Third, I would say, that Jesus himself calls God, "Father." And he uses a more familiar term: "Abba." It's hard to get a precise English translation of Abba. But it's more intimate and less formal than Father. The closest we can come is something perhaps in between "Papa" and "Daddy."

While God is certainly more than just "Papa," that term does remind us that God wants an intimate, personal relationship with us. He wants us to trust him like a child would trust a loving father. And that's one of the main reasons I would hate to lose the image of God as Father. I don't mind expanding our vocabulary and our images of God. But I hate to lose such an important one, especially one prized by Jesus himself.

But there is that pastoral issue. Some people have been severely damaged by human fathers. And some have had abusive human mothers. To think of God in any kind of parental terms dredges up all sorts of pain and anguish from their past.

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 1973

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 1:27

My suggestion to them is that God can be the kind of perfect parental figure that no human could ever be. Even the best human parent on their best day is imperfect. But with God we see a perfect expression of what perfect parental love could be.

God is the almighty sovereign and creator of the immensely vast and complicated and ancient universe.

And God is also the most loving parent any of us could experience.

The glorious good news of the creeds tells us that God loves us and created us with a purpose, and gives of himself for us. For our sake, for us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven. And we will turn to that glorious news next week.