

Unlocking Scripture: The Apostles' Creed, Pt. 4
Conceived by the Spirit, Born of the Virgin

Luke 1: 26-38

**First Presbyterian Church
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I like to think of the Apostles' Creed as a story. It has three chapters. We've been considering chapter one: I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. Now we go to chapter two: I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. This middle chapter is the longest. It's about who Jesus is. It begins with a crashing paradox. An oceanic mystery. "He was *conceived* by the Holy Spirit and *born* of the Virgin Mary."

The Scripture underlying this part of the creed is from the first chapter of Luke's Gospel. The angel Gabriel came to the home of a young woman named Mary. She lived in the small settlement town of Nazareth, far to the north of Israel. Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. The text makes it clear that she and Joseph had not come together before her wedding. Gabriel appeared saying, "Greetings O favored one, the Lord is with you!" That sounds like a good, positive thing to hear. But angels are glorious and a startled Mary wondered what he wanted. She was troubled. But she did not run away.



John Waterhouse's beautiful 1914 painting captures this sense of Mary's worried wonder. The artist imagines that Mary had been kneeling on her rug in prayer. She raises up in response to the greeting. She places a hand over her head

and a hand over her heart. This news is hard to understand and even harder to process emotionally. It's overwhelming. But Mary remains available. She remains in conversation.

Gabriel tells her that she will soon conceive a son. He will be called Jesus, which means The LORD saves. He will be the Son of God. Conceiving a child would have been a young woman's dream. But Mary's child was supposed to be known as the son of Joseph, the child of her soon to be husband. Not the Son of God. How could she, a virgin, possibly conceive such a child? Gabriel gently offered a description of what cannot be explained. The cloud of the Lord's glory would come over. His Holy Spirit would conceive the child. Thus, the boy would be both the Son of God *and* the son of Mary.

And so we run smack into the paradox at the heart of our faith. Our savior and Lord Jesus is fully God and fully man. He is of the same stuff as any ordinary person. He is of the same stuff as the only true God. This is the mystery of the incarnation. God came to us as a man. The uncontainable God inhabited the confines of a human womb. The infinite Son of God took up a human body in Jesus. This is a place where we can stumble. It is a place where we can be struck with wonder.

Some years ago, I came awake to the beauty of Christ. I started thinking and feeling deeply about this mystery that Jesus is God and man. I can't stop thinking about it. I learned that the ancient writers coined a phrase for this mystery. I want to teach it to you because it's really important. The word is *homoousion*. It simply means "the same being." It comes from fusing together two words. *Homo*, which means "same." And *ousion*, which is "being." Same being. Now I think *ousion* sounds like ooze, which is like *stuff* you get on your hands. So it's easy to think of *homoousion* as "the same stuff." Jesus is of the same stuff as God. Jesus is of the same stuff as humanity. He's fully both.

In the little heritage room outside our sanctuary, we display paintings by artists in our church. This year, Rhonda put in one of me lying on the ground under the trees. She called it "Pondering the *Homoousion*." The title is a joke we've had between us. Whenever I seem far away in thought she asks, "So are you pondering the *homoousion*?" It's become a catch phrase for any time we see a vacant look on someone's face. Our dogs frequently get the look of pondering the *homoousion*. Just thinking and thinking about something you can never figure out.

So why am I taking all this time to tell you about a theology word you probably can't use this week in a conversation? Why does it matter to think so hard about a mystery we can never solve? Well, the guy who coined the phrase thought our very salvation depends on whether or not Jesus is both fully God and fully man. If Jesus is not both fully God and fully man we are not fully nor finally saved. Athanasius built his theology on the urgent question of how we can get out of the desperate predicament we find ourselves in.

We were made in the image of God. Made to have fellowship with him. Made to flourish in the earth. But we turned against our creator. We tried to seize control and be gods ourselves. We crossed the line of God's one command. And the promised consequence occurred. Death entered the world. And ever after we have been in bondage. We decay. We fall to the corruption of our hearts in the upheaval of all our grasping, groping, and grinding down each other. We're in the grip of forces we cannot control. We're doomed to die. To tumble into further decay and condemnation. Existence runs away from us and we scramble after life only to abuse it and ultimately lose it.

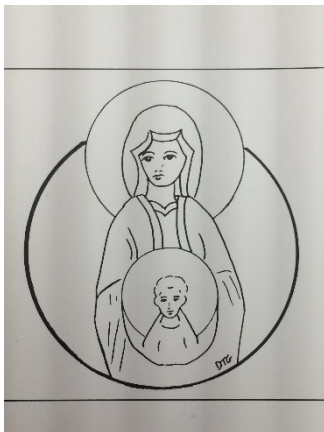
The Creator looked upon the ruin of the people he had made to be his image bearers and his heart broke. He yearned after us. He wanted to save us. He wanted to restore us to what we were made to be. He wanted to renew his image in us so we could relate to him and one another in love once more. But for God to truly remake us, he couldn't just wave his hand and say, "All is forgiven, don't worry about it." That would not stop the death that follows our sin, because that wouldn't change our hearts from the inside out. No, man, humanity, had to be remade from the inside out. And then, only the willing sacrifice of that new man could take the force of death and stop it. By a man came death, by a man also had to come life.

But no mere man could achieve this salvation. Not one man or woman could live according to the original design. No matter how much one person repents and tries, he always fails, and even if he succeeded, he could not do so on behalf of anyone but himself. Only the one who created all people can recreate all people. Only the one who made all things out of nothing could remake the human heart out of its fallen condition. Only God could live faithfully on behalf of all, and suffer and die on behalf of all. Only the Son of God could represent the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve before the Father. It is a God-sized task to remake us and restore us.

If Jesus is merely the best man that ever lived, a great example, showing us a path to God like many other teachers, then his life did us no good. I hate examples. I can't live up to them. They end up making me feel worse. We are left in our frustration. If Jesus is only a man, then his death doesn't affect me at all. He just died like everyone else. So what.

But if Jesus is God acting in our midst, *as* one of us, then everything changes. Then Jesus is the man for every man, woman, boy and girl. He is the man on our behalf. Because he is the God who made and loves each one of us acting as one of us for the sake of all of us. Then, he gives value to every single human life because he became our brother in the flesh. He is God saying, "I will be with you forever. I will make you new. I will change your heart. I will redeem you from the inside out." ¹

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit: he is God. He was born of the Virgin Mary: he is man. I've always loved how intuitively children grasp this wonder. I love when children give me drawings they've done in church or in Sunday school. So many times, without knowing it, they draw the images used in church worship. My heart leapt when a first grader gave me a picture of baby Jesus smiling at us from a circle inside Mary's tummy. Here's an adult rendering of that in pen and ink, and next to it an example of the great icon of the incarnation.



Think what this means for all of us. Professor Torrance has written, "The Son of God became a human being for us in the womb of the Virgin Mary, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. He became what we are. Think of the importance of the incarnation, then, for our understanding of and regard for the unborn child. Every child in the womb has been *brothered* by the Lord Jesus. In becoming a human being for us, he also became an embryo for the sake of all embryos, and for our Christian understanding of the being, nature and status in God's eyes of the

unborn child. So, to take no thought, or no proper thought, for the unborn child is to have no proper thought of Jesus himself as our Lord and Savior or to appreciate his relation as the incarnate Creator to every human being.”²

Why do we value the unborn? Because the Son of God became an embryo on behalf of all embryos. He risked the vulnerability of growing from a cell; he dared the hazards of the birth canal. And so he hallowed conception and birth for all of us. Why do we value children? Because the Son of God became a little child in our midst. And never forgot when he grew up, but welcomed them in his arms. Why do we value the least and the lost, the outcast and the compromised? Because the Son of God as Son of Man blessed, touched, healed, calmed, and fed every sort of person. He came to seek and save the lost. As one of us. For all of us.

As an example, Jesus daunts me. I cannot possibly live remotely like he did. Not on my own. But as the incarnate savior who gives me his life, I can draw from him. His life in me changes my heart and turns me towards those I would otherwise devalue or discard. That’s why I need his Word every day. That’s why I need his sacred Supper every week. That’s why I need to have my heart nourished by his praise. So that from the inside out I can live *from* him and then, only then, live *for* him.



Which leads to our conclusion. Mary’s response to this news. She replied to Gabriel, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.” Mary’s response is a paradigm for all Christian spirituality in 3 parts.

1) Behold the servant of the Lord. In saying this, I have already claimed my deepest identity. I belong to the LORD God. I am not my own. I am not here for

me. I am here for God. My life is fulfilled when I am in God's will. Apart from him I have no good. In his presence is fullness of joy. In his will is perfect peace. I freely draw upon this truth: I am the servant of the Lord. I wait for his lead.

2) Let it be unto me. Therefore, when God calls upon me to do something, or go through something, I can say, "Let it be. I will go through what you send me through. I will undertake what you place before me to do. I will receive these circumstances as from your loving hand. I will engage this mission as your best will for me. I will let go of my way. And say 'Let it be' to your will." I may have to let go the stories I have always told myself about how my life is supposed to go. I may have to let go of cherished ambitions and beloved aspirations. I may have to live very differently than I hoped. But let it be. I am your servant. And I choose to trust you.

3) According to your Word. This path of giving myself to what God sends or calls is not just resignation to an indifferent universe. It is not just detaching from everything. Nor is it calling any path a good one as long as you go easy. Let it be unto me according to your word. I surrender my will and undertake to enact your will as revealed in your scriptures. I engage to think about the world the way you think about the world in your Word. I strive to view people as you view them, and I know how you view them because your Word shows me Jesus.

Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. It is a glorious impossible. Yet, as Gabriel told Mary, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Jesus is of the same stuff as God and man. He had to be if we are to be truly saved from the inside out. And indeed in Christ, we have been. Will you look upon the wonder of this incarnate God and say, "I am your servant. Let it be to me according to your Word. According to your will and way for me."

¹ These insights paraphrased from the seminal 4th century work by Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*.

² Thomas Torrance, "The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child," (Lenoir, NC: Glen Lorien Books), 2000, p. 15).