

Nicene Creed Sermon Series: *Sermon #4*: August 11-12, 2018

Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen.

Well saints, now that you have had a three-week break, you should be mentally well rested enough to return to our series on the Nicene Creed. Before we wade into the waters of today's sermon, allow me to remind you of the waters we have already swam in and, hopefully, have drunk deeply from. In the first sermon, we looked at Deuteronomy 6:4 (which is part of the Shema: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!") and I made the case that this verse is in fact a Creed, which I defined as a statement about the basic beliefs of a religion, in this case Judaism. However, I did not leave it there; if you recall, I showed you that both the Apostle Paul and Jesus brought the Shema into the Church precisely as a Creed. We also saw that both, especially St. Paul, modified the Creed to include Jesus in the identity of the One God identified in Deuteronomy 6:4. The overarching point that I was making in that sermon was that the Church is on good standing when she expresses and teaches her beliefs in the words of the Nicene Creed.

In the second sermon we returned to the Shema, but this time we looked at all of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. We started again with the claims about God in verse 4, but we moved to notice the functional outcomes of such statements. First we saw how the command in verse 5 to only worship this God flows directly out of the identification of who God is in verse 4, and in so identifying God and our relationship to him, it identifies us also – we are *his* people, the people whom he has saved. Second, we noticed that we must train our hearts to love the Lord, and so verses 6-9 provide instruction for training our hearts and the hearts of our children to love the Lord identified in verse 4. We should recall that the instruction is to follow a Liturgy in life and worship. I concluded this sermon by naming three ways that the Nicene Creed trains our hearts to love the Lord: 1) It teaches us the content of the faith – namely, who God is and what he has done for us, and in so doing, it also identifies us. Part of this particular function is that it teaches us to properly read Scripture; 2) It shapes us into a community with a shared memory of a shared history. This, in turn, teaches us that we are dependent on others to live and learn the faith. I might add, that this directly challenges the hyper-individualism of our culture, but that is another sermon unto itself; 3) The Nicene Creed, in its liturgical setting, operates as the Church's pledge of allegiance to our true King, the Triune God revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

In the third sermon we returned to the idea that the Nicene Creed teaches us to properly read Scripture by teaching is the subject matter of Scripture. In this way, I said, it operates as the *Rule of Faith*, an authoritative distillation of the Faith that is present both in and behind the text of Scripture. Not only does the Rule of Faith operate as a standard to measure doctrinal claims (and sermons) against, it teaches us to properly see the true subject of Scripture – namely, Jesus Christ as the revelation of the Triune God. All three of these sermons can be found, in written form, in the sermon rack in the Narthex.

Today, I want to begin to explore why the Christian faith expressed in the Nicene Creed is necessarily Trinitarian. Our primary focus to get at this question will be the revelation of Jesus Christ and his resurrection. First, however, we will need to retrace our steps and, also, define some of the boundaries to the discussion in order to get a sense of the theological pressure the historical reality of the Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection put on the early believers who were predominantly Jews, and this includes the writers of the New Testament.

To begin with, there are two primary ways in which we can speak about God. One is to speak of his being, who he is in and of himself; we call this ontology – the study of being. Here we find claims about God like the one made in Deuteronomy 6:4: "the Lord is One." We also find claims such as God is omniscient (all knowing), he is omnipresent (everywhere at once), he is spirit, he is love. Many of the assertions that we make of God can be found directly in Scripture; however, the Church also makes claims about God in his being that use the logic of Scripture, but in a sense move beyond what is explicitly claimed in the text. A relevant for instance, is the doctrine of the Trinity or one of the foundational assertions of Trinitarian thought, God is simple – that is, he has no parts. In other words, his love doesn't stop where his wrath begins; rather, he is love all the way through such that his wrath must be conceived of in the context of his love. Notice, though, we do not claim that God is wrath; his wrath is an expression of other attributes, and thus belongs to our second category of thought.

This category is what we call the economy, or to put it another way, God's self-revelation to humanity in time and space. Think of God's calling of Israel to be his people, his saving action toward them and us, or even Scripture itself. All these belong to God's economy. We should note also that certain activities that demonstrate who God in his being also belong to his economy, and as such there is a certain mutuality between God's self-revelation and his being; he reveals himself to be who he is.

And indeed, the Nicene Creed makes claims about both his economy and his being. Think of the article about the Son: Here we find statements that he is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." This is a statement about how the Son in his being relates to the Father in his being – it is a statement of ontology. The article goes onto say: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried." This is a statement about the economy of the Son. It is important to notice, though, that not all of what is included in his economy is applied to the way that we think of him in his being. For instance, in his Incarnate form, the prime economic act, the Son is located in a particular time and space. It would be a mistake to say based on this that God is a spatial or temporal Being; instead, we affirm that God is eternal and omnipresent, even as we recognize that in the Incarnate Son he does inhabit a particular space. But this is getting into very deep theological waters, so I will stop here. Suffice it to say, we want to affirm both manners of speaking about God as essential to our understanding who he is.

Nevertheless, there are a number of theologians and biblical scholars who want us to remain at the level of economy, preferring not to move from revelation to God in his Being. In fact, some of these scholars would encourage us to pay less attention to the Nicene Creed, precisely because it makes claims about who God is. I do not have the time to get into the philosophically robust arguments for and against these scholars who prefer the economy to the exclusion of ontology, but I do think they are wrong. And I will explain why.

It seems to me that the intersection of God's self-revelation in the Old Testament and the New Testament do not allow us to simply stay at the level of economy. Let me try to make this a bit more accessible: Imagine you are a Christian alive around the time of Jesus. But let's make it even less abstract than that; imagine you are the Apostle Paul. St. Paul, like many believers of his time, was a Jew, but not just any Jew. He tells us in his letter to the Philippians that before he met Jesus, he was a Jew's Jew.¹ And as any good Jew of his day would do, St. Paul would have recited the Shema twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. He would have been thoroughly formed by these words: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."² Remember that "Lord" here in these verses is a substitute for God's legal name YHWH. The practice of substituting either the Greek or Hebrew word for Lord in place of YHWH was meant to protect the holiness of God's legal name and honor the command to do so. The substitute appears here as the Church has historically honored this practice. Keep this in mind as it will become relevant again shortly.

¹ Philippians 3:4-6

² Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

The Apostle Paul would also have been well acquainted with texts like Isaiah 45:21b-24; in fact, he reworks it in a passage we will look at momentarily. But first let's look at Isaiah 45:21b-24 together, you can find it on page 729 of your pew bible. It reads [read it]. See in verses 21 and 24 how the word "Lord" is in all capitals? That signals that the original manuscript has God's legal name present, and the translators have substituted "Lord" in its place. So Deuteronomy 6 and Isaiah 45 are definitely speaking about the same God. Moreover, they are both making claims to his complete and utter uniqueness. However, Isaiah makes greater claims than even Deuteronomy. In verse 21, YHWH isn't just *our* God, he alone is the true God. All the gods (with a lower case "g") of the surrounding nations are pretenders. Or perhaps better, in the idiom of Isaiah, they are dumb and blind idols unable to intervene on behalf of their devotees. Unlike those gods, YHWH is mighty to save: in him alone is salvation found. And because of this, YHWH alone is worthy of allegiance, to him alone will every knee bow.

These two passages from Deuteronomy and Isaiah don't leave a lot of room for entertaining other options, as St. Paul would have well known. Imagine being a Jew, like St. Paul, who was formed in these verses and hearing Jesus' high priestly prayer found in John 17. Look with me there, you can find it on p. 1081. Jesus says in verses 1 & 2: "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify you, even as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life." Now you're standing there hearing this as a good Jew and you think: Wait, what did he just say? Did he just say that he can give eternal life to people? Doesn't he know that only YHWH can do that? That only YHWH can save? And even worse, doesn't he know that YHWH alone is worthy of glory and that he doesn't share it with anyone else? And then you hear Jesus pray in verses 3-5: "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work which you have given me to do. Now, Father, glorify me together with yourself, *with the glory which I had with you before the world was.*" This last claim is a truly ostentatious one! Not only has Jesus named himself as being able to save, a clear transgression of Isaiah 45, he has just claimed to have shared in YHWH's glory since before creation! In other words, Jesus just claimed to be eternal and to share in the divine glory of YHWH. This is heresy of the first order! No wonder they killed him. And no wonder pre-Christian Paul persecuted the followers of Christ; they were rank heretics.

Amazingly, the very act that was meant to discredit Jesus, is precisely the one that vindicates his claims about himself and ultimately exerts the most theological pressure. It is his resurrection from the dead, wherein Jesus took up his own life, that he is most fully revealed as divine. Think of St. Thomas at the end of John's Gospel. First recall that Thomas was there at the beginning of the Gospel when Jesus told the Jews that if they tore down the Temple, meaning his body, he himself would raise it back up. And now in the upper room after claiming that he would only believe Jesus was alive if he touched his wounds, he was doing exactly that. Standing face to face with the Risen Jesus, recalling Jesus' prophecy about his own resurrection, and finally placing his hands in Jesus' wounds, Thomas is pressured to make the ultimate theological judgment. He professes of Jesus: "My Lord and my God!"

As you might imagine for men like St. Thomas and Paul who were raised in the tradition of the Shema and Isaiah 45, such an acclamation about Jesus, whether justified or not, could cause something of an intellectual crisis. They are faced with, on the one hand, the self-revelation of God as YHWH in the Old Testament complete with the claims of Deuteronomy 6 and Isaiah 45; and on the other hand they are faced with the claims of Jesus to be one with YHWH, claims that seem to have been vindicated by his resurrection from the dead. But if YHWH is One, where does this leave Jesus? Is Jesus a second God? Surely not. In light of Deut 6 and Isaiah 45, this is an impossibility. How is it, then, that Jesus can be worshipped as Lord? Wouldn't that be idolatry?

The tension that we feel here is the tension between speaking of God in his economy (that is, how he has revealed himself) and speaking of him as he is in his Being (that is, ontology). It is the coming of the Word in flesh, Jesus Christ, including his claims about himself and his resurrection, that force the New Testament authors and eventually the Church to make theological judgments about who Jesus is in relationship to YHWH. To remain at the level of economy for early Christians like Sts. Paul and Thomas who were deeply invested in their Jewish faith, would be intellectually impossible. How could they reconcile the Shema with the realization and worship of Jesus as Lord? How could they reconcile the claims about YHWH in Isaiah 45 with the revelation of God in Jesus without making theological judgments about who Jesus is in his Being? In other words, for the early Christians, especially for those of Jewish descent, to remain content at the level of economy, never venturing a claim about the Being of God in light of Jesus Christ, would be to make idolaters of themselves. This would be an untenable option for somebody of St. Paul's devotion and education.

And indeed, we find him making theological judgments about who God is in Jesus all throughout his letters. In closing, let's look quickly at one example: Philippians 2:6-11, which you can find on p. 1175 of your pew bibles. [Read it]. Notice that in verse 6 St. Paul makes a claim not only to Jesus', as the Son, eternity, but also an outright claim to his divinity – he existed in the form of God *before* his incarnation. Second, notice first that in verse 9 St. Paul proclaims that because Jesus fulfilled his mission (as Jesus prays in John 17) God, that is the Father, has exalted him by at minimum making Jesus' name equal to his own, that is above every other name. It has also been argued that the Father actually gives Jesus the divine name YHWH. Either way, St. Paul is identifying Jesus with and in the only name that can save and the only name worthy of allegiance, YHWH. Thus, second, we must notice that in verse 10, St. Paul working within the logic of Isaiah 45, he includes Jesus in the identification of YHWH who alone is worthy of allegiance. In light of Jesus' claims about himself and his resurrection, we must now understand him to be included in the worthiness of worship precisely because we must understand him to be one and the same as YHWH. Or in the words of the Nicene Creed, he is: "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...of one Being with the Father."

And with that saints, let us stand together and profess our faith in the Lord who has revealed himself to be One God in three Persons with the words of the Nicene Creed which can be found on p. 45 of your red prayer book.