

Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-16 **Hymns:** 355, 332, 383

✠ In the name of Jesus ✠

“He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The title for today’s sermon in: “The Nicene Creed—The Holy Spirit confessing God before men. Amen.

At the council of Nicaea, in AD, the year of our Lord 325, there was an Alexandrian by birth, with dark skin and a small stature. His name was Athanasius. While Athanasius was not able to vote at the council, he was present and later was a giant in defending the cause of orthodoxy in the 4th century. While the Nicene Creed had been written and endorsed by most of the Christian bishops at Nicaea, the Arian controversy continued to disrupt unity in the Church. The Arians insisted Jesus was created by God and thus didn’t exist from eternity. In other words, they continued to deny Jesus was God.

Some people in the 4th century considered the whole controversy a trivial matter. I suspect some people would continue to take the same position today. In fact, any discussion of doctrinal issues, particularly of subtle nuances in doctrine, leaves some yawning, longing instead for a more personal discussion on spirituality. But the Church and particularly Athanasius understood there was more to the controversy than it seemed. In fact, for Athanasius, and I quote, “the Arian controversy was not a matter of theological subtleties with little or no relevance. In it, the very core of the Christian message was at stake.”

To give an example, Athanasius spoke of the incarnation, the conception and birth of Jesus, in terms of an imperial visit to a city. “The emperor decides on such a visit, and resides in one of the houses of the city. As a result, not only that house, but the entire town, receives a special honor and protection. Bandits stay away from such a place. Likewise, the Monarch of the universe has come to visit our human city, living in one of our houses, and thanks to such a presence we are all protected from the attacks and wiles of the Evil One. Now, by virtue of that visit from God in Jesus Christ, we are free to be what God intends us to be—that is, beings capable of living in communion with the divine.”

The cause to which St. Athanasius devoted his life, the defense of the deity of Jesus as clearly confessed in the Nicene Creed, wouldn’t be the official position of the Church until after his death. The problem, history records, was with the sons of Constantine, the supposed legitimizer of Christianity in the 4th century. While one son ruled supporting Arianism, the next ruled supporting the Nicene formula. Julian, the last son of Constantine, finally ruled supporting

paganism. It wasn't until the 2nd Ecumenical Council which met in Constantinople in the year 381 that the Nicene Creed became the catholic, or, universal confession of the Church.

Jesus, **“being of the same substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate.”**

Truly, **“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** Even today, God dwells among us, in His Word, in the sacraments and in the mutual consolation we afford one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. God with us is the heart and the core of the Gospel. It is what livens our hearts and steadies our faith.

“It has been well said that we must seek Christ not only **while** He may be found, but also **where** He may be found. The shepherds were given this direction: **“This will be a sign to you:”**—a proof that you have found Him whom you were seeking—**“You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”** Luther says: “Word and Sacrament are the manger and the swaddling-clothes into which it has pleased Christ to lay Himself.” The lowliness may seem absurd to some, but our Lord says He will be found nowhere else.”

Where Christ is found, in God's Word and Sacrament, is also where the Holy Spirit is living and active. Through the Means of Grace: God's Word, water, bread and wine; the Holy Spirit works to plant and nourish His seed of faith in us. It is the Holy Spirit who, working through the very Means of Grace He said He would work through, grows and strengthens His gift of faith in us. The Holy Spirit works through God's Word—His *Λογος*—which is none other than Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh.

This Word strengthened Athanasius and gave him the fortitude to face the attacks against the person of Jesus Christ. This same Word gives us the strength to face the continued attacks against Christianity and the clear teaching of Scripture today.

But going back to the Nicene Creed, it really should be read backwards—the 3rd Article first, followed by the 2nd, then the 1st—because as Christians that is how it works. It is the working of the Holy Spirit who brings the gifts Christ earned in our place, and confessed in the 2rd Article, which in turn have reconciled us back to God the Father. Being reconciled in Christ we can see the Father for who He really is: a gracious and merciful God.

It is **“the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,”** who through God's Word and Sacraments has given us life in Christ Jesus and on account of Jesus' death and resurrection in our place.

The Holy Spirit, **“who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, and who has spoken by the prophets”**, continues to speak faith into our hearts and to bring Christ's gifts to us.

We say “**And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church**” because through the work of the Holy Spirit in your Baptism and mine, we were brought into and made part of that one holy Christian and apostolic Church. As Jesus told Nicodemus: “**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.**” (*John 3:5*), there in Baptism we were born of water and the Spirit and given eternal life.

In this new life of faith in Christ we “... **acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.**” We hold fast to what the Holy Spirit proclaimed through Peter on the Day of Pentecost: “**Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.**”³⁹ **For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.**” (*Acts 2:38-39*)

We do “... **look for the resurrection of the dead,**” because we have already died the only death that really matters in our baptism, and have also been raised to new life in Christ. Hence forth we joyously look forward to the return of our Lord and Saviour and the resurrection of the dead. For all who are in Christ, who have received His gifts through the working of the Holy Spirit, we do joyfully look ahead to “... **the life of the world to come.**”

The Nicene Creed clearly and concisely proclaims what God has done, and what He continues to do for us and all people. It took almost 60 years and many faithful Christians to fully hammer it out, but in it and through it we can rejoice in and share the confession of faith and Good News of salvation of Christ with Christians over the past almost 1700 years. In this Creed we hear and confess our Saviour, who came for you and me. In Him our sins are forgiven. In Him, we are delivered from death and the devil. In Christ we have eternal life. And now to conclude, the final word of the Nicene Creed: “**Amen.**”

* This sermon belongs to Christ and His Church because it is taken from His Word. I would like to thank Rev. Alan Taylor, from St. John Lutheran Church, Galveston, Texas, for the idea for this sermon series. While some of the original text remains, most has been changed, including the overall focus of the sermon. Please feel free to copy or use this sermon accordingly. I expect people to copy my sermons otherwise I would not post them. I only ask that you quote accurately if you attribute anything to me. Should you decide to contact me, I would be very interested in knowing where you are. Please include the name of your city, province or state, and country when contacting me.