

# **“The Nicene Creed What We Believe”**

## 1. “We Believe in One God”

Genesis 1:1-27; John 1:1

Pentecost 9

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Every Sunday, after the sermon,  
our Lutheran liturgy calls for  
the gathered worship assembly  
to respond to the spoken Word with  
one of the church’s sanctioned Creeds.

On most ordinary Sunday’s,  
the shortest and oldest creed-the Apostles  
is usually recited.

On festival days, the Nicene is preferred,  
and in some churches on Holy Trinity  
Sunday, the longest and most recent  
of the creeds-the Athanasian- is required.

It has probably been the experience of  
most of us as worshipers, myself included,  
that when it comes to reciting the creed,  
we do it either by rote memory or  
by glancing down at its printed form  
in the bulletin.

Some of us sleepwalk through it,  
thinking of other things like  
Sunday’s dinner or afternoon sports’ schedule;  
some of us, in a moment of somnolence  
caused by the sermon, puzzle over  
the creed’s strange language; and  
some, who are more attuned to today’s  
radical interpretations and application of  
political correctness, will find offense  
in what the creed seems to say.

And perhaps, few would fully appreciate  
what a remarkable thing that

they are doing.

I wonder how many of us really know  
what we are saying and what  
we are really implying when  
we recite a Christian creed?

And would we keep on doing it  
if we really grasped how different  
it made us in today's world?

In an age and culture that celebrates  
individuality, we Christians are  
actually doing something together as a group.

In an age and that avoids commitments,  
we are actually pledging ourselves  
to a set of beliefs as well as to each other.

In a commercial culture that rewards  
novelty and creativity, we are actually  
out of step using words and statements  
written by our ancient spiritual forebearers.

In a society where accepted wisdom changes  
with each passing trend, we are actually  
declaring truths that need to be repeated  
over and over again.

And, in a throw-away, consumerist world,  
we are actually standing up and out  
in our acceptance, preservation, and  
continuation of tradition.

Reciting the creed at worship is thus  
a counter cultural act.

Before considering the first article of the  
subject and theme of this sermon series-  
the Nicene Creed- it would do well for us  
to understand where it comes from,  
what it means, and why we still have it.

The word "creed" comes from the opening  
and in the Latin Apostles Creed, *credo*.  
which translates "I believe," or as in  
the Nicene Creed *credimus*, which means  
"We believe."

Not all religions have creeds.

Beliefs as such are not nearly so central  
to most other religions as it is to Christianity.

Many religions like Judaism and Islam  
put more emphasis on orthopraxy (right  
practices) than in orthodoxy (right beliefs).

What is it about Christianity that placed  
such peculiar emphasis upon right belief  
and, given that emphasis, led it to  
an even more elaborate and official statement  
or belief by means of creeds?

There are popular scholars and critics  
who want to lead people today to  
the opinion that creeds were a later,  
violent, and patriarchal imposition upon  
the gospel story of Jesus.

I would rather view creeds as a natural  
development within Christianity and  
best understood in light of its spread  
and rise as a revelatory religion and  
the crises and challenges it faced  
from its start.

As we will hear further on in this message,  
the Christian creed began as a variation  
of Judaism's Shema Israel and the claim  
that the Hebrew God and Father of Jesus  
Christ is the one God who reveals and  
creates through the spoken Word.

As those of you who have and are now  
participating in my recent bible studies  
on Paul's letters know, the first generation  
of followers was composed of Jews  
and former pagans, who distinguished  
themselves from the polytheism and  
idolatry of the Greco-Roman world  
by confessing the one, true God;  
and also distinguished themselves from  
the other Jews by professing Jesus as

the Christ, the Lord and Son of God,  
whose life, death, resurrection and meaning  
would become terms and phrases that  
later find their place in creeds-

It is from the Hebrew Torah- The Book of  
Deuteronomy that contains an ancient  
rudimentary confession of belief known as  
the *shema*, from its opening word in Hebrew  
“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord  
and you shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart and all your soul,  
and all your might” (6:4)

This statement features three features of  
special interest to us.

First, it is a call for communal, and not  
simply individual, commitment.

Second, in the polytheistic world of that  
time, it is exclusive: The Lord (the proper  
name of Israel’s God) is both the “one” God  
and the only God toward whom (Israel owes allegiance

Thirdly and lastly, it involves a personal commitment.  
Israelites are to “love” the Lord God with  
their whole hearts and souls and might

In other words, the Shema both defines the  
one Lord to whom loyalty is given  
and separates Israel from all other peoples  
but it’s unique monotheism.

As Judaism takes its faith and shape from  
the experience of living out of Shema,  
a call for communal, personal, and exclusive  
commitment, Christianity, which began  
within Judaism, also claimed the Shema,  
to which Jesus himself added, “we are to  
love our neighbor as ourselves.”

However, the specific character of the Christian  
experience of Jesus as the crucified and  
risen Lord led them to add on to the Shema  
and with it, the story of God and God’s people.

Christianity took its name from the claim  
that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed One  
or Messiah because of his death and resurrection.

We see it expressly in the four Gospels  
and the entire New Testament, especially  
in the letters of Peter and Paul,  
the writings of the early church fathers,  
and ultimately in the creeds of the church.

The language of the Nicene Creed- the subject of  
this series- is exceptionally compressed and cryptic  
Each statement can be examined by itself and  
in combination with every other if we are  
to grasp the importance of the creed's meaning  
Doing that job adequately from a pulpit in a  
series of short messages is an almost impossible task.  
I want to provide you with a better sense in  
what they declare to us within our worship liturgy,  
how they are grounded in Scripture,  
and how they affect the way one lives as  
a creedal Christian in a church community.

The Nicene Creed's most radical and important  
profession comes right at the beginning:  
"We believe in one God."

It is the root out of which the rest grows  
Without it, nothing more can be said.

The God we proclaim is the one we hear  
from and learn of in scripture- the God  
who is the creator of everything and the  
deliverer of Israel from slavery in Egypt  
is also the God, who is the Father of  
Jesus Christ, who raised him from the dead  
and returned him to heaven to rule co-eternally.

In saying "We believe" enables us to unite  
not only our voices but also our hearts,  
minds, and spirits to not only profess the  
church's faith but also to live it out in the world.

In this creed we say "we" as the church.

The God of the Bible is not a God of human conjecture but a God who speaks.  
God reveals himself to us through words.  
In the opening verses of Genesis, God begins self-reflection by speaking and then throughout the Hebrew Old Testament and the Christian New Testament God never ceases speaking whether through the prophets and the psalmist, by Jesus, Peter, and Paul and the evangelists right on through to the closing verses of Revelation.

The God who marked the beginning of the universe by speaking into the empty void of the initial creation, saying "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3) also anticipates its culmination with the enthroned God declaring, "It is done I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 21:6).

"In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1)

This means that before there was anything else in this world, there was the Word of God.  
God's Word is performative speech-  
it does what it says

Just as God created something out of nothing, then called it good, so God continues to create new realities by the power of sheer Word.

Beloved people of God,  
all throughout today's spoken and sung liturgy,  
God's word speaks and thus creates and recreates,  
by declaring us forgiven from our sins;  
by greeting, welcoming, and bestowing grace  
upon us through the declaration of God's trinitarian name;  
by the singing of the Kyrie, the Canticle, the hymns  
solo, and communion hymns, we profess  
what God has done for us

In our Occasional Services,  
when we hear God's Word to the baptized  
joining them to the Trinity and to the people- the church

we hear God's word of love and union  
spoken to those who are united in matrimony;  
and we hear God's word of hope and resurrection  
spoken to those who mourn the dead.

God's Word is never static information  
but always creative transformation.  
God and God's Word creates, sustains,  
and delivers those who believe and call upon  
"the one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen."

Amen.

AMEN