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National Presbyterian Church

## The Apostles' Creed: What if God Suffers Too?

Hebrews 4:14-15, 5:8, 12:1-3; Isaiah 43:1-3

Philippians 2:1-13, Romans 8:28, 35-37

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In the first few months of this year, in our sermons we're looking together at what Christians believe, and we're doing so with the help of one of the earliest formulations of the Christian faith known as the Apostles' Creed.

Last week, we skipped ahead of ourselves with our marvelous guest preacher, Anne Zaki from the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt, who preached on the phrase in the Creed that mentions the "holy catholic church" ("catholic" here means "universal"). Professor Zaki reminded us that God's passion was not just to touch our lives as individuals, but to create the church, to turn us into a community, a community of reconciliation – with all the hard work and risks that that might involve .

Apart from last week, though, our focus has been on the opening lines of the Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth  
And in Jesus Christ, God's only Son – our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary.

One of the statements I made two weeks ago, with regard to the line about the virgin birth (which seems to be problematic for many people today) –was this: that I agreed with author, Madeleine L'Engle who said in her book, A Stone for a Pillow, that

The virgin birth has never been a major stumbling block in my Christianity. It is far less mind boggling (*DR: in other words, the virgin birth is not **the** big miracle*) than that the God of all creation (*DR: that is, "God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth"*) should stoop so low as to become one of us.

That's the miracle! The incarnation! That an almighty God (who can choose to do anything he likes) should choose not to stay far off, but to enter the world he himself made. In other words, according to the Creed, God is like a movie director entering his own movie; like Alfred Hitchcock or Clint Eastwood! But, here's the difference: **for God, it was at great personal cost**. To create the movie, direct the movie and then enter it, didn't cost Hitchcock or Eastwood anything special. But, what the Creed tells us is, that when God did this, God did it not as a mighty ruler or king wielding power over everyone, but as a baby, tiny and at the mercy of parents and other forces that (from a human point of view), were far beyond his control.

And then, what is even more amazing (the Creed spells it out explicitly), God, in the person of Jesus, *suffered*. God the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth chose to suffer.

That's what the first Christians believed. And this fact was so stunning – the choice of God to suffer – that when it came to establishing the core of the faith, it seemed to eclipse everything else in Jesus' life.

Let me put it like this. We know from the Gospels that Jesus was also a great teacher, a great preacher, a great healer, and a great religious leader. But what the Creed calls us to remember about Jesus, above all is just this: NOT that Jesus was great in all these things (preach, teach, heal and so forth); BUT that Jesus, God's only Son our Lord, was born like us, and he died, and did so at the hands of the powerful people of the day:

*"He suffered under Pontius Pilate, (the Roman Governor)  
was crucified, dead and buried"*

In fact, one of the most remarkable early pieces of evidence outside the Bible pointing to the historical nature and reality of this awful suffering and death was written within 70 years or so of Jesus' death, by a Roman historian, Tacitus, who in his Annals (15.44) writes that the Emperor Nero,

*"falsely accused and executed . . . those people called Christians who were infamous for their abominations. The originator of the name, Christ, was executed as a criminal by the Procurator, Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius."*

This is what Tacitus, an unbeliever has heard, knows and remembers about Jesus – that he was executed as a criminal by Pilate.

And even the four biblical Gospels themselves point to the importance of Jesus' suffering and death. As I just mentioned, of course, the Gospels tell us about Jesus' life – his birth, his baptism, his preaching, teaching and healing, and much more. But the way they tell the story is still rather strange. All of them focus disproportionately on Jesus' death. Or, to put it another way, in the gospels, the last week of Jesus' life takes up a disproportionate amount of space compared to a "normal" biography:

21% of Luke;      29% of Matthew;  
37% of Mark;      and 57% of John

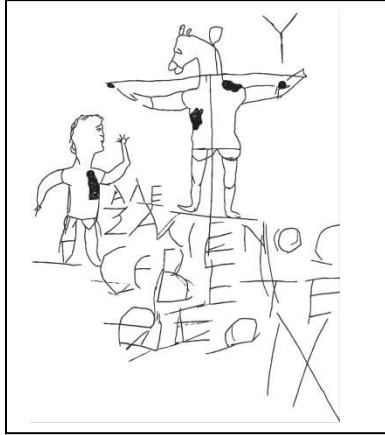
Accounts which are so skewed towards his death that some scholars call the gospels, not biographies, but extended "passion stories," with all the other stuff just being the "preliminaries" to help us get to what they see as the main message: the stunning message that God not only took on human flesh in Jesus, but that he then let himself *suffer terribly, and then die!*

But this was what they believed:

God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and Earth  
*was born into this world as Jesus His Son  
and allowed himself to be placed under the brutal power  
of the authorities of his day – so that he also  
suffered under Pontius Pilate: was crucified, dead, and buried.*

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So, often, I think, in the church in America (or the west in general) we lose the sense of scandal and shock that this belief should generate within us. Perhaps because most of us have heard it so many times. But for the first few centuries of the church, at least, that's exactly how the general public felt about it. You may or may not have heard of the Alexamenos Graffiti. It's a cartoon carved in stone in Rome from end of the second century.



The inscription in stone reads: “Alexamenos worships his god” (his “god” being someone portrayed as a donkey dying on a cross, an instrument of torture).

The “someone” is clearly Jesus, and the cross would have been the equivalent for us of the electric chair! In other words, this idea of any god suffering such humiliation was so shocking, so bizarre, that many Romans and Greeks simply laughed at it, and mocked the Christians for what they believed.

But this only begs the question “WHY?” Why an Almighty God who could choose to do anything he wanted would choose to enter the world – to enter his own movie – and suffer and die, in

the person of His Only Son, our Lord Jesus? Why God would do this?

To which the Creed gives us no clear cut answer, but forces us instead to explore the Bible, and to ask what the first Christians believed about this. How did they explain why God did it? Why God chose to enter the world to suffer and die in the person of His Only Son, our Lord Jesus?

Over the next few weeks – that’s the question we’ll look at, and today we begin with just one of the many answers given in the New Testament, an answer that points not first to us, but first, to the very character of God:

*as humble, courageous, and above all, loving. A God who could not bear the thought of you and me suffering alone. A God who could not bear the thought of you and me thinking that he is far away, and that he has no clue what it’s like to face the pain and suffering and grief of human life.*

And so he comes, and suffers too.

Listen again: to the Letter to the Hebrews

In chapter 4, we read

15 Jesus is not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

And In Chapter 5:7-8

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission (*DR: God heard, yes! But, what’s really important to note is that the answer to his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane was not ‘yes,’ but ‘no!’*). Although he was a Son (*was privileged, divine*), he learned obedience (*like us*) through what he suffered;

And then in Chapter 12

Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

In other words, the suffering of Jesus mentioned repeatedly in the Creed points us in the first place to the eternal unchangeable character of God, a God who decided even before the creation of the world not simply to create, stand back, far off, and watch safely from a distance, as if we were toys to be played with. But from the get-go, hidden within the very decision to create, God chose to enter the movie, enter the arena, play alongside us on the field, join us in the battle at

the front, and so to experience the world at its best and at its worst, for himself, like us, and with us

And this knowledge of God, of what God is like, the knowledge that God has chosen to love us with courage and humility in this way, was transformative and empowering for the first Christians. By itself, it didn't solve all the problems of pain and suffering and evil, but, when suffering and evil struck, as it often did they knew something critical:

- that God was in it with them
- that God knew suffering too, not only in his head but in his heart, and in his body.

Many of you are familiar with the name, Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

He was a German pastor and theologian in the 1930's and '40s. Originally he was a pacifist, but eventually came to believe that assassinating Adolf Hitler was the right thing to do. The plot he was involved in failed; and just before the end of WWII he was arrested, imprisoned and put to death.

In June of 1939, 3 months before full scale war broke out in Europe, Bonhoeffer was safe and sound here in the United States, and could have remained here. But on June 20 that year, he made the decision to return to Nazi Germany, and in a letter to theologian and friend, Reinhold Niebuhr, he gave the following explanation:

I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people...

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works*, Volume 15 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), p. 210

HE LOVED HIS PEOPLE and with courage and humility he was willing to risk everything not to stay away, far off in safety, but to return and be with them. Without this step, he would barely have gained a hearing in his homeland in the years of the war. But with this step, his words and thoughts became powerful and lasting – not mere ideas, but ideas clothed in flesh and blood.

The very next year, in London, when war had fully broken out and London was being bombed, the present Queen's parents, King George and Queen Elizabeth made the decision, against the recommendation of the government to stay in Britain with their children. When asked about this, the Queen (the late Queen Mother) replied "The children will not leave unless I do. I shall not leave unless their father does, and the king will not leave-the-country in any circumstances, whatever." So they stayed.

And in September 1940, when the King and Queen were in Buckingham Palace one day death came very close – when the palace was bombed That afternoon they left the palace – not to run away, but to enter a place of greater danger and pain – to visit West Ham in London's East End, which had itself just been bombed.

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/sep/13/queen-mother-biography-shawcross-luftwaffe>

They made a choice: to be with their people – to love them, even if their own safety was at risk. And there was power in this!

In fact, at a time when the very institution of the monarchy itself was under attack some people credit the repeated actions of risky love by the royal family as being of far more importance for the survival of the monarchy than any rational argument or defense

The real, flesh and blood presence – the love, humility, and courage – of people of privilege and power, who could have stayed to themselves, away, but chose to join others in the midst of pain and suffering and danger, contained power not only to bring hope, but to change people's minds. And still does so today.

Six years ago, in September 2011, nine months after the events of the Arab Spring, when Christians and their churches were at risk in Egypt, our preacher last week, Anne Zaki, along with her husband and children, after being away for most over a decade, decided to return to her homeland of Egypt, and to teach at the Evangelical Seminary in Cairo (which our congregation has supported financially). And a year later, in 2012, when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, they chose to remain.

In an interview at Calvin College, Professor Zaki gave her reasons:

We sensed an urgent call to return, because many Christians were leaving. But not all Christians wanted to leave, and certainly not all Christians could leave. So the question was, “Who is going to serve those who remain? Who is going to pray with them? Who is going to encourage them?”

<https://calvin.edu/publication/spark/2012/09/01/for-such-a-time-as-this?dotcmsredir=1>

And I have no doubt at all that her very presence, every day with her students is more encouragement to them than we can imagine – precisely because she freely chose to be there. She didn't have to be there. But there she is.

And what the Creed is calling us to believe is that God is just like that! God does this same kind of thing, in love and courage and humility for every single one of us. God didn't have to – he's the Royal family! He has every right and excuse to stay aloof. But he comes, compelled by eternal love, and courage and humility.

*“We do not have a high priest,” says the Letter to the Hebrews, “who cannot sympathize with us in our weaknesses. But one who in every way has been tested like us” – has experienced life as we do -- choosing freely to enter our world to suffer, like us.*

And in that example, says the Apostle Paul (in Philippians 2), God not only wants to comfort us, but to challenge us – to follow his example:

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, 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 — even death on a cross.*

*Conceived! Born! God enters our world in Jesus  
Suffered crucified dead buried.*

- Not far away on the outside of the universe
- Not safe and secure from the dark side of the world he created
- But with us, in the movie

- Here in the heat of battle
- And even in the depths of pain

I believe in God The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth  
And in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
Conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary

and in amazing, humble and courageous love for us:

Suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was Crucified, Dead, and Buried.

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