

***Sermon Series: "I Believe in..."    Sermon Title: "Jesus"***  
***Luke 1:26-35; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 23:44-46; Matthew 28:1-10; I Corinthians 15:1-11***  
***Salem United Methodist Church; August 4, 2019***  
***Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling***

The Apostles' Creed was written in the first centuries of the church to codify who God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is, particularly who Jesus is. This is the reason that most of the Creed focuses on the life events of Jesus. Notice the Creed makes no reference to the teachings, healings, or miracles of Jesus. The intent of listing the events of Jesus' life is to affirm that Jesus is divine in human form and to dispel other beliefs about Jesus. There was one belief that Jesus was a divine spirit and not human. And another belief that Jesus was not divine, but just a great moral teacher. The intent of the Creed was to prove that Jesus, both fully human and divine, is the Son of God, who came from God yet born of a woman, died, was resurrected, and returned to God. As you read over the second verse of the Creed that pertains to Jesus, what events of Jesus' life are significant to you? Why are they significant to you? Are there any events of Jesus' life listed that you struggle to believe? Why do you struggle with them?

There are ten events of Jesus' life listed in the second verse of the Creed. One sermon cannot speak to all ten. I have prayed for discernment on which one of these ten events to talk about. I recognize that each Sunday our worship celebrates the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. Then during Advent and Christmas, we both celebrate and talk about the Virgin Birth of Jesus to Mary. During Easter we talk about the meaning of the Resurrection, but most of us skip over Christ's death. We go from the celebration of Palm Sunday to the celebration of the Resurrection on Easter. Perhaps we don't want to confront the horrific, painful death of Jesus on the cross. Yet, the cross holds significant meaning to those who believe in Jesus. The cross becomes a symbol of our faith. We display them in our churches and in public places. We wear crosses as jewelry. What significance does the execution of Jesus have for us? And what power does the death of Jesus on the cross hold?

Before we try to answer these questions, we need to review the events that led up to the Crucifixion of Jesus. Throughout his ministry Jesus' teachings were deemed as radical by the Pharisees, the men who interpreted the law of Moses for the people. The Pharisees were threatened by this new interpretation by Jesus and they wanted Jesus gone, so they schemed to find ways in which his teachings and actions broke the law. They challenged him repeatedly and every time Jesus answered with an even clearer interpretation of the law. When Jesus and his disciples came to Jerusalem for Passover, the Pharisees were afraid Jesus would disrupt the celebration and cause problems for the Roman guard. They bribed Judas to turn Jesus in and have him arrested. After his arrest, Jesus was tried before a Jewish tribunal called the Sanhedrin, and then taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea for trial. Pilate declared him innocent, but the people want him crucified. Jesus was tortured and humiliated by the Roman guards before he hauled the heavy horizontal beam of the cross up the hill to the place of execution. There he was nailed to the cross and hung there in excruciating pain in the hot sun. The Roman guards killed him by thrusting a spear into his side. His friends buried him in a nearby tomb. Then on Sunday Jesus rose from the dead.

The crucifixion of Jesus was traumatic for the followers of Jesus. They were filled with grief and fear even after the risen Jesus appears to them and offers peace. The early followers of Jesus tried to make sense of Jesus' death on the cross. Why did Jesus have to die such a gruesome, horrific death? We still struggle with the reason Jesus had to die. Couldn't God have thrown a going away party for Jesus and before he ascends into heaven announced, "You are all forgiven! God loves you!"?

Throughout the centuries, because our human language is limited, theologians have developed different explanations for Jesus' death using analogies. We use analogies when something is difficult to understand and we liken it to something that is easier to understand. The first analogy of Jesus' death is the phrase, "Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The early followers of Jesus soon

recognized the significance of Jesus being killed during the Passover, the time of remembrance when God freed the slaves from Egypt. During the first Passover, a lamb was sacrificed so the enslaved Israelites could be set free. In addition, God required the Jews to kill an animal: sheep, goat, or bull as a sacrificial offering for the atonement of their sins. The early believers began to ask: Could Jesus represent the sacrificial lamb that frees us from sin? Could Jesus be the Sacrificial Offering for the sins of humanity once and for all?

Before we move on, we need to define the phrase, the atonement of sin. The Greek word for sin is *hamartia* which means to miss the mark, another analogy. In college I took archery. We had ten arrows in which to aim and shoot into the bull's eye, the inner circle of the target. Inevitably, I would miss the mark, the bull's eye, with eight or nine arrows. When we sin, we are not loving, compassionate, just, merciful, giving, and honest and we miss God's mark. Most of the pain and suffering in the world occur because groups of people or people in power fail to practice love to others and miss God's mark. For the ancient Hebrews, offering an animal sacrifice was a way to admit that they missed the mark. Atonement occurred as God received their offerings and forgave them. Jesus, who we claim is divine in human form, humbled himself, submitted himself to death on a cross so we would be reminded that we are forgiven when we miss the mark, and that we can be changed so that we can hit the mark the next time. This is a meaning of atonement. Here is another analogy of atonement. Our sin separates us from God. When we hurt someone we love, when we do something behind their back and lie to them, it is hard to look them in the eye. Our sin separates us from the person we love, so it is with God. Sin creates a great chasm between us and God. Jesus' death builds a bridge over that chasm so we can be reconciled with God, made one with God, thus a play on the word, atonement to be "at-one-ment."

This is the role of Jesus. Even his name in Hebrew, Yeshua, means to deliver or save. Jesus came to deliver us from the pull and the power of sin. He came to show us who God is and how much God loves us. Jesus came to demonstrate what selfless sacrificial love is. He came to change us from being egocentric, narcissistic, and self-absorbed into people who love God and each other. Jesus means to save and he does save us from our sinful nature and transforms us to be more loving and reconcile us to God.

Many have asked, "Did Jesus need to suffer and die on the cross to save us?" I will answer this with a NO. Jesus can save us anywhere or anytime, but consider this. Perhaps we needed Jesus to suffer and die on the cross to save us. Perhaps we needed to be reminded of our sinful nature and God's amazing grace and love for us. Perhaps we needed to know that God is more powerful than sin and death. Adam Hamilton writes, "Jesus did suffer and die for our sins-not because God insisted on torturing [God's] son in order to satisfy or appease [God's] wrath, but because by this dramatic act God hoped to finally break through to us, to affect and change us, to save us from our sin and alienation from God."

Jesus' death on the cross has this significance for me. I need to be reminded every day that I am in need of grace of Jesus. I need his transforming love to help me see others as Jesus sees them, to love as Jesus loves them. I need his grace to do no harm: to not think, say, write, or do harmful things. I need his grace to be compassionate, to offer healing and reconciliation, to care, to be kind, to love. I wear a cross every day to physically remind me every morning that I need Jesus to be with me throughout the day. I believe in Jesus because he first loved me and spread his arms out to receive me and my sins.

When Charles Wesley discovered what Jesus' death on the cross meant to him, he wrote a poem entitled, "Glory to God, and Praise and Love." We sing five or six of the seventeen verses as "O For A Thousand Tongues to Sing." He describes his understanding of Jesus' death in the fifth verse, "I felt my Lord's atoning blood close to my soul applied; me, me he loved, the Son of God, for me, for me he died!"

**Resources:** *Creed: What Christians Believe and Why* by Adam Hamilton; *Christian Theology* by Alister McGrath; *The United Methodist Hymnal*

