

"The Nicene Creed: Light from Light, True God from True God"

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FOUNDATIONS of Faith

Fall 2025 Sermon Series

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"The Nicene Creed: Light from Light, True God from True God" | Colossians 1:15-20 | Pastor Jess Scholten

Happy birthday! It's kind of a party today, though I didn't bring 1700 candles to honor the Nicene Creed, the oldest creed in Christendom. A creed is like a declaration from the church, and the Nicene Creed stems from the Council of Nicaea in 325 where leaders of the church gathered in order to help define how Jesus is God.

From the beginning, we have been trying to figure out Jesus. Even the disciples do not know – his own disciples!

We got a little insight into their conversation in our first reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him. Well, some people think you're just John the Baptist... or... maybe... like a prophet come back to life – maybe Elijah or Jeremiah. Or maybe, like, a new prophet?

And then Jesus asks Peter directly – who do you say that I am? And that's when Peter – that impulsive disciple prone to fumbles – has a chance to shine. He exclaims Jesus to be: the Christ, the Son of the living God. On this, Jesus says, on this truth I will build my church. Who is Jesus? The very son of God, as prophesied in the Old Testament, fully human, yes, *and* fully divine.

There are a whole variety of ways we try to describe this. Peter's answer dips a toe in. In the various letters written to the earliest churches which we have gathered into the New Testament is a little four-chapter letter that directly addresses this question of who Jesus is as well. The Christ-hymn from Colossians is another way to describe Jesus as fully human and fully divine. Understood to be one of the earliest hymns of the church, Colossians 1, verses 15-20 is our second Scripture lesson for the day.

Hear the word of the Lord from Colossians:

¹⁵[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

May God add God's blessing to our reading and hearing of the Scriptures.

This fall, we're doing a little theological throwback work as we pay attention to our foundations in the faith and make our way through the Presbyterian Church's *Book of Confessions*, a collection of twelve creeds, statements, catechisms, and proclamations used to help us better understand what the whole of Scripture and faith are trying to teach us. Our small group curriculum does a beautiful job of summarizing this.

The first two creeds were written early in the life of the church. This includes the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. They were formed out of a desire to create unity in the church and to better understand who God is.

The next six creeds and confessions are essentially teaching tools that came out of the Reformation around the 16th century in order to better define what the purpose of the Church was and how it is shaped by the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and other fundamental understandings of faith.

The last four of our *Book of Confessions* are 20th-century proclamations that help us better understand as the church what it is we are supposed to do.

I love how the development of the Creeds follows our own walk of faith. We spend much of our early life just trying to figure out who God is through Bible stories and celebrations in the church. Then, we spend the next decade or two figuring out church – going through confirmation and accepting this faith as a member of the church. And then, the rest of our lives are – hopefully – spent living out our faith in the world – deeply connected to God, strengthened by our church community, and living out God's love with our neighbors near and far.

Now that we've had a refresh on all the confessions as part of our Foundations of Faith: POP QUIZ *quiz slide*

- Which is the oldest creed in *the Book of Confessions*?
 - The Nicene Creed.
- Which creed is the only creed accepted in all three main branches of the Christian Church: the Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant traditions?
 - That's right the Nicene Creed.
- Which creed played a roll in the first major split in the Church in 1054?
 - The Nicene Creed. (maybe blow noisemaker)

You guys are really good at this!

And, those are *all* the fun facts I have about the Nicene Creed – all of them! There's some clever little detail about a war over an iota, but it is really in the theological weeds, and we're just not going there. It's like trying to explain a knock knock joke - a really bad, confusing knock knock joke.

Any which way, the Nicene Creed is kind of a big deal.

Mostly because for almost three hundred years, the church was growing but also persecuted... and a little bit underground. But then along comes Constantine – let's be real, Constantine's mother, really; she was the big influence in the shift – and he declares Christianity to be the religion of the empire, and he brings together the major leaders of the church to formulate a statement that summarizes the beliefs Christians could agree on.

It's the first real pathway to Christian unity. Not because everybody was going to believe all the same things all the time in every way, but because there were some things everybody could agree on. Which, these days, it's a good reminder that in the midst of so much turmoil and disagreement, most Christians can have some common ground, even if how we learn and live is loosely different.

There are four main parts to the Nicene Creed. You can find it in your hymnal, by the way – it's on page 34 – actual page 34 – not hymn number 34. The first part defines God as our Parent and Creator. Pardon the all-masculine language – it was all-patriarchy, all-day in the 300s.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

Pretty basic and brief start, but underlying is the knowledge that each person is loved and belongs. Two things we can sometimes be short on these days. You are created by God, loved by God, and you are part of God's treasured community.

The next part is a big center section all about Jesus – he was sort of the star of the show for the Nicene Creed anyhow, because – again, not getting into the weeds of it, but there were some heresies floating around – that Jesus was just a human or that Jesus wasn't really a human – so this Jesus section is important.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

This harkens back to the very beginning of time as God speaks creation into being. As the Gospel of John reflects: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

There's a whole second section to the Jesus section about why Jesus did what he did – becoming human and all while still being God so that we could more fully know salvation and be in relationship with God.

And then the last part of the Nicene Creed is about the Holy Spirit... as well as some main understandings about the church.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

You can see here how the council was wrestling with and clarifying how even though there are three parts to the Trinity, they are of the same essence – separate but one, working in different ways... but together – that mystery of the Trinity.

And finally, about the church:

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Even though the Nicene Creed was first and the Apostles' Creed took some of its cues from the Nicene Creed, they are similar. The Nicene Creed is a little longer and a little more... poetic. I love that light from light, true God from true God bit, reminding us again of the unity of essence that happens in our Triune God.

All of Scripture and the arch of salvation summarized in a one-page creed.

But truly, how does this creed or any of the Scripture passages help us do the most important thing we can do – become more deeply rooted in God's love so that we can share that love with others?

In some ways, having a nice concrete statement can help. I don't always have the words for God, so to be reminded of God as a loving parent, as our Creator, leads me back to love and why nature – creation – is such an important part of our walk in faith. It can help give us a memory map of the ways God has been present to us, providing for us and comforting us.

For those with really wonderful parents, God's love feels like a natural and beautiful way to experience the Almighty. And for those who have or had lousy parents for whatever hard reasons, maybe knowing there is a loving Holy Parent and Creator God who is forgiving, gentle, safe, and kind can be a balm on broken hearts.

Having some concrete statements about Jesus can be helpful in the same way – it's a good summary of Jesus' life, though I always end up missing all the good teachings. This is likely part of why Pastor Charlie and many of us are big fans of "A Brief Statement of Faith" which expands on Jesus' ministry in meaningful ways. Even so, we're reminded of God's love for us in actually coming to earth and becoming one of us to connect more fully into our human little lives.

But in the end though, we have to figure these things out for ourselves. Like Peter, we're standing before Jesus who asks each one of us: Who do you say that I am? Who do you understand Jesus to be? How is Jesus at work in your life?

Because a life of faith moves beyond being told what to believe in a creed or even in Scripture. We each have our own experiences of God and our own seeking and learning to do for ourselves. That's why we offer things like small groups and adult education, service partnerships, devotionals like Pastor Charlie's morning and evening prayer guide which is still available, and other ways to learn and grow.

We all have our own encounters with the living God that shape our faith beyond the long-standing beliefs of the church. I've met Jesus while watching bees, one time with my car stuck in a snowbank, on a park bench, one very odd Lent he showed up rather surprisingly in my car. We're still getting to know each other, as pastor and congregation, so I haven't heard many stories yet, but I know you've experienced Jesus in Guatemala, at the bedside of a parent, in the face of your grandchild, over a meal at the Triangle, while singing in the choir. Jesus is asking you, too: "Who do you say that I am?"

The World Council of Churches is celebrating this 1700th anniversary all year long, including recently at their annual meeting. And while being a member of the World Council of Churches requires adherence to the faith expressed in the Nicene Creed, they articulate the movement of faith succinctly: "moving from creed to deed." Because our knowledge of Jesus helps shape us into people who learn and live our faith out in the world, moving from creed to deed. (<https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-reflects-on-moving-from-creed-to-deed>).

The way to do this most fully is to get to know Jesus in a new way – to read Scripture, to pray, and to pay attention to where the Holy Spirit is nudging you in your faith and in your work in the world. We offer lots of ways to do this, but we also pray for you – that you would hear the same voice of the God who created you, who loves you so much God came to earth as a human being to share in this with you, and who calls us all into action by the whispering voice of the Holy Spirit.

If you're still figuring out how to better understand God, the Creeds can help, but your pastors, your small group leaders, your elders and deacons, and your fellow congregation members can help as well. Please don't hesitate to reach out or ask for prayer. We do this together, in community, so that we can be light in the world, moving from creed to deed, learning and living out God's love. May it be so. Amen.