

“Credo, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Part Three: **God’s Only Son**”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for January 12<sup>th</sup> 2020 (Baptism of the Lord Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 3: 13-17

Early on in the Book *Acts*—indeed, in the very first chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles*—the disciples faced a rather thorny problem: that of replacing Judas Iscariot, whose betrayal had brought to a tragic close his participation in the life of the community of Jesus’ followers. As they ponder that challenge, Simon Peter addresses them...and makes the point that they must choose, to replace Judas, not just any well-meaning chap, but *one of those who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.*<sup>i</sup> **Beginning! Beginning from the baptism of John.** Serving as a powerful reminder of the importance—the pride of place—Christ’s baptism at the hands of John held for the life of the early church. And yes: its importance, its pride of place is well testified by the fact that it is one of the few episodes—one of the very few episodes—found in all four of the New Testament Gospels.

Furthermore—without glossing over the very real variations, the fascinating variations, found in the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism—it is hard to deny that the central elements found in all four versions are, on the one hand, the dove descending on Christ as he emerges from the waters of the Jordan and, on the other hand and perhaps even more impressively, the voice heard from heaven testifying to Jesus.<sup>ii</sup> **Testifying.** And doing so making use of one key word: the word “son”. Son as in: *Behold, a voice from heaven said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*<sup>iii</sup> Hardly surprising—given the astonishing claim made by the voice from heaven...hardly surprising that this episode’s impact was such that, in a very real sense, it came to be regarded by the early church as the true starting point of Jesus’ public ministry. And yes: hardly surprising that it found a place in all four of the Gospels. *And behold: a voice from heaven said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*

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Fair to suggest, I think...fair to suggest that this is where the rubber meets the road, that this is where our ancient Creed—the Apostle’s Creed—truly begins to embrace its mandate of articulating the core elements—the **distinctive** elements—of the Christian faith. So far we have been able to skirt around—to dance around—this central proposition: commenting on the Jewishness of Jesus on Christmas Sunday, and on the decidedly non-Jewish nature of the movement—the Christian Church—that would arise in the aftermath of his life, his death, and his resurrection. But this morning, with the use of that weighty word “Son”, to be precise the phrase **God’s only Son**, something quite radical and—from the standpoint of our Jewish and Islamic sisters and brothers—something quite scandalous here comes into the light of day.

To be precise: it is here that Judaism and Islam have no choice but to part company with Christianity. Indeed: I once read a wise Jewish thinker who made the point that it is simply impossible for a faithful, observant Jew—one who knows his own tradition—to speak in the way the Christian tradition speaks of Jesus as God’s Son. This writer hastened to add that there is no comparable problem with any of the other titles with which Christians crown Jesus, including the most basic title of them all: the title “Christ” which means Messiah. A thoughtful Jew should have no trouble thinking of Jesus in Messianic terms, even if they regard him kindly as a “failed” Messiah...or not so kindly as a “false” Messiah. Either way, they are using a Jewish category—that of the Messiah, the Saviour, the Liberator—that makes perfect sense within a Jewish worldview. But to speak of God’s Son—of God’s only Son—is to conjure up something deeply problematic, deeply abhorrent. And much the same...much the same can be said of the Islamic response to the notion of Christ as God’s Son. Even those Muslims who have great respect for Jesus as a prophet and a teacher, will draw the line here: at the Christian claim that Jesus is the Son of God.

And it’s worth pointing out that the Apostle’s Creed, in a sense, doesn’t quite spell any of this out, but alludes to where the real issue lies. Because here’s the heart of the matter. Embedded in the notion of Jesus’ Sonship—the contention that Jesus Christ is God’s only Son—is an implicit claim to **divinity**: a claim that sits within the Apostle’s Creed as a kind of ticking time bomb, in the very fact that it adds to its first paragraph (about God the Father) a second paragraph (about the only Son) and a third paragraph (about the Holy Spirit). The addition of those two further paragraphs entail a clear—but not fully spelled out—claim to divinity for the Son and for the Spirit: claims which are articulated far more fully...

...far more fully in the somewhat longer ancient creed—known as the Nicene Creed: a creed which includes the claim:

**We believe in the 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  
for us and for our salvation.<sup>iv</sup>**

The shapers of the Nicene Creed weren’t leaving anything to chance, now were they? But please! Do not be too quick to presume that’s the sort of thing we enlightened mainline Protestants left behind long ago in a place far away. As recently as 2006, the General Council of the United Church of Canada, meeting in Thunder Bay, ratified our most recent creedal statement, known as “The Song of Faith”. Although the Song does not use the language of Christ’s “Sonship”, it does not shy away—as it sings of Jesus—from claiming divinity for Christ: proclaiming him as **God incarnate** and insisting that:

**we celebrate him as the Word made flesh,  
the one in whom God and humanity are perfectly joined.<sup>v</sup>**

Make no mistake about it! When the Apostle's Creed adds that tiny "and" to its initial invitation for us to believe in **God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth...**

...when it refuses to shut-up, but instead adds a second paragraph in which we are invited to believe in **Jesus Christ, God's only Son**...what is henceforth at stake is the central Christian claim. That God was in Christ!<sup>vi</sup> That the Word—which was **with** God from the beginning—not only was "with" God, but **was** God.<sup>vii</sup> The divinity of Christ...the divinity of the Word...the divinity of Jesus....that's what is at stake...that and nothing less, when we begin the second paragraph of the ancient Christian creed.

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If the divinity of Christ is what's at stake in all of this...the clear corollary involves the undeniable fact (some might describe it as the depressing fact) that the Christian enterprise, from a very early point in time, became immersed in theology: became immersed in God-talk. Depending upon the theological mood from generation to generation, Christian thinkers sometimes regard that as a very bad thing. As a matter of fact, it was fashionable amongst a certain subset of 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian historians, to blame all of this on the Greeks, specifically the Greek philosophic tradition which—if it had only kept its hands off of the pristine non-theological Jewish tradition—might have spared us all the conceptual somersaults Christian thinkers have been performing for the better part of the past 20 centuries. That, of course, is nonsense: because the insistence—in the midst of a **monotheistic** tradition—that this fellow Jesus was, in fact, none other than God—that insistence (either inspired or blasphemous!) would have called out for some kind of explanation: one that employed some alternative conceptual framework had the Greek philosophic framework not been at hand. Consider!

...consider the following: the following seven propositions, based on this morning's Gospel episode, in which the dove descends and the voice is heard from heaven as Jesus rises from the waters having received John's baptism. Consider the following 7 propositions.

- 1. The Father whose voice is heard to speak from heaven is God.**
- 2. The One who is baptized by John is God.**
- 3. The Holy Spirit who descends like a dove is God.**
- 4. The Father whose words bear witness to the Son is not the Son.**
- 5. The Son to whom the heavens open is not the Holy Spirit but—as he rises from the Jordan—is equipped by the Spirit.**

**6. The Holy Spirit who rests on the Son in the Jordan in the aftermath of his baptism is not the Father but is sent by the Father.**

**7. There is only one God.**

**Your head hurt yet?<sup>viii</sup>**

. Do you see why the Christian tradition had no choice but to become a theologically dense tradition: above all a tradition in which we had no choice—once we claimed divinity for Christ and further down the road divinity for the Spirit...

...do you see why our tradition had no choice not only to think theologically (who is this God we worship, who is this God who came to us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit?)...but also why those theological thoughts had no choice but to become Trinitarian thoughts: God in three persons, blessed Trinity. You see: at the end of the day, what is really and truly at stake when we worship the Triune God, is whether we are committing blasphemy or whether we are worshipping rightly as we worship the Son and the Spirit as fully and truly divine: as no less divine than the One Jesus himself worshipped as Abba, Father. We may not be equipped to follow all of the ins and outs of the theological debates; much of the language may seem terribly odd and at times far too abstract for our little minds...but that which is at stake matters...ought to matter any time we gather to worship the Son...any time we gather to worship Christ. Then again...then again.

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It's entirely possible...perhaps even likely...that the real value (the cash value so to speak) of this whole business won't truly become clear until we wind our way to Good Friday...to Holy Saturday...to Easter Sunday. Perhaps it is only when we reach that painful/joyful conclusion to the story...perhaps it is only when we behold the horror of the Cross on that awful Friday...when we endure the empty ache of his absence on that puzzling Saturday...only when we rejoice in the strange beauty and haunting mystery of his empty tomb on Sunday...

...perhaps it is only then and there that it becomes apparent how much it matters that this whole business not simply be reducible to one puzzling episode to be placed side by side with the countless other puzzling episodes scattered across the landscape of humanity's at times brutal history. Perhaps it is only as we stand before the Cross...only as we rejoice before the empty tomb...that we will begin to comprehend how important it is—for us and for our salvation—that this whole drama is one in which God is implicated from start to finish. That it is, indeed, God who has gone to work on our behalf in and through this Jesus and yes: that it is God's own power and God's own love—God's love, ironically, made known in weakness—that is being manifested in every word spoken and every action undertaken on our behalf by this Jesus who comes to us not merely as a good man...

...though a good man he most certainly was...

...but that his Word and his Way were nothing less than God's own Word and God's own Way in our midst. With us...and for us: as the story reaches its shocking climax on Calvary Hill....but with us...and for us...from the very outset!

In the Bethlehem manger. In the adoring gaze of Mary and Joseph. In the awestruck wordlessness of the shepherds. In the gifts of the Magi. Above all...above all: some thirty years later, on the banks of the Jordan! As the holy dove descends. As the Voice rings forth from heaven bearing witness to the beloved Son. God in our midst! God, our God: doing a new thing...in person....paying a house-call: with love as its true fount and its ultimate goal. And Christ...the beloved...Christ the only Son...at the centre of it all. The One in whom we can and must and shall come to place our trust. Word made flesh! True God from true God! For us and for our salvation.

May it be so! Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 1: 22

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 3: 13-17, Mark 1: 9-11, Luke 3: 21-22, John 1: 29-34

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 3:17

<sup>iv</sup> Voices United, page 920

<sup>v</sup> "The Song of Faith" <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/song-faith>

<sup>vi</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:19

<sup>vii</sup> John 1:1

<sup>viii</sup> I adapted this list from a similar list that was based on the scripture texts for the Fourth Sunday of Advent. See: <https://crackersandgrapejuice.com/the-christmas-creed-in-a-nutshell/?fbclid=IwAR11AfQdniiwHauBoHj7Cn8qMlmoF84lXrXkqHQRT46NURkCoE3p-jyrDAQ>