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LENT GUIDE

2024

newcityabq.org

New City Church

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Introduction

By Aliza Loya

The Apostles' Creed has been adopted by Christians around the world as a unifying testimony of our faith in Christ. Much like the Lord's Prayer provides a basic structure for prayer, the Apostles Creed provides an outline of the tenets of our faith. As we observe Lent this year, we will utilize the Creed to reflect on our need for a Savior, repent from the sin that overtakes us, and grow in the knowledge and wisdom of God.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy [world-wide]* church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

*The Apostles' Creed commonly uses the word "catholic" here which is an adjective meaning "all-encompassing."

(Taken from the New City Church website)

What is Lent?

In Matthew 4, Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit where he fasts for 40 days and nights. After resisting temptation by the devil, Jesus then begins His public ministry. Christians around the world observe Lent for 40 days, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday, as a way to draw near to God, reflecting on our need for a Savior. As sin separates mankind from fellowship with God, we were destined to eternity without Him. But, in His mercy, God the Father sent His Son, Jesus the Christ, to suffer the penalty of death so that we would not have to. Now, God lives inside of us as the Holy Spirit, empowering us to serve one another with spiritual gifts.

Traditionally, Lent is practiced in three ways - prayer and reading scripture, fasting, and almsgiving. Here are some examples of each expression:

- Prayer and reading scripture - Read through one of the gospels or start a Bible reading plan. Bring requests and concerns for others to God. Begin praying specifically for the person in your life who needs Jesus, who we refer to as “the one”. Pray for the church (worldwide or local). Consider praying on one topic for the duration of Lent. However you structure your prayer time, come before the Lord with thanksgiving and reverence. The one true God is listening and attentive to you! A great resource for guided prayer is *Face to Face* by Kenneth Boa.
- Fasting - Abstain from something to remind you of God’s sufficiency in your life. Give up the regular morning coffee stop or takeout for lunch and spend that time thanking God for His provision. Delete social media for the duration of Lent and become friends with God - every time you would otherwise pick up your phone, tell God about your day, your current mood and feelings, take a walk to appreciate the creation He made with you in mind.
- Almsgiving - Perform acts of benevolence (kindness) and charity toward those in need. Let prayer guide you toward compassion for your neighbor. Perhaps “the one” in your life is in need. Prayerfully give gifts of time or money where the Holy Spirit leads you.

These three practices are usually combined. For example, if you pray for the needs of our city daily while fasting during lunch, the money you save by foregoing takeout might be donated to an organization serving people in need.

Ideas for Observing Lent Together

Join with your New City community group to observe Lent together. Ask a friend for their support. Gather once per week to pray for each other and discuss the week's readings. Write down your questions and bring them to the Lent gathering between services.

Students: You have unique opportunities for service and prayer. Set a time with your youth group to prayer walk around your schools and neighborhoods. Look out for other students who may be struggling with friendships and introduce yourself. Skip your lunch and pay on someone else's lunch account. Offer to clean up a classroom, the yard around your house, or (deep breath) your sibling's room!

Families: Set aside time for family prayer. Create a list of friends and family members everyone would like to pray for. Fast from dessert one night a week and check in on neighbors who might need a hand. Create opportunities for kids to set aside change for donation to one of New City's ministry partners.

Shine Partnership
New Mexico Dream Center
Kids Club
Navigators Campus Ministry
Ciudad de Gracia
Juntos

However you choose to observe Lent, resist the temptation toward perfection. Jesus has already crushed death. There is nothing we must do to complete the work of redemption. Romans 10:9 says "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

So, thank God for His grace and respond with reverent prayer, asking Him what He would have you do to deepen your relationship with Him during this season.

Ash Wednesday

By Aliza Loya

Today is a day of lament, traditionally observed with prayer and fasting to mourn over the sin that separated us from God and destroyed His perfect plan for a world filled with beauty, goodness and truth.

In Genesis 1, God creates the Universe and everything in it with just a word. Adam and Eve are given the responsibility of stewardship over the land and animals. They come to know God the Creator as God the Father and they enjoy closeness with Him. However, in Genesis 3, we discover that while Adam and Eve have been provided all they require, their eyes desire what hasn't been given to them. From selfish will, they fall into disobedience and are separated from the Holy God, locked out of the Garden of Eden, suffering the consequences of sin. Romans 5:12 tells us that sin and death came through one man and spread to all mankind. Because sin was unleashed in the Garden, penetrating the hearts of mankind, we now suffer the presence of sin in our own hearts and separation from the Holy God.

Silent Reflection: Isaiah 59:2 says, "but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." Enter a time of silent reflection to remember when you were apart from God and became aware of your need for a Savior.

Prayer of Confession: Holy God, who delighted to set the foundations of the earth for mankind to enjoy, I confess that I have allowed my selfish desires to magnify my own will over Yours. Because I do not gaze at Your face longer and more deeply than I gaze at my own, I do not enjoy your Presence in my life as I could. My soul is imprinted with the memory of Your voice in the Garden, yet it also remembers the pain of sin. Let me enjoy the sweetness of walking with You again. Amen

Devotional: 1 John 1:6-10 says "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." If we're willing to be honest, there are times we become frustrated with God when we feel we've done everything right, yet bad things are happening to us. We question Him for the challenges we face, we blame Him for the results we didn't expect, and we'll even scandalize His name in public by shaming His bride, the church. We complain to Him, instead of worshiping Him. We lift haughty eyes to heaven before bowing our heads in reverence. Like rebellious children, we trample the heart of God our Father and forget the thoughtfulness of God the Creator. We walk as those who are

righteous, with crossed fingers behind our backs, unwilling to recognize our disobedience.

Walking with God in fellowship requires our honest admission of our shortcomings and rebellion. He calls us to Himself - how will we answer?

How do you know you are in need of a Savior? If you are a believer in Christ, what did He rescue you from? If you have doubts about your need for a Savior, write them here, too.

Action steps: Attend an Ash Wednesday service to commemorate your need for salvation. The ashes we receive on our forehead mark us as mourners, grieving over our sins.

Next, with your family, friends, or individually, commit to one of the practices of Lent described in the Introduction. In Matthew 11:27-30, Jesus promises to lighten the burden of religion, calling all who were exhausted from the weight of religious obedience into a relationship of grace. As you select your own expression of Lent, remember that you are not working for your salvation. Jesus has completed that work. These expressions are merely a response to God because of His great love expressed by Jesus' sacrifice for our sins. We deny ourselves during Lent to draw closer to Him and grow in our knowledge of Him.

Circle one expression you will commit to?

Prayer

Fasting

Almsgiving

Write down the name of the person (the "one") you would like to know God for themselves. Make a list of names if you are with family or friends.

Closing prayer: Ask God for guidance on how to pray, what you may fast from, and where to give. Write down anything He brings to mind.

God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit

By Aliza Loya

Read The Apostles' Creed at the beginning of this guide. In the first few lines, we find a statement of faith in the Trinity, the three persons of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are united and reveal Himself in different roles.

Silent Reflection: Read John 1:1-5 and contemplate the words "In the beginning was the Word...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Prayer of Confession: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I confess that in my daily routine I forget about your constant presence. From the beginning of time, You've held the universe and everything in it, in Your hand. I confess that I don't live in light of this truth. I confess that I often see myself in control of my time, my family, my friends - my life. Forgive me for forgetting your sovereignty and at times, ignoring Your presence. Though You are Divine and high above all things, You made Yourself known to us through Jesus Christ, and You've given Your Holy Spirit to live inside us. Let me remember Your name with reverence and bow down in worship because of your love, Lord, God, Creator of all things. Amen.

Devotional: Remember that Adam and Eve walked with God in the Garden of Eden, enjoying a close relationship with Him. There were no boundaries between them and the presence of God. Then, sin severed their intimacy. At once, Holy God and His image-bearing man were divided. In a moment of rebellion, man lost our purpose - to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, in reverent companionship with Him. In Exodus 33:20, God says no man can see Him and live, and again in John 6:46, we're told, "not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father."

The only way to return to God's presence was to pay for our sins by the sacrifice of lambs. In the Old Testament, blood-soaked ground testifies to the wicked heart of man. But God wanted true fellowship with us again. The Father set in motion His plan to redeem His people and save us from the consequences of sin. God sends Jesus, His Son, to pay for our sins by dying on the cross. God then raises Him from the dead, defeating death forever. If we put our trust in Him, we are saved from eternal separation from God. We can be restored to the close relationship with Him, just as Adam and Eve once had. Mark 16:19 says that God the Son is the physical revelation of God, who now sits at the right hand of the Father in Heaven.

As we repent, our relationship with God is restored, and God the Holy Spirit empowers us to do the will of God and to be transformed 2 Corinthians 3:18 "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Jesus tells His disciples in John 14:25-26 that the Holy Spirit will teach them and help them remember what He has said.

Acts 2:38 says that the Holy Spirit is a gift of God through faith in Jesus who forgives our sins. If you are a believer in Christ, you are called a temple of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 6:19 and God lives inside you!

As we grow in our knowledge of God and become more insightful, it's possible to forget that God is complex beyond our understanding. We can be tempted to believe that the three persons of God are separate or in a hierarchy, one being more important than another. We might also think of them according to a timeline - God first, then Jesus, with the Holy Spirit arriving last. Consider this as just one example of the deep mystery of God: Genesis 1:26 says, "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." If God was the only person present at creation...who is He speaking to?

Reflection: Which person of the Trinity do you feel you understand the most? What questions do you have about God the Father, Jesus the Son, or the Holy Spirit? What kind of relationship do you have with Him? Maybe you are unsure of your relationship with Him at all - write your doubts and concerns here too.

Action Steps: Using your computer or device, do a search for scriptures about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Write down the ones that will help you know them better. Pray for your "one" person to meet and know God.

With friends or a small group, talk about your own encounters with the Trinity. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is called the Holy Ghost. Does this affect your feelings about Him? How might we distinguish between the traditional definition of ghost and the Holy Spirit?

As a family, read the account of creation in Genesis 1. God called everything He created "good". What are some of the good things in creation that you enjoy? Do you think that God created rose bushes and weeds with thorns? Why do you think that?

Remember the Holiness of the Father, the Friendship of the Son and the Gift of the Holy Spirit as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: God, I admit that I don't fully understand who You are. Would you please help me know You better? I want to know you as my King and Father; Just Ruler, yet Merciful Lord; Mighty Warrior, yet Gracious Redeemer. I want to honor Your Spirit inside me. Give me the grace, faith, and courage to obey You, even when I don't understand. Amen.

Christ Crucified *By Taeler Larsen*

In this season of Lent we recognize our need for the cross. In Psalm 51 David cries out, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.” In this moment, David recognizes the depth of his sin and knows that only God can heal him. Today, we reflect on Christ’s work on the cross and ask that God would reveal both our desperate need for him as well as the joy and hope we have in Christ’s finished work.

Silent Reflection: What are we like when we fail to live with an awareness of sin? What are we like when we fail to live with confidence in God’s grace?

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus’ death on the cross does more than just grant us forgiveness of our sins – we receive Jesus’ righteousness! In Christ, we have complete right standing before God and we can approach him with confidence.

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I confess that I often try to live out of my own righteousness, forgetting that I have the freedom to acknowledge my weakness and cry to you for help. Thank you for paying the price that I could never pay.

Devotional: As a preschool teacher, I have seen endless examples of children that are not ashamed to boast. All day long I hear statements such as “I’m a really good singer” or “I can run faster than my dad”. Their sweet, childlike declarations are a reflection of what we adults often believe our strength lies in (physical strength, success, influence, etc.). We boast (often in more subtle ways than our children) as a way of celebrating.

In Galatians 6:14, Paul says that he boasts in the cross of Christ Jesus our Lord. Boasting is a means of rejoicing in what we think shows strength. We boast in the cross because it is where our strength lies – a strength we did nothing to gain. God’s love and goodness toward his people is revealed in the suffering of his son – an act of love done to bring us who were far from God, close to him once again.

Reflection: What do you boast about? Often the area of my life where I most struggle with insecurity or anxiety reveals where I believe my strength and value lie. Insecurity and anxiety often arise in my life when something I boast in is threatening to fail. The cross anchors us in God’s goodness and love for us and when we boast in it we boast in something that is steadfast and unchanging. “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the

love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” How might believing this truth address some insecurity in your life? How might it bring you joy?

Action steps: Individually or with friends, consider Ephesians 2:11-22. By the blood of Jesus Christ we have been brought near to God. However, this passage takes it even further! Not only are we reconciled to God but the grace of Jesus also leads to reconciliation toward one another. What does this passage say that God has done to the divisions and hostility?

In light of Christ’s work on the cross and the peace he has brought, take a moment to contemplate how this might affect your week. Is there a specific expression of worship that you might do in light of today’s reflection? Remember that you are in no way required to respond in one particular way.

Optional expressions this week might include a time of confession as you sit with both the weight and beauty of the cross. Maybe it means welcoming someone in your church body who you have yet to get to know or find it hard to relate to. Or perhaps you need to spend time in worship – reflecting on the blessings received through Christ’s work on the cross (revisit Ephesians 2:11-22 if you need a prompt). Maybe your expression looks different from these examples, and that’s okay!

As a family, talk about a time you were apart from people you love. How did it feel to be reunited? Jesus made it possible for us to be reunited with God!

Remember Christ crucified as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: God, thank you for sending your son so that I might have access to you. Help me to grow in my understanding of what an amazing gift that is. I thank you that Jesus came that we might have life and have it to the full.

Resurrected and Ascended

By Gary Chorpenning

If saving non-material human souls is all that matters, what is the point of the bodily resurrection of Jesus? If the goal of the Christian faith is to get souls into heaven, then the bodily resurrection of Jesus is irrelevant and unnecessary. And yet, there can be little doubt that the New Testament writers were very insistent that Jesus was raised again to life in physical form. It was not, they insist, merely some sort of “spiritual resurrection” that took place on the third day after his crucifixion. Jesus was raised in physical, bodily form. The New Testament will accept nothing less than that or other than that.

Silent Reflection: Read Luke 24:1-12. Imagine yourself in the place of the apostles when the women came rushing in to report what the angels have told them. How would you react? Why?

Prayer of Confession: Lord Jesus, death, decay, and despair are all around me. I have the new life of your resurrection in me, but I often fail to bring life and light into this broken and troubled world. Help me today to be more alert to the ways you want to pour your resurrection life into the world around me. Amen.

Devotional: On the first Easter evening, Luke tells us, Jesus appeared suddenly to his disciples. They were, Luke says, “frightened and thought they saw a spirit.” (Luke 24:37) But he was not a mere spirit. “Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I do.” (Luke 24:39)

That event, the bodily resurrection of a dead person, was something quite new and quite remarkable. And that was what the first Christians declared to the world. That declaration was what they based their lives on and for which many gave their lives.

The belief that human spirits continued to exist after the death of the body was nothing new. Most Jews of Jesus’ day believed that. Most pagans of Jesus’ day believed that. If that was all that the first Christians were claiming about Jesus, none of their contemporaries would have been particularly surprised or interested.

But the first Christians were declaring that Jesus had been raised bodily from the dead. All four gospels emphasize the empty tomb. At sunrise on the first Easter, some of the women disciples went to Jesus’ tomb, planning to tend to his corpse. Instead, they were met (and terrified) by an angel who asked them a question that is full of significance. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Then the angel points to the emptiness of the tomb and says, “He is not *here*, but has risen.” (Luke 24:5 & 6) The tomb is empty because Jesus has risen bodily and walked away.

To be sure, Jesus' resurrection brought about a remarkable transformation in his body. But at least two facts about it are clear. First, though it may have been transformed in some astonishing ways, it was still recognizably the same body that had endured crucifixion. The scars in his hands, feet, and side were still present. And second, it was, as I've already mentioned, a physical body. Jesus invited them to touch him and feel his physical reality. (John 20:27) Jesus also made a point of eating in front of them, something mere spirits would certainly be incapable of doing (see Luke 24:41-43 & John 21:9-14).

Now there are two especially important reasons why the bodily resurrection is so central to the Christian faith. First, it is in the resurrection of Jesus' dead body that his victory over death is accomplished. As I've mentioned already, if Christians were only claiming that Jesus continued to exist as some sort of disembodied spirit after his crucifixion, their claim would have been nothing new, then or now. In Jesus' physical resurrection, physical death and all other expressions of death are defeated (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

A second great truth that the bodily resurrection of Jesus demonstrates is that God has not forsaken his creation. In Jesus, God is not just saving souls out of the world. God is in Jesus saving us and the whole creation from slavery to death (Romans 8:19-23). The resurrection of Jesus is a foretaste of a new creation, when God will make all things new. We'll explore that in more depth next week when we reflect on Christ's return.

The resurrection of Jesus will not be a unique event. The Bible promises that what Jesus experienced in his resurrection we too will experience. Like Jesus, we too will one day be raised up from death in new, redeemed bodies (1 Corinthians 15:50-57). This truth we will reflect on more deeply in the last devotional in this guide on Easter.

Reflection: As the Apostles' Creed points out, the Bible tells us that the bodily resurrected Jesus has ascended to the throne of God. There he continues his ministry as King. He prays for us to the Father and directs the work of the Holy Spirit among us. In what ways might Jesus' ascended ministry give you comfort and assurance as you live and serve him today?

Action steps: Individually or with a group, read and discuss Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 4:14-16.

With your family, talk about the word "resurrection". What does it mean? Besides Jesus, who has or will experience "resurrection", according to the Bible?

Remember Christ resurrected and with the Father in Heaven as you practice prayer, fasting, and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: Living Lord Jesus, live in me today and always. Amen.

Returning *By Gary Chorprenning*

Surely, there are few biblical topics that have generated as many books, articles, Bible studies, and sermons as the topic of the return of Christ. They are often filled with charts and tables and complex speculations that make quantum physics seem simple. A. W. Tozer writes this, "There have been enough foolish formulas advanced about the return of Christ by those who were simply curious to cause many believers to give the matter no further thought or concern" (p. 90, *The Apostles' Creed*).

Silent Reflection: Maybe the key passage for our reflection on the return of the Lord Jesus is found in Revelation 21:1-3. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'"

Read those verses a few times, then reflect on what it might mean for you to be dwelling with God.

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I am not the new creature you intend me to be. In your mercy, show me the places in my life where sin and evil still live. And by your Spirit, enable me to uproot it so that more and more I might reflect the goodness of your coming new creation. Amen.

Devotional: Imagine this. You find yourself stranded in a dangerous and unnerving neighborhood at midnight. You call a friend. You wait anxiously. Finally, your friend pulls up in her car. She pushes open the passenger door and yells, "Come on! Get in and let's get out of here!" You drive off together to someplace that feels safe and comfortable, leaving that dangerous neighborhood to stew in its wrack and ruin.

That's often how the return of Christ is portrayed in popular Christian thought. But is that how the Bible presents it? What we see in the passage quoted above is a very different picture of Christ's return.

What we see in Revelation 21 is that Jesus is not returning for a brief curbside pick-up in order to take us away. Rather, Jesus is returning to settle in and take up residence with us on the new redeemed earth where he will reign and rule as king forever.

But we should take comfort and live in confident expectation, because the earth where Jesus will take up residence with us will not be this same old thorn-infested earth we live in now. "Behold," Jesus assures us, "I am making all things new." (Revelation 21:5; see also v. 4)

The Apostles' Creed speaks of "making all things new," though we often miss its meaning. It says, "He will come **to judge the living and the dead.**" We are prone to think of God's judgment and God's work of redemption as separate and opposite things. But the Bible presents things differently. There we see judgment not as something separate and opposite to redemption, but rather as a necessary part of the work of making "all things new." If God is going to make a new creation, one that is again "very good" (Genesis 1:31), then the "thorns and thistles" (Genesis 3:18), the evil that we human beings have brought into the world has to be removed. That's what judgment is about.

But let's be careful. The sin and evil that needs to be judged isn't just "out there" in the world. It's also inside of each of us. There is no room for arrogance on our part. Our sin and evil needs to be judged and removed, too. It has been judged when Jesus took it to the cross for us. And it is being removed from us now by the working of the Holy Spirit within us, making us new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is even now at work in us and in the world, preparing the way for the new creation. Jesus challenges us on this point. When the Master returns, what will he find? Will he find us hiding in a corner or seeking our own comfort and pleasure? Or will he find us alert and prepared (see the parables in Matthew 25)? Will he find us as lights shining in the darkness (Matthew 5:14-16)?

Reflection: Jesus, the "Master of the house" might return at any moment. How do you feel about that fact? Afraid? Eager? Confused? Reflect on what life in a world that is again "very good" might be like.

Action Steps: Individually or with a small group, identify some concrete way in which you might be more at work preparing the way for the new creation that Jesus will bring about at his return. What are some specific ways you might begin to do that work today?

Genesis 3:18 describes how the very good world that God had made became full of "thorns and thistles" after sin came into the world. Those thorns represent ways in which the world is not now the way it's supposed to be. Talk with your children about things they might do that will pull up some of the thorns in this broken world, and in that way prepare the way for God's new creation and show others what that might look like when Jesus returns to make everything new.

Remember Christ's future return as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, I long for that day when you will make all things new. Show me how by your Spirit at work through me I can even now begin to make some things new. Amen.

The Communion of the Church *By Gary Chorpensing*

This week we'll explore that article of the Apostles' Creed that reads, "I believe in . . . the holy catholic Church and the communion of saints." Two words in this article of the Creed are especially tricky for us modern readers. So, let's get a basic definition of those words before we begin our devotional.

First, the word is "catholic." We often associate that word with a particular denomination of Christians. But the word didn't originally stand for only one segment of the Christian Church but was a way of speaking of the whole Church in its entirety. In modern English dictionaries, "catholic" is generally defined as "universal." That definition isn't wrong, but the Greek origins of the word can, I think, help us get a fuller sense of what the Creed is getting at. The Apostles' Creed in its earliest versions was probably first set out in Greek. The word "catholic" comes from the Greek word "*katholikos*", which itself is based on a prepositional phrase meaning "according to or with reference to the whole". The Creed declares that Christ's Church is one whole and not a bunch of separated fragments.

The second term is "communion". These days I don't think this word is ever used except in church, and even there we mostly only use it as another word for the Lord's Supper. Here in the Creed, the word refers to a deep, shared relationship among all those people who are in a deep relationship with Jesus Christ. That deep relationship among the people of God is created by the presence of God's Spirit in us. Even though most of the millions and millions of Christian people do not know each other in a personal way, we are all still bound together in communion with each other because of this presence and working of God's Spirit. We are knit together as one people, one family, one body.

Silent Reflection: Read Hebrews 12:1-2 at least three times slowly. Have you encountered faithful witnesses to Jesus in surprising or unexpected places?

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I have often been too proud. My pride has sometimes made me unwilling to cross economic, cultural, and racial boundaries. By your Spirit, soften my proud heart and open me to your witnesses wherever they come from. Amen.

Devotional: In Revelation 5:9, the apostle John describes the Church as being made up of people from "every tribe and language and people and nation." (See Revelation 7:9 and 14:6 where he uses very similar phrases.) Clearly, John means us to understand that Jesus gathers his flock, the Church, from all corners of the human race. None of the categories that we humans seem to love using to divide ourselves one from another—language, race, ethnicity, nationality, and other such things—are to have any bearing on membership in the Church of Jesus Christ.

There are several ways we modern American Christians are prone to allow human categories to divide us. We American Christians can find ourselves thinking of American Christianity as “standard” or “normal” Christianity. We recognize that there are Christians in Africa and Asia, the Middle East and South America, but we are prone, maybe without quite realizing it, to assume that American Christianity is somehow more advanced or sophisticated than the Christianity in other parts of the world. That way of thinking shows itself in our assumption that Christians in those other places have much to learn from us but that we have nothing much to learn from them.

It is still all too easy for us to almost unthinkingly assume that the Western and particularly the American church is the standard by which all others should be measured. But that unthinking pride can demean our non-American brothers and sisters and deprive us of the spiritual wisdom and insights that those sisters and brothers of other places and cultures might bring us, if we would be willing to open ourselves to receive it.

God is not creating his Church from “every tribe and language and people and nation” so that American Christians can teach them, but rather so that all of us might mutually learn from one another and lift one another up in the Spirit. Christ’s Church is a global “catholic” Church, undivided by national borders or cultural backgrounds, one family bound together by the one Spirit of God.

Just as the communion of the “holy catholic Church” is not divided by national and cultural boundaries, it is also not divided by time. Another assumption that we modern Christians are prone to is the assumption that the modern Church is wiser and more sophisticated than the Church of past times. We Americans get trained up from early on to believe that the latest thing is the best thing, and we can easily import that belief into the way we think about the Christian faith. When we do, we can cut ourselves off from the wisdom of the generations of Christians who have gone before us.

The communion of the holy catholic church extends to the past, to the believers who have gone before us. The writer of Hebrews calls them a “[great] cloud of witnesses” who testify to us about the faithfulness of God. Those generations of brothers and sisters in Christ who have gone before us can not only help us break through the barrier of time that separates us from them, but they do come to us from cultures, languages, and peoples very different from our own.

It is so very important to us that we allow ourselves to hear from believers who speak to us from different situations from our own, different experiences of life, different cultures, and different cultural outlooks. The unbelieving cultures in which we live often create biases and blind spots that we are unaware of. These believers who are very different from us can help us recognize our blind spots and our biases. But in order for that to happen, we need to nurture a humble and teachable spirit in ourselves which will enable us to listen to them.

Reflection: What are some of the obstacles that make it hard for churches to create genuine diversity in their fellowships?

Action Steps: Individually or with a group, talk about some tangible ways you could build relationships with believers who are quite different from you.

With your family, talk about Christians you know that practice different traditions than you. Read the Apostles' Creed together and name some of the ways you notice that they hold to the same truths as you do.

Remember the body of Christ, the worldwide church, as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, show your people how to become a living picture of that multitude of people "every tribe and language and people and nation" so that you might be glorified by your Church. Amen.

Forgiveness of Sins *By Gary Chorprenning*

At the very core of his being, our God is a relational God. Every fiber of God's nature is biased toward relationship. We see that in the mystery of the Trinity—one God in three Persons, woven in a profound interrelationship of love, one with the other.

We also see this relational nature of our God in his act of creation. We human beings in particular are made, are in our very nature designed for relationship with God. The heart of the full and complete human life is being in an intimate love relationship with God. (see John 10:10)

Yet, for reasons that are in the end beyond rational explanation, we human beings ruptured and ruined that intimate relationship with God in our embrace of sin and evil. That human turn toward evil was an adulterous rebellion and rejection of relationship with God.

Now, a resentful, petulant God might well at that point have simply washed his hands of us. But ours is not that sort of God. It is not too much to say that everything in the Bible from Genesis 3:21 through Revelation 22:21 is the story of God's relentless mission of restoring our love relationship with him and all that it was meant to be. Forgiveness of sins, which we read about in the Apostles' Creed, is all about this relationship restoration mission of God through Jesus Christ.

Silent Reflection: Read through Psalm 103:8-13 several times. Open yourself to the voice of God's Spirit. Allow him to highlight and apply the message of these verses to your life.

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I confess that I don't know how to deal with my sin. Sometimes, I scarcely give it a thought. Other times, it oppresses me and almost leads me to despair. As I reflect on the truth of your forgiveness, help me both to take my sin seriously and to rest joyfully in your forgiveness. Amen.

Devotional: In the Christian life, it is always a temptation for us to project our own thoughts and feelings on to God. It's never good or helpful when we do that. We are not God, and God is not us. Thank God! But it is especially tempting and especially damaging to us when we project onto God our own feelings about and experiences with forgiving those who have hurt or offended us.

Forgiving people who have treated us badly can often be very hard for us. In some especially hurtful or damaging situations, it can feel almost impossible for us. Sometimes, the best we can manage is a sort of grudging, on-and-off forgiveness toward someone who has hurt us deeply.

It can often be tempting for us to project that grudging, wavering attitude onto God when we think about his forgiveness of our sins. When we do that, we create a false God. Psalm 103, which we reflected on above, is one of the Bible passages where we are shown the depth of God's commitment to his relationship restoration mission. David, the author of that psalm, describes God's character there like this, "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love." (v. 8). David knew God intimately. David was also one of the great sinners of the Bible. So, when he speaks of God's mercy and forgiving nature, we can be sure he knew firsthand what he was talking about.

There is nothing grudging about God's forgiveness. He doesn't need to be cajoled or placated into forgiving. He initiates our forgiveness and relentlessly pursues us with it. In prayer, King Hezekiah exults in amazement, "You have cast all my sins behind your back." (Isaiah 38:17) The prophet Micah assures us, "He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:19) God himself declares, "I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like the morning mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:22)

God takes the initiative. He pursues us in our sin. He aggressively wipes out our guilt and sinfulness. He reconciles us to himself. And reconciled to God is just where we were meant to be from the beginning. This is forgiveness of sins. This is our God.

Reflection: How might the fact of God's forgiveness of your sins strengthen you for a life of faithfulness going forward? Read Luke 7:36-50 and reflect on what Jesus says.

Action Steps: Individually or with a group, discuss how the fact of God's forgiveness of your sins might help you to forgive others when they sin against you? Read Matthew 18:21-35 and reflect on what Jesus says.

Who do you need to forgive this week?

With your family, talk about some ways that God has been more kind and generous to you? Spend some time each day this week thanking him for those things.

Remember God's forgiveness as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: Lord, your forgiveness is hard for me to comprehend. Draw close to me. Lift me up in your forgiveness and transform me. Amen.

"It is the spiritual work of Jesus Christ to purify His people by His own blood to rid them of this deep-lying disease. That is why He is called the Great Physician." (A. W. Tozer, The Apostles' Creed, p. 113.)

Eternity *by Taeler Larsen*

“And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’” (Revelation 8:13) The new heaven and earth means experiencing the overwhelming glory of the presence of God where all cannot help but worship him.

Silent Reflection: Take a moment to worship God in one of your favorite ways. Maybe this means looking out your window and noticing the beauty of God’s world. Perhaps you love to worship through music, prayer, or creative writing. However you’d like to, take a moment to reflect upon God’s goodness, grace, and glory.

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I confess that I often love the gifts you give more than you. Help me to find *you* lovely and the hope of eternity with you as a glorious promise.

Devotional: One winter I brought my young class outside to experience the magic of a snowy day together. Though warned to wear their gloves to touch the cold snow, one boy desperately wanted to experience the feeling of snow on his bare hands. He was delighted to touch the soft white flakes that he could pack into harder shapes. Of course, after a few minutes of this he came running back to me, yelling about how the cold snow made his hands sting. After warming them with his breath and gloves, he proceeded to once again remove his gloves and run straight back to play in the cold snow with his friends. Back and forth he went – laughing with joy as he played followed by rushing to his teacher for help with his stinging hands.

Perhaps a silly example, but is this not like much of life? Such joy, excitement, and life to experience often juxtaposed by pain and sorrow. We rejoice in much of the good and beautiful in this world and yet there are moments when we desperately long for sin, sadness, and death to be no more. This is exactly what God is promising in Revelation 21 when we hear that, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

Though we long for this final victory and comfort, it can also be hard to picture what this eternity looks like. A.W. Tozer speaks on this struggle by reminding us that faith and imagination are different things. We can have faith in the character of God and still struggle to visualize what the new heaven and earth will look like. (A.W. Tozer *The Apostles’ Creed*) As you ponder eternity with God today, let your heart be drawn to look upon the character of a God who loves you and let yourself freely wonder and hope in the resurrection life to come.

“It is not easy to convey a sense of wonder, let alone resurrection wonder, to another. It’s the very nature of wonder to catch us off guard, to circumvent expectations and assumptions.” – Eugene Peterson

Reflection: Romans 8:22-23 says, “For we know that the whole of creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

What in this world makes you “groan” or long for the redemption of all of creation or of your specific body? Have you felt freedom to express this in your church body or community? Consider discussing your response with your friends or community group.

Action steps: How does resurrection hope and the promise of eternity in the presence of your good and gracious king help you “weep with those weep” yet also keep you from losing hope? (Romans 12:15) Who in your life might need hope right now? Prayerfully consider what practical thing you could do for them today to remind them they are not alone.

We also spoke above about a sense of “resurrection wonder”. For those who have kids or find themselves around little ones this week, let children teach you how to wonder. As adults, we often forget how to imagine and be amazed. Choose something to observe together: a painting, something in nature, or a fun science experiment. Start by naming all of the things you notice about your subject. Is it blue? Big? Bubbly? Bumpy? After you have gotten all of your “noticing” out of the way, let yourselves freely wonder together. I wonder if the man in the painting is traveling to Antarctica! I wonder what will happen if we mix the red and blue colors together. I wonder how this rock got here - maybe it rolled all the way from the top of that mountain! Take time to appreciate the bold and wild wonderings of children this week.

Remember our future in eternity with God as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving this week.

Closing Prayer: Father, come quickly and restore all things. Help me to live for your glory until the day I see you face to face.

Maundy Thursday *By Gary Chorpensing*

Today, the Thursday before Easter, is traditionally called Maundy Thursday. This is pretty much the only context in which the word “maundy” is used in English. So, what does the word mean? Well, it comes from the Latin word “*mandatum*” which means “command.” This Thursday is called Maundy Thursday because we are meant to remember that we are a people under a commandment.

Silent Reflection: The specific command that is being referred to is the one that Jesus issued to his disciples on that Thursday before his crucifixion. We find it in John 13:34-35. “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. But by this all people will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.” [ESV]

Spend a few moments reflecting on the love that you have experienced from Jesus.

Prayer of Confession: Lord Jesus, I have taken your love for me for granted. I have thought of myself as far more loveable than I am. Help me to recognize how difficult to love I can be and how conquering and unconditional your love really is. Amen.

Devotional: In our modern world, we tend to think of love as being an emotion or a feeling. But that doesn't seem to be the way Jesus is thinking of love. After all, how can you command someone to feel something? For Jesus, love seems to be something you do. For Jesus, loving someone means actively seeking that person's well-being, actively doing good in their lives.

In fact, just before he gave his disciples that new commandment on that first Maundy Thursday, Jesus gave them an example of that active servant love. He washed their feet (see John 13:1-11). That act of foot washing was something a household servant would normally have done. But on that night of his betrayal and arrest, the Lord of heaven and earth knelt down and washed the filthy feet of twelve men, one of whom would betray him, one who would openly deny him three times, all of whom would abandon him in his time of most dire need. He knew all of that was coming, yet still he performed this simple act of loving service.

Loving others is at the very heart of the Gospel and at the heart of the Christian faith. But loving others can be hard, very hard, gut-wrenchingly hard, and costly. Foot washing is a little picture of the love Jesus was about to live out. In less than a day after he knelt washing the feet of all those men who would run away, Jesus would pick up the sinfulness of the whole world, carry it up onto a Roman cross, and kill it there for us. He would do that even though it cost him the most horrifying physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. He did that because he too was under command (Philippians 2:5-8).

In the Garden of Gethsemane on that first Maundy Thursday, Jesus knelt down, dripping bloody sweat, and wrestled with the command he had received from his loving Abba in heaven. That command was that he should love the world by saving it from its slavery to sin and death. Obedience to that command was not easy or without cost. But because that command came from the loving heart of the Father, it echoed loudly in the loving, self-sacrificing, obedient heart of Jesus, who loved the world, even through betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion.

That love is the very core of the Christian faith. Just as the love of the Father shines out in Jesus' life of obedient love, so also Jesus calls us to live our lives in such a way that God's love shines out from us into this dark and troubled world (Matthew 5:14-16). Living out that love often won't be easy. People might not always understand it or accept it. But the command remains. And behind the command is a promise, namely that God will use our loving obedience and obedient love as an agent of his redemption, co-worker in the new creation.

Reflection: In what ways have you experienced unconditional love in your life?

Resentment, judgmental attitudes, indifference and other such states of mind can inhibit our ability or willingness to love others. What interferes with your willingness to love others?

Action Steps: Individually, write down some of the ways you feel loved by others.

With friends or a small group, discuss some ways you can practice the habit of saying no to yourself and yes to God by actively showing love to someone in the coming days?

With your family, name some of the things that tell you or show you that you are loved. How does God show you that he loves you?

Remember God's love as you practice prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the costly love you have shown in my life and the assurance that nothing will ever separate me from your love (Romans 8:38-39). Enable me to overcome anything that might interfere with my obedience to your "new commandment" so that others might experience your love through my actions today. Amen.

A Meditation for Good Friday

By Taeler Larsen

“Good Friday is the day when you can do nothing. Bewailing and lamenting your manifold sins does not make up for them. Scouring your soul in a frenzy of spring cleaning only sterilizes it; it does not give it life. On Good Friday, finally, we are all, mourners and mockers alike, reduced to the same impotence. Someone else is doing the terrible work that gives life to the world.” – Virginia Stem Owens

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I take a moment to recognize that Jesus was nailed to the cross for my sake. For all my trying, I continue to fall short of your glory and goodness.

Devotional: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” – Isaiah 53:5

This verse encapsulates both the horror and the beauty of the cross. Today, on Good Friday, we cease our doing and we sit with the weight and darkness of the cross. As we reflect on the darkness Jesus endured for our sake, we do so with a sense of wonder and expectation. Who is this God that would take our place and endure the punishment meant for us?

Reflection: Consider pulling up the hymn “Rock of Ages” and taking a moment to listen to its lyrics. If you’d rather, read some of them here below:

*Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to your cross I cling;
Naked, come to you for dress;
Helpless, look to you for grace;
Foul I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die
(Originally written by Augustus Toplady)*

Action steps: Optional readings for a Good Friday meditation:

Isaiah 53

Matthew 27:32-56

Romans 5

For friends and community groups, consider attending a Good Friday service or Stations of the Cross walk together. If you don’t have a place to go, consider looking up artwork that attempts to portray Jesus’ journey to the cross. Take time to silently contemplate what Jesus endured for our sake.

For those with young ones, take time today to read about Jesus' journey to the cross in whatever children's bible you enjoy using together. Ask your children if Jesus loves them. Does he love them when they are silly? Sad? Hungry? What about when they do something wrong or make a mistake? YES! Jesus loves you always. On the cross, Jesus showed us how much he loves us. Jesus died on the cross for us even though he had never sinned or done anything wrong. (Jared Kennedy and Trish Mahoney, *The Beginner's Gospel Story Bible*)

Remember Jesus on the cross as you practice prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Closing Prayer: Jesus, thank you for bearing the weight and horror of the cross for me. My heart is yours.

Easter Sunday
By Taeler Larsen

“I am the resurrection and the life.” – John 11:25-26

Silent Reflection: Take a moment to read John 20:11-18.

Mary Magdalene was experiencing a moment of hopelessness and despair when Jesus revealed himself to her. What does Jesus do to get her to recognize him? In what ways does this reflect John 10:1-5 when Jesus says “he calls his own sheep by name” and his sheep “know his voice”. Take a moment to reflect on the personal love of Jesus and the image of him calling his people by name.

Prayer of Confession: Lord, I confess that I often forget that you want good for me. My heart moves quickly to fear and despair instead of expectation. Jesus, *you* are what is good for me. Help me to cling to you.

Devotional: Christians are known for going big with our Christmas celebrations. We decorate, sing, throw parties, and have family traditions that have been passed down for ages. And as we should! The incarnation is huge – what a gift that our transcendent God became immanent – fully human in every way. (Hebrews 2:17) We have a God who understands us and who has also made himself known to us.

Yet, Jesus not only understands our sin and our sorrow - he is *victorious* over it! Jesus’ victory over death is a sign and a promise that he is able to and will accomplish all of his purposes. On the cross, Christ takes the punishment meant for us and cries, “It is finished!” We hear a similar cry in Revelation saying, “It is done!” (Revelation 21:6) as God promises that He is making all things new. Christ’s victory over both sin and death gives us the hope and expectation that God *will* reconcile and restore his creation in fullness. The resurrection is our hope and joy of both what Christ has already accomplished *and* the blessings that we know are still to come. We are God’s people – forgiven and reconciled to him through Jesus – also looking forward to the day when our resurrected and victorious king will perfectly complete his renewal of all things.

The outrageous, wonderful, and true claim of the resurrection tells us that death is not the end, life is the end. (Frederick Buechner, *Bread and Wine*) What might our celebration of Easter be like this year if we allow ourselves to fully realize the joy and victory of the resurrection?

Reflection: The image of the empty grave in Scripture is powerful and glorious and yet the story doesn’t end here. We continue to hear of the women and men who witness to the mighty power of Jesus Christ and whose lives show the transforming work of the Holy Spirit through their fellowship, unity and prayer. (Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37) Clarence Jordan once said, “The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a

vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.”

Do I find myself speaking of the death and resurrection of Christ without being moved by it? Take time now to thank and praise God for what he has done.

Action steps: What does celebrating look like to you?

Families, how do you have fun together? Maybe you have a spontaneous dance party with your children. Bounce around the house in the silliest, most embarrassing ways possible! Not your thing? Perhaps you bake a messy cake together, take a walk and delight in God’s world, ride bikes, smash cascarones (confetti-filled eggshells) on each other’s heads... something that is not “productive” but is simply and purely “fun”. Discuss why you are celebrating! “Every Easter we celebrate that Jesus is more powerful than death. Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus is alive!” (Jared Kennedy and Trish Majoney, *The Beginner’s Gospel Story Bible*)

Friends and community groups, maybe you choose to share an Easter brunch together. Feast and celebrate! Pray for the body of Christ – that the Holy Spirit would sanctify us and that his work would be evident to others.

Remember God with joy as you celebrate resurrection life today.

Closing Prayer: Father, teach us what it looks like to daily “practice resurrection” (*Wendell Berry*) – to have the courage to believe and live like you truly offer “abundant life”. (John 10:10)