

**The Great Incarnation**  
Creed Series Week 3  
5/24/15

Welcome/intro

We're taking the oldest written Christian Creed and spending these next 6 weeks or so drilling down into it

One thing that's a bit confusing in the Creed that we're getting some questions about that we should have cleared up at the outset of the series, sorry about that

***[I believe in...the holy catholic Church,]***

It talks about believing in the holy catholic church and some of you have wondered does that mean we're sort of pledging allegiance to the pope or something

There's two ways to understand the word catholic—there's capital C, Catholic, that's the particular Catholic church with popes and nuns  
some of whom at one point were trying to solve a problem like Maria

But then there's lower-case c "catholic" and the original English definition of the word catholic is simply "universal."

So when we're saying that we believe in the holy "catholic" church  
what we're saying is that there's this glorious universal movement of churches who all proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ

That's Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Catholics, and non-denominational and the like

And they might not all get along with each other all of the time and we might have our own disagreements or baggage with one of those traditions

But we believe and trust that God is at work in the midst of all of the brokenness that is the whole universal church  
to do his good work throughout history and in our world today

So hopefully that clears some things up for those of you who were kind of hitting a snag at that point

So the beauty of all the Creeds is that they summarize huge, vast enormous swaths of the Biblical story in like one half-sentence

And the reality is that we could spend 16 weeks going through the creed, line by line, and still barely do each line justice

But in order to spare you that pain, we're going to do a much more abbreviated pass through the creed

which means that today we're going to do a fly-over over a good bit of ground.

We talked last week about this first line: ***We believe in...Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord***

And we talked about the reality that Jesus is the single most polarizing figure in all of history

That he's had more followers and worshippers than anyone else in all of history and he's been the most hated human being in all of history

The truth of the matter is, because Jesus' claims are so incredibly audacious and were from the very beginning of his life

He has ALWAYS been on trial.

He's been on trial and under the microscope from day one of his life on through the end of his life

And on trial and under the microscope by every single generation ever since.

The writers of the Creed knew that if we were going to love or reject Jesus, we needed an accurate summary of who he was and what he did

Today we're going to cover this part of the creed:

***who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
he descended into hell;  
on the third day he rose again from the dead;***

So basically in the next 25 minutes or so we're going to cover everything from Christmas to Easter

Now, as much ground as gets covered here, there's even this huge gap in the Creed—which is this odd interval of time between his birth and his death called his life

And it would seem to be somewhat important given that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all record a whole lot more about his life than either his birth or his death!

Some of us have grown up in the church and we've got this same gap in our understanding of Jesus as the Creed does—we've got his miraculous birth and his death and resurrection

But the stuff in the middle is just Jesus being a great teacher and doing some fancy party tricks to kill a little bit of time before he died.

We don't have time today to cover Christmas AND Easter AND everything Jesus was doing and why he was doing it for the 33-ish years in between!

But I've ordered and gotten a great book on the book table for you called "How God Became King" by one of the best authors and speakers that I know named NT Wright  
And he's basically written this book to fill that gap.

That book is on the book table, just got a few copies  
but if you're really wanting to fill out your understanding of who Jesus was and why his actual life mattered I can not endorse this book highly enough

My grandparents were missionaries in Brazil for 40 years.

And they went to Brazil during a time in American missionary work when many Americans went overseas to a foreign country

And the first thing that they did was build a missionary compound with high walls and fences  
and they'd live within that compound and allow natives in who they hired to do stuff around the compound like cook and clean and teach the kids

Now these were well-intentioned people, but what did those walls and that compound communicate to the people they came to serve?

That they weren't going to mingle with the people, that they were going to keep their distance and be separate and distinct.

For 40 years, while all over the world missionaries were setting up compounds to live in  
my grandparents in many different locations and in many different places, always, always, always lived as one of the people they were serving.

They WERE coming from the outside to bring the message of Christianity  
but as they came they were going to embrace as much of the culture and the context as they could

This is a small picture of what we call incarnation—that God put on flesh and walked as one of us

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He comes from the outside as the only Son of God, but he comes as one of us, to be one of us, in order that he might rescue all of us

This is what the Creed is emphatically stating as it walks this line and invites us into this tension that is at the core of what Christianity is all about

The belief and the mystery that Jesus Christ is BOTH fully human AND fully God

One of the false teachings that this Creed is designed to address is called “Gnosticism”

Gnosticism was a broad philosophy about life that taught that the way to a enlightenment or growth or transformation

Was through the acquisition of secret spiritual knowledge—only the enlightened few and the elite could acquire it

And the way that you acquired this super secret knowledge and made it into the club was by embracing the purely spiritual and denying the physical

Gnostics believed that everything here on this earth was polluted, including especially bodies—all bad!

So the only way to achieve real and true enlightenment is to leave behind the world or the flesh and to embrace a purely spiritual existence

You see this worked out in a lot of Eastern thought like Buddhism where the goal is to detach from the things of this world to get access to the things in the next world

And so when the Gnostics got a hold of Jesus back in the first century, they really liked parts of what he had to say

But the whole idea that God would put on flesh was shocking and deplorable to them—they hated bodies, they refused to see anything good about our flesh

And so they taught that Jesus was kind of a floating, levitating being who sort of floated his way through life

but certainly never had a real body, was never REALLY tempted, never really experienced the trials of this earthly life

and he certainly never actually died and certainly never actually suffered!

To combat that, you can see the writers of the Creed gathering together the full teaching of the Scriptures

Which emphatically teaches that Jesus was a real human who fully experienced all that it means to be human

And the place where the Scriptures talk most explicitly about the fullness of Jesus' humanity is in his suffering and death.

In our world, there are many who object to the idea of a God who loves us based on the sheer and raw amount of pain and suffering in this world

And there are all kinds of horrific stories and great questions about God's goodness and power in light of all that humans suffer

But the Scripture's answer to this question of the suffering of humanity is this strange and unexpected turn in God's activity

God doesn't stop all suffering from ever happening.

He doesn't just play the trump card over everything and put a stop to all this pain and suffering!

But what the Scriptures offer us instead is the strange good news of the God who instead enters INTO suffering as a human being, experiences it, and in the end overcomes it and redeems it—he embraces it and transforms it

So that suffering might no longer be the final word and have the last verdict over your life or my life or over all of human existence

but that his victory OVER pain and suffering and even death might be the last word over all of us

And the way that he accomplished this is the God of the universe put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood and experienced all of what it means to be human—that's what we're doing to drill down into today

Here's one of the many texts that invite us into this tension from the same book we looked at last week, the book of Hebrews chapter 2:

***10 In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered.***

Now remember last week we looked at this same book, the book of Hebrews and at the very beginning of the book it talked about the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being

So we've already been introduced to how the author of Hebrews has a HIGH view of who this Jesus is

But when this Jesus comes to see us, he doesn't set up his compound, he doesn't build a big wall around himself and insulate himself from the human experience and existence

He gets made perfect through what he suffered  
that is, he comes to us as God in the flesh and through his suffering he experiences and redeems and overcomes the hardest parts of the human experience

The New Testament makes ALL KINDS of promises about how God uses suffering to purify us, to make us whole and holy  
that if we will hold onto Christ and follow Christ in the midst of our hardships those hardships in the end will be forced to bless us and serve us

You know where they got that idea? Jesus—he suffered one of the cruelest forms of torture ever invented

And yet that was the gateway to his coronation as Lord and Savior and redeemer of the cosmos—and so we get this whole re-understanding of suffering not as an annoying distraction to life in this world  
But instead as a gateway for our redemption and transformation

SG this past week asked the question “what have been your most spiritually formative times—success or suffering?”  
Jesus enters into suffering and redeems it

Hebrews goes on to unpack Jesus' desire to relate with us:

***11 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters....***

Okay, how many of you have ever been somewhere with a friend or spouse and family member in a public space  
and they do something stupid and you want to basically dis-associate yourself from them as far as possible? “I'm not with them” moments?

The author emphasizes this surprising news from his perspective that Jesus isn't ashamed to call US his family, to call us brothers and sisters

Even though because of our sin nature because of the ways that we've run from God he might have reason to want to DIS-associate himself with us, he doesn't!  
He's willing to stand with us, in spite of ourselves!

He goes on:

***14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.***

A couple of years ago the new Superman movie came out  
and it was heavily, heavily marketed to churches and the Christian  
community as a way to talk about Jesus

And of course there a number of places where the Superman story and the Jesus  
story have some contact

But the danger here is that we conflate or confuse Jesus as Superman.

Superman is a great guy, he's got a great looking outfit, and I'm glad he's on  
our side

But he's not really one of us—he doesn't become one of us. He's an alien who can't  
feel pain and he can't be hurt by anything here on this earth

But God made humanity, he made flesh, he LIKES it. And so when he needs to break  
the power of death and free us from our slavery to the fear of death

He shares in our flesh and blood, he becomes a part of the human family

We don't have a God who sits in a command-and-control center in the sky and  
arbitrarily calls the shots from far-off

We have a God who so loves us that he puts on flesh and moves into the  
neighborhood to do a work that has to be done  
to break the power of death and bring us into everlasting life

I think I've quoted C.S. Lewis each week of this series, here's this week's citation  
he describes this whole concept like we're all tin soldiers, and someone has  
come among us to turn us from little tin soldiers who aren't really alive into fully  
human beings

he's bringing this GOOD infection that takes our broken humanity or barely-  
real humanity and to make us more real, more alive

This infection that gets introduced into history by the God of Heaven coming down  
to earth to conquer the infection of death that is the consequence of sin

The author of Hebrews goes on:

***... 17 For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.***

In the Old Testament and the Jewish structures of things, the High Priest was the human who's job it was to represent people before God in the offering of sacrifices and prayers

and then to represent God and his word back to the people

Jesus is the perfect and yet human high priest, our great and loving older brother, who leads all of his brothers and sisters both en masse and individually

before the throne of the God of the universe with a holy humility and a holy confidence

Because in Christ Jesus, we have this great worship leader and great high priest who makes the perfect sacrifice for our sins

And he makes a way for us to approach God our perfect Father without any guilt or sin getting in the way

This is God, fully human, becoming our great high priest for us who gives us access to places we couldn't get without someone else's credentials

Kelly and I won a backstage pass tour for Peach Bowl in Atlanta a couple of years ago

and hours before kick-off we got to walk around in the stadium and locker-room and on the field

What happens with a backstage pass is someone gives you credentials that are borrowed on someone else's authority

Which opens doors and gives you access to places and opportunities and maybe even a relationship that you wouldn't have had otherwise

Jesus is our big brother and great High Priest who gives us HIS credentials and then takes us by the hand

and he opens doors into the presence of eternal glory that would not open for us on OUR credentials

but which open for him based on HIS credentials because he is the only eternal Son, Lord of Heaven and Earth

And he brings us right into the throne-room of grace, into the presence of God the Father who is the almighty creator of Heaven and Earth

This is what Jesus has done for us—but that's not all. As our great high priest he not only leads us as his brothers and sisters towards God

He is also God moving towards us. Here's how the author of Hebrews explains it:

***18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.***

One of the things that's true about many families with small kids is that they get sick a lot, especially during the winter months

And what happens in some families is that one kid gets sick and you just go ahead and cancel all activities for the next three weeks

because you know it's going to make the rounds through the house as the dominoes start to fall

It can kind of feel like you're living in this giant petri dish, exchanging germs

And sometimes if you're a parent and it's like the third or fourth round of sickness in your house in the past two or three months

your patience and sympathy for sick kids can get worn a little thin!

You just want everyone to be healthy so you can move on with life!

But one thing that changes your level of sympathy for the sick kid is if YOU as the parent is the one who gets sick first.

If you're the first one who gets sick and then one of your kids gets it

you remember how bad you felt, you remember how you had no energy and just felt achy and chills or feverish or whatever

It is much easier to sympathize with your kids weakness and whininess if you yourself were sick and whiny just two days before!

In Jesus, God himself has suffered and experienced what we experience in our flesh.

He suffered and he was tempted and he did not succumb to suffering OR to temptation

So he is able to sympathize with us AND at the same time, because he overcame it, he is able to coach us through it—to help us when we're struggling

Anyone here ever been betrayed by a close friend? Jesus suffered through that, too he experienced all the temptations that come with that to lash back out or seek revenge or hold onto bitterness and un-forgiveness

He can help you overcome that

Anyone ever been tempted to lie, cheat, or steal? Jesus experienced that, and suffered that temptation too—he can help you.

Anyone Battling sexual temptation? Jesus has been there, done that, overcame it, he can help you overcome it, too.

He suffered in temptation and he invites us to listen and follow him as he coaches us through our own sufferings in the midst of temptations

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The Creed is emphatic that Jesus was fully God AND fully human  
and that any less-than-fully-human picture of Jesus was no longer good news,  
it was just another god myth  
that would not have the power to change our situation, redeem our  
sufferings, or bring us into the presence of the real God, the Father, the almighty  
Creator of the universe

Now all of this sounds like a great story, but it begs the question: how can we know this to be true?

There are all kinds of messiah figures and religious teachers out there who claim to have some information about God or the gods

Why is this source and this story any different from anyone else? What is it that validates and elevates this version of who God might be from all other versions of it?

It's all right here in this last line that we're looking at today: "on the third day he rose again from the dead"

Last week we talked about how Jesus made all kinds of ridiculous, audacious claims that only crazy people or liars make

Claims about being with God when all things were created, claims about his God-like authority to forgive sins and to show us exactly who God is and what he's like

And you've got people who make God-like claims throughout history, usually we put them in a padded cell!

And occasionally they'll get a little following, but eventually what happens is they die and the whole thing is exposed to be a sham

If the Jesus story ends at he is crucified under Pontius Pilate it's just another failed messiah

just another nut-job who got what was coming to you in ancient times if you were a nut-job running around claiming to be a LORD when the only LORD who had authority was Caesar.

If the story stops at dead and buried all his claims are exposed to be the empty ridiculousness that they sound like

And all of us here are total idiots for even bothering to get up this morning to come talk about this guy-- and I need to go find a way better day-job!

This whole Christianity thing turns on this one line: "on the third day he rose again from the dead"

See, Jesus walks around acting like he's utterly and uniquely God's spokesman

And then what validates & authenticates all of this big and crazy talk

Is that he trusted that God his Father would raise him back to life after his sacrificial death—and that's exactly what God does

In order to combat fakes and forgeries, what most and maybe all states do is they put a mark on your driver's license that can only be seen under a UV light

Shining UV light on your driver's license is the TEST that validates and authenticates that your driver's license actually IS what it SAYS it is!

Jesus was put under the grueling light of death. Buried dead. And what happened when the black light of death was shined on him

Was that the Father caused him to shine that much brighter

Jesus absorbed all that death could throw at him, and the Father validated and verified that this man was truly His one and only Son

By pulling him back out of the grave.

Why should you believe that what Jesus said about himself was true?

Because God authenticated everything he said about himself by raising Jesus back from the dead, just like Jesus said he would.

This is an event that the first followers of Jesus emphatically clung to as actually happening IN HISTORY that validated every single ridiculous claim of Jesus'

The resurrection is what moves Jesus from just another minor footnote in all of world history to the single greatest influence in all of global history

If this did not actually happen, then we wouldn't even be talking about this guy—  
Jesus dies, Christianity dies with him

And if the resurrection did not actually happen  
the Scriptures say that we are all still dead in our sins and we do not have  
backstage access to the God and Father of the Universe.

No other religion anywhere before or since has ever even thought about making this  
claim

And This wasn't what Jesus' original followers expected AT ALL!

But their experience of the resurrected Jesus is what drove them to re-thinking  
everything about their previous Jewish experience

the old testament, the sacrificial system, the prophecies, all of it got re-  
thought in light of the surprising solution of Jesus's resurrectoin

And the resurrection is what drove them all over the world to tell the whole world  
about what God had done in Jesus

And it's often said that this had to be a hoax or conspiracy of some sort, which I  
totally get, we all know that dead people don't come back to life

But almost all of the disciples died horrific deaths rather than recant or take back  
this claim that Jesus Christ ACTUALLY rose from the dead!

You don't die for an April Fool's joke!

The disciples knew that dead people don't come back to life—this is not something  
that we just figured out in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because we're so smart

EVERYONE knew that dead people don't come back to life. But they met Jesus,  
resurrected, in a new and perfect body

And they went confidently to their deaths because they had seen that Jesus had been  
raised from the dead by the Father

and they trusted that the Father would do the same thing for them

And this changed everything not just for them but it's been changing the world with  
this good infection ever since

And today, this very Sunday, all over the globe, in almost every country, almost  
every culture, almost every tongue, almost every tribe, there is this glorious,  
universal, catholic church

That is gathering to declare his praises, the praises of the God who put on flesh and became both fully human while remaining fully God, so that he might be our great high priest

The one who gives us access to God and who is God sympathizing and encouraging us in our sufferings and temptations

Every ridiculous audacious claim made by Jesus was validated and authenticated by the fact that God the Father raised him from the dead

And the call on all of our lives, yours and mine, is to throw the full weight of our lives in with His

Most of us have a hunger for a GREAT life, so we're looking for something GREAT to build our lives around—you fill the blank: ***For my life to be complete I would love a great \_\_\_\_\_***

a great family, a great job, a great house, great fun and experiences, great school, a great deal of money, or a great deal of people leaving me alone!!

Jesus has been raised from the dead and so has been shown to be the greatest one ever: A Great King, Lord, Savior, Teacher, Rescuer, High Priest—he fills in that blank

And the question for all of us, in the midst of all these other claims of greatness and lots of other things that would pull at you and clamor for your attention

Is will you build your life around this One Great One? BECAUSE IN ORDER FOR OUR LIVES TO BE GREAT, WE MUST BUILD THEM ON SOMETHING OR SOMEONE GREAT.

God gives you Jesus and says,

“Build your life around him. Follow him, learn from him, be his student and let him teach you what God is like, what YOU were meant to be.”

May we have the courage to throw our lives in with Jesus, and in him and by following his lead, may we know the greatness of everlasting, resurrection life.