

Jesus Is

The Apostle's Creed, Part 2

“And 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.”

Welcome to part two of our five-week preaching series on *The Apostle's Creed*. We are using the Creed during Lent to examine our foundational beliefs as Christians. I am going to focus on that portion of the Creed pertaining to Jesus over the next two Sundays. This morning I want us to look at the first part that says, “*And 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.*”

Let's begin by first talking about the name Jesus Christ. *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua and it literally means “the Lord saves.” *Christ* is not Jesus' last name. It is a modifier. “Christ” defines who Jesus is. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. Both Christ and Messiah mean “the anointed one.” To be totally correct we should say “Jesus the Christ” or “the Christ Jesus.” But popular convention over the past 2,000 years has led to referring to our Lord as Jesus Christ. It is all right to do so and we all do it.

We believe that Jesus is not just God's Son, but his *only* Son. This phrase was placed in *The Apostle's Creed* in response to heresies in the early days of the church which held on the one hand that Jesus was not divine, and from other quarters that God could have others sons. We believe that in being God's Son, Jesus is fully divine. We also believe that Jesus represents God's one and only Incarnation into the world. As such, Jesus is God's only incarnational expression of bridging the gap between God and us. When we experience Jesus, we experience God. In other words – Jesus is!

When we profess that Jesus is Lord, we are saying that he is the absolute ruler of our lives, and that we have turned our lives over to him. When we accept Jesus as our Lord, our lives must change. If they don't change, then our profession is not genuine. It means we die to self so that Jesus may live in us.

All of us have experienced those times in our lives when we have felt utterly helpless, powerless, and perhaps hopeless. We find at those lowest moments that we can best understand the meaning of the Incarnation, that point in history when God became human. That is what the phrase in the Creed means when it says, “. . . conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried.” It attests to Jesus' humanness. It testifies to our inability to conquer our own suffering and that Jesus comes into our lives with both his humanity as well as his divinity.

Let's look a little more closely at the elements in this phrase. We believe Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That doesn't mean that God physically impregnated Mary. Rather, Mary was conceived by a spiritual miracle from the Holy Spirit. Our God who has the power to create the earth, all living things, indeed the cosmos itself, has the power to create life miraculously and mysteriously.

We believe that Jesus was born of Mary, who was a virgin. Although conceived by the Holy Spirit, Mary remained a virgin, not having any physical relationship with a man until she did so with Joseph after Jesus' birth. The word “incarnation” means to “provide with body,” which is exactly what happened. The Incarnation is the transition of the eternal God to the eternal Jesus. John 1:1 affirms this when it says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Although the conception within Mary was miraculous, everything else was normal – the pregnancy, labor, pain, birth, wrapped in cloths, suckled, nurtured, vulnerable and needing protection. But the supernatural aspects of Jesus' birth did lead to supernatural events accompanying it – the Star of Bethlehem, the appearance of angels, the divine leading of the Magi, and the divine warnings about King Herod's evil intentions.

An important question is why Jesus needed to be both fully human and fully divine? If he were not fully human he could not have represented us on the cross; if he were not fully divine he could not have been resurrected for our salvation.

Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate. Pilate was appointed prefect of Judea in 26 A.D. He had large-scale military and judicial power, and wielded control over the Jewish leaders and Temple treasury. Although *The Apostle's Creed* names Herod specifically, many others were involved in Jesus' suffering and death. The Pharisees were the largest Jewish religious order and represented the common people. They were interpreters of the Torah, the Law, and believed Israel's salvation would come by the people perfectly obeying the Law. With time their interpretations of the Law became more important to them than God's Law itself. Jesus repeatedly denounced them.

The Sadducees were a small religious order, representing the influential and elite Jews. They controlled the Temple and worked closely with the Romans. The Sadducees dominated the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council that condemned Jesus the night he was betrayed and arrested.

The Sanhedrin wanted Jesus executed but Rome had removed the power of capital punishment from them. They turned to Pontius Pilate, telling him Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. Since Pilate refused to condemn Jesus for only violating Jewish law, the Sanhedrin told him that Jesus' claim would lead to civil insurrection. In essence, Jesus was also charged with treason against the state. Even at that, Pilate was reluctant. Luke's gospel tells us that Pilate tried to pass Jesus up the chain of command to King Herod. Herod knew a can of worms when he saw it and returned Jesus to Pilate. Because Pilate had to work with the Sanhedrin, he tried to placate them. It led to the offering of Jesus and the prisoner Barabbas to the people to let them choose which one would be freed and which one would be crucified. Pilate was certain the people would choose to free Jesus, but Sanhedrin operatives worked the gathered crowd, urging them cry out to free Barabbas and crucify Jesus, which they did. Left with Jesus, Pilate condemned him to death and washed his hands of the whole affair.

What followed was not flogging, but scourging of Jesus. Flogging is whipping. Scourging is a cat-of-nine-tails type of whip with pieces of glass and metal interwoven into the strands. When it is laid across the back, the shards dig in, then ripping the flesh as it is pulled back. Many who were condemned to death by crucifixion died during the preliminary scourging. A crown of thorns was thrust on Jesus' head, the thorns being three to four inches long and digging into his scalp causing more bleeding. Jesus was derided, spat upon, and given a cross to carry to Golgotha, the crucifixion site.

Jesus died on the cross. The cross he carried was not exactly the shape we portray today. The cross used by the Romans for execution was in the shape of a "T". The condemned carried the cross piece to the site, was nailed or tied to it, hoisted up, and the cross piece placed on top of the vertical post, which was already embedded in the ground. Death on the cross was slow. A small foot piece was nailed to the vertical post so the condemned could push his body up with his feet. Eventually, exhaustion took over, the body slumped, and death came by suffocation of the lungs.

Jesus was crucified on Friday. The Jewish Sabbath began at sundown, and no dead Jewish bodies were permitted to remain on the cross after that time. To ensure Jesus and the two criminals crucified with him were dead, Roman soldiers came to break their legs. Such would ensure they would be unable to push up with their feet to grasp breaths of air. When they arrived they found Jesus already dead.

Before he died, Jesus forgave his tormentors and commended his mother Mary and friend John into each other's care. When he drew his last breath, the mid-day sky turned black, and the curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was torn in two, removing for all time any barriers between God and humanity.

After Jesus died, his body was taken down from the cross and laid in a tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin. A heavy stone was rolled in front of the tomb and Roman guards posted to prevent Jesus' followers from stealing his body. Christianity views Jesus' death as both a sacrifice and a victory. Jesus gave his life that we might have ours – now and eternally.

Let me try to put this into perspective with a true story. During the Korean War an American Army sergeant fell in love with the children of Korea. He saw countless orphans running through the streets, rummaging through garbage for food, and begging for coins. When the War ended, the sergeant and his wife adopted two Korean children and brought them home to Ohio. But it was not enough. The family soon moved to Korea, took an old house partially destroyed by shelling and restored it. They adopted Korean ways, wore Korean clothing, and ate Korean food. Every day the sergeant went through the streets of Seoul and brought home orphaned children. Soon their home was overflowing. At one point they were caring for 24 children.

One of the children became ill with a kidney disease. The sergeant took the boy to Japan for treatment. The doctors told him the child's kidneys could not be saved. The sergeant volunteered to be tested, and amazingly enough he was found to be compatible. The operation was performed and he gave one of his kidneys to the boy. But then the sergeant developed a severe infection and soon died. The child recovered and was returned to Korea where he led a normal life. The sergeant's wife remained in Korea, continuing to care for all their children.

That is what our faith says God did for us. He came as one of us, adopted our ways, and lived as we live. With infinite compassion he suffered for all humanity. In the end he gave his life that we might have life eternal. It's really as simple as that. All of us need to think about it the next time we feel helpless, powerless, and perhaps hopeless. To put succinctly – Jesus is! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 20 March 2011