

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost
October 26, 2025
9:30 AM

Texts: Isaiah 63:1-6 & John 1:1-5, 14-18

Theme: We Believe: “For Us and for Our Salvation”

[prayer]

Over the last two Sundays we have considered the first twelve lines of the Nicene Creed and begun establishing the basic beliefs we affirm as Nicene Christians: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. We also believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. We believe that Jesus is also the One God – eternal, fully divine, of one Being with the Father, co-equal in power and majesty. When we say that Jesus is the Father’s Son, we are not making a statement about biology. We are making a statement about divine will. Jesus embodies the will of the Father in word and deed. And we call this embodiment the Incarnation.

One of my church history professors was fond of saying, “Christianity is a funky Eastern religion.” She is a Presbyterian, but her specialty is the history and theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church with its smells, bells, candles, icons, and chanting in Greek. At times the Eastern rite feels closer to the rituals of Far Eastern religions than the austere rituals of mainline Protestantism, so her statement makes some intuitive sense.

But truthfully, she wasn’t speaking about the ancient rituals of the Eastern Church. She was speaking about its theology, birthed out of ecumenical councils like Nicaea. This theology includes profound – dare I say “funky”? – mysteries that we experience with our bodies even more than we grasp with our minds. And perhaps the profoundest mystery that Christians in both the East and the West embrace is the mystery of the Incarnation.

The Creed says:

*For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

The definitive Scriptural proof for the Incarnation is the Prologue to John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1 NRSVUE). John begins his Prologue by stressing the existence of the Word of God, the *logos*, outside the bounds of time and history, before the creation of the world.

But as the Prologue unfolds, the eternal Word enters our time-bound world: "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (v. 14). The eternal becomes temporal. And by the end of his Prologue, John has given this Word a name: Jesus the Christ.

What does it mean to say Jesus became "flesh"? The first half of the Nicene Creed's statement on Jesus was written to defend his divinity against the heresy of Arianism. The second half was written to defend his *humanity* against a different sort of heresy. This heresy is called Docetism. Arius questioned how a man could be God, but Docetics questioned how God could be a human. How could the majesty of God subject Himself to the indignity of becoming a human being? It was scandalous to think of God being hungry, dirty, sweaty. As another of my professors remarked, Jesus had a body...and bodies are leaky. All the embarrassing things our bodies do, Jesus's body did, too. If Jesus was human, then he also experienced the full range of human emotion. He knew depression, anxiety, grief, joy, love, doubt, loneliness, temptation, anger, pride, contentment – pick your emotion and he felt it. The Gospels say that when Jesus saw someone suffering, his very bowels were moved with compassion.

To try and soften this scandalous notion, Docetics, who took their name from the Greek word that means "to appear" or "to seem," argued that Jesus only *seemed* human. They taught that his humanity was simply an illusion, like God had put on

a costume of human flesh and was just pretending to be a human being. To protect the sacred otherness of the divine, Docetics sanitized the Incarnation.

This impulse is relatable. We are all Docetics to a certain extent. We try to hide the ugly parts of ourselves from God because we think those parts are too human for Him. We equate being human with being dirty and being divine with being clean, and so we think that salvation is about escaping our humanity, being exalted above our humanity. But that is not salvation. Salvation is about restoring our humanity, restoring the parts of ourselves that have been distorted or even destroyed by sin. Remember that human beings were made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). Our humanity is inherently sacred. We reflect the *imago dei*, the divine image, not by being less human, but by being *perfectly* human, as God intended us to be before we fell from grace. This is why as Methodists we believe that grace not only justifies but also sanctifies us. We believe we are going being restored to the perfection God intended in the very beginning when we walked and talked with Him in the Garden. Salvation is the process of God's image being restored in us.

Claiming Jesus only seemed human strips the Incarnation of its miraculous healing power and undermines our salvation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote, "That which is not assumed is not healed. But that which is united to God will be healed." For our humanity to be healed from the disease of sin, Jesus needed to assume our humanity – not just some of it, but all of it.

The Nicene Creed moves directly from the Incarnation to the Crucifixion – from Christmas morning to Good Friday – because these two events, these two miracles are inseparably linked. On the cross Jesus took upon himself all of our sin, all of our suffering, not in a purely spiritual sense, but in his physical body. That body was beaten and broken. That body suffered humiliation and pain. And then that body died and was buried.

The Creed is clear that all this was done "for us and for our salvation." It summarizes Isaiah's Song of the Servant, where the prophet declares that God's servant will be

*wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;*

*upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isa 53:5)*

“That which is not assumed is not healed.” Jesus had to assume it all to heal us: Our betrayal and acts of injustice. Our violence. The consequences of that violence. And our death. Jesus had to assume, had to experience, all these things in his body in order to redeem us from their power and restore the image of God in us.

And when we look at Jesus on the cross, and remember what he has done for us, because of the Incarnation we understand that it was in fact God on that cross. The Crucifixion of Jesus was not the first, nor was it the last. But this death was unique among all deaths because this was the Creator of the Universe, the Perfect and Immortal Word, subjecting himself to the agonizing consequences of *our* sin. At Christmas, when we reflect the most deeply on the Incarnation, we adore the images of infant Jesus sleeping peacefully in Mary’s arms because babies are the epitome of purity and innocence. But Jesus didn’t just assume the pure and innocent parts of our humanity. He assumed the most broken, detestable parts of our humanity, too. The creche always stands juxtaposed with the cross. You cannot get a complete image of the Incarnation without both.

There are a bevy of “atonement theories” designed to systematically explain how Jesus saves us through the cross. The Nicene Creed does not promote any one of these theories over another. Instead, it simply acknowledges 1) We need saving and 2) The Incarnation is how our salvation is accomplished. God created us to be in relationship with Him, but sin estranges us. It tarnishes the image of God in us and separates us from God. But Jesus reunites us with God. He gives us a way back to full relationship with God. With his body he forms a bridge between human beings and the divine. The engineers among us know that when you build a bridge across a canyon, you start from both ends and work towards the middle where the bridge will be complete. To span the canyon of sin between us and God, Jesus needed to build a figurative bridge. One side of the canyon is human while the other side is divine. If a bridge must be built simultaneously from both ends, then Jesus needed to be simultaneously of both natures – human and divine.

We do not have the power to build the bridge to God ourselves, not even part way. The Incarnation, then, is God taking on human form so He could build the

bridge for us from our side as well as His own. The Letter to the Hebrews says, “Since, therefore, the children [of God] share flesh and blood, [Jesus] likewise shared the same things...He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” (2:14, 17).

We believe then that Jesus, while fully God, fully divine, is also fully and truly human. We do not believe that he is fifty percent human and fifty percent divine, or seventy-five percent divine and twenty-five percent human, or some such combination of percentages. We do not believe that his humanity diminishes his divinity, or that his divinity augments his humanity and makes him superhuman. We believe that Jesus is simultaneously one hundred percent human and one hundred percent divine. If that math doesn’t make sense, which it shouldn’t, then you are feeling the same tensions that the heresies of Arius and the Docetists sought to lessen. But our faith and salvation as Christians is found in keeping that tension, not resolving it. As Rev. Michael Carpenter writes, “The nature of Jesus’s divinity and humanity isn’t a math problem to solve but a faith solution to believe.”¹

And that is what the Incarnation is – a solution to a problem human beings could never solve on their own. John says that “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (vv. 17-18). God first chose to reveal himself and reconcile with us through the Law, but we were miserable at following it and our alienation from God only grew deeper. And so, God chose to reveal Himself differently. He wrapped Himself in warm skin and strong bones and beating blood, became human, so He could give us a concrete example of what it looks like to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus makes God known to us. He pulls back the curtain on the glory of God by embodying who God is and what God does. Where Moses had to turn his face away to avoid looking directly at God, in Jesus God is seen and heard and felt in a way that is accessible and relatable to us.

“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory” (v. 14). Jesus reveals the heart of the Father so we can experience and then learn to

¹ Michael Carpenter. *We Believe: How the Nicene Creed Can Deepen Your Faith*. Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition. Pages 49-50.

imitate divine love. God did not simply step into the world. He stepped into a particular community of human beings in a particular time and place. And those who saw his glory and believed begot the confessing community that continues in the Church today. The Incarnation was initiated more than two thousand years ago, but its power continues to radiate today through the Church, which now exists as the body of Christ on the earth. As Jesus's disciples we have received "grace upon grace" (v. 16). God has been made known to *us*. And now we exist to carry on the mission of the Incarnation by making God known to others. Just as God refused to stay distant from us, we refuse to stay distant from our neighbors. Instead, we are called (to paraphrase Eugene Peterson) to become flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood, to be with our suffering neighbors in real and effective ways.

The Incarnation is the reason that I am a Christian. When I began to grasp its significance, it transformed my relationship with God and with my neighbor. I began to truly understand that we worship a God who is with us and for us, and frees us to be with and for each other. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15-16).

Amen.