

### **The Apostle's Creed Part III: "And in Jesus Christ, His Only Son our Lord"**

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on John 1:1-5

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Today, we find ourselves in part three of my five part series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed. Two weeks ago, I began Part One by talking about the phrase *I believe in*. After that, I began to talk about the objects of what we confess to believe in. So last week, I talked about God the Father Almighty, and this week, I am talking about the second object of our belief, Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

The first thing I want to say about our faith in Jesus Christ is that this faith is at once what unites us as Christians, and what separates us from everyone who is not a Christian. I think everyone here knows you do not have to be a Christian to believe in God. Christians Jews and Muslims all agree that there is a good God in heaven who is almighty and all-knowing and who made heaven and earth. And all three of these faiths are also in agreement about the goodness of most of the things that Jesus taught. For their part, Muslims recognize that Jesus was a prophet, just as we recognize that Daniel and Jeremiah and Elijah were prophets just to name a few. Our Jewish brothers and sisters do not officially call Jesus a prophet, but unofficially they usually call him one or at least a good teacher. But what unites us as Christians is our belief in Jesus. We don't just say we believe some nice facts about Jesus and that we believe what he taught, but we believe *in him*. And that is something unique that we say about Jesus. We would never think to say that we believe in a mere prophet. We don't say "We believe *in* Jeremiah" or "We believe *in* Elijah". We may say we believe what they taught, but not we believe in them. Muslims believe that Muhammad was a prophet, but they would never say they believe in

Muhammad. And for that reason, Muslims take offense at being called Mohammedists. But we say we believe *in* this person himself, we put our faith *in* this person himself.

And what should this tell us about Jesus? It should tell us that we as Christians recognize Jesus as divine. We believe he has the same status as God himself. We don't say that we believe in Jeremiah or Elijah because we believe that even though these were people with a divine message they were just human beings like you and me. But we make Jesus the object of our faith just like we make God the object of our faith because we claim that Jesus is God—and that is why in this creed we say we believe that Jesus was also conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. There was something divine even in the event of Jesus' conception and birth that sets him apart from everyone else.

But the second thing I want to say today is that even though this creed tells us that Jesus is divine, it also tells us that Jesus is human. And to make this point, I need to digress for a moment, because this brings me to the whole point of why we have the Apostle's Creed or any creed in the first place. You know, every now and then I have found myself approached from people who aren't familiar with what we believe as Presbyterians and they will say to me, "Pastor why do we have these creeds and confessions? Why don't we just have the bible, isn't that all you need? Why do you need to say anything more than what the bible says?" These are good questions. But to answer them I really like what someone says whom I hardly ever agree with but who this time hits the nail on the head. What Richard Burnett says is the reason we have creeds and confessions is not so that we will say more than what the bible says, but so that we do not say less. The reason we have creeds and confessions is not so we will say more than what the bible says, but so we do not say less. Now, what does that mean? Well, if I

understand Burnett correctly, what that means is that there are times when the church faces certain issues that arise in our society, and for us to say nothing or to say nothing more than “Read the bible” is for us to say less than the bible says and to be unfaithful to the bible. But what were the issues in the day when the Apostle’s Creed was written? Well, one thing was happening was that people were going around saying that Jesus was just a man and there was nothing really divine about him, just as our Jewish and Muslim friends say today. But what was also happening was something you may never have heard anyone say. You see, in those days there were also people running around trying to convince people who read the bible and who believed in Jesus that Jesus was never really a human being. He just appeared like a human being. Jesus was God alright, but God never became flesh in the form of Jesus. And because Jesus was never really human, he never really died. And this whole story, is ultimately why we have the Apostle’s Creed. The church in those days wanted to make it clear that Jesus really was human and that he really did die not so they could say more than what the bible said, but so they would not say less. And so they said that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. They could have just said one of these things but they wanted to hammer the point home. Crucified, dead and buried. The writers of this creed wanted to make it clear that Jesus really died because he was just as human as anyone else. And why does it matter that Jesus was human? Well, it matters because if Jesus were not human he could not know what it is like to be one of us. If Jesus were not human he would not know what it was like to suffer as we suffer. If Jesus were not human he would not know what it was like to be tempted as we are tempted. If Jesus were not human he would not know what it was like to be rejected and lonely as sometimes we are rejected and lonely. And more than any of that, if Jesus were not human he would not have

known what it was like to take our place, because how can you take our place if you are nothing like us? That's why it matters that Jesus is human and that's why it mattered to the writers of the Apostle's Creed.

And what else are we told in this creed about Jesus? Well, third, we are told that Jesus "rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." In other words, to believe in Jesus Christ is not just to believe in one who exists in the pages of history, like Napoleon or George Washington, but it is to put your faith in someone who is alive now. It is to put your faith in someone of whom we don't just speak in the past tense, but it is to put our faith in someone of whom we speak in the present tense. You know, years ago it became really popular in the church for people to have bumper stickers and bracelets that said WWJD on them. Do you remember that? And WWJD stood for "What Would Jesus Do?" And you know, I suppose it is a good thing to ask yourself what Jesus would do from time to time. Now I say from time to time, because usually we don't have to ask that. Usually doing the right thing is rather simple. Most of the time I know exactly what the right thing to do is, even though I sometimes lack the will to do it. But in other times knowing the right thing can be complicated because we like to lie to ourselves and trick ourselves into believing that something is ok when it is not, and in those times it is helpful to ask myself "What would Jesus do?" But the central question of our faith, the central question of our life together as God's people is not "What would Jesus do?" The central question is "What is Jesus Doing?" For our Lord is not like Socrates or Gandhi who gave a nice example of how to live, but he is alive and he is risen and at work in our midst even today. History is important. Don't ever think that it isn't. But a church that is only concerned with history will soon become a part of history. You

know, I remember when I was a part of the church back in South Carolina we used to put on the best Christmas pageants every year. The men used to dress up in tunics and sandals and the women would veil their faces and everything looked so authentic that you seriously felt as though you stepped into a time machine and traveled back to the first century as you watched these Christmas pageants. But I sometimes feel as though people in church step into a time machine every time they gather. And if that is what a church does and that is all it does, then it will soon become a part of history. It will soon become a museum relic to a by-gone era, as far too many churches are these days, standing empty as monuments to what used to be. So if we don't wish to have that fate, the question for us is not *What would Jesus do?* The question is *What is Jesus doing?* What is he doing in the present tense?

Finally, Jesus is not just here in the present tense, but in the Apostle's Creed we also confess that he is in the future tense, as we say "from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." But that is not a topic for this week. Stay tuned as I talk about that next week. For now, I want to close with this. I have told this story before, but it is worth telling a hundred times so I doubt anyone will mind if I tell it again. As people of the bible we are people after all who know that good stories are worth telling over and over again, because that is what we do in the church.

When I was in Seminary in Georgia, I remember that one of my first experiences of preaching was going to this little church in Alabama. And I don't know if anyone here knows this but when you cross the state line going from Georgia to Alabama you cross from the Eastern to the Central Time Zone, so when you are trying to get somewhere in Alabama from Georgia you lose an hour. Well, you see the first time I was going to this church I forgot about that. So the

first Sunday I was there, I pulled into the church parking lot thinking that they would appreciate that I was an hour early. But they said “Son, you’re not an hour early, you’ve got two minutes.” I said “Oh, no, you guys must think I’m some kind of deadbeat.” They said “No, not at all, we’re used to people from that Georgia Seminary crossing the state line to come here and forgetting about the time change.” Now, when I would preach in this church I was basically preaching to about fifteen people, and I really didn’t know anything about preaching. Now, some of you may think I don’t know anything about preaching now, but I really didn’t know anything about preaching then. So what I would do at that time is I would just take some paper that I wrote in some Seminary class and read them the paper. And as you might guess, I didn’t read the part that the professor marked up, but I would read the other part that was apparently good because it didn’t have any markings on it. And about the second or maybe third time I did this, this woman who was clearly the matriarch of this church asked me if she and her husband could invite me over after church to their house for supper. I said “Sure.” And I said “Sure” because I thought this was just a nice friendly invitation, I didn’t know what she had in mind was a dressing down. And so she sat me down for supper and she looked at me rather sternly and she said “Rich, you seem like a bright young man who knows all kinds of stuff, but you have to understand that those of us in this little church you’re preaching to are humble people, and we’re simple people. And if you want to come every Sunday and talk to us about people like John Calvin and Martin Luther, well I guess that’s okay. But they didn’t die for me.” She said “We just want to hear a little about Jesus.”

More than twelve million children in America go to bed hungry every night. Just tell me a little about Jesus. Seventy thousand people each year kill themselves with opioids. Just tell me a

little about Jesus. Grandma just got diagnosed with congestive heart failure. Dad and mom don't know how to talk to each other anymore, and so dad is moving out. I just want to hear a little about Jesus. That's who we're all about in the church. That's what the Apostle's Creed says. And that is why we say the Apostle's Creed.