

Begotten, Not Made

TEXT: John 1:1-18

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 8, 2024

The following story, found on the website stnicholascenter.org, represents a medieval legend, woven into the historical event of the Council of Nicaea. This first paragraph is simple history.

“In AD 325 Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, the very first ecumenical council. More than 300 bishops came from all over the Christian world to debate the nature of the Holy Trinity. It was one of the early church's most intense theological questions. Arius, from Egypt, was teaching that Jesus the Son was not equal to God the Father.”

And now we start to stray into the unproven.

“Arius forcefully argued his position at length. The bishops listened respectfully. As Arius vigorously continued, Nicholas became more and more agitated. Finally, he could no longer bear what he believed was essential being attacked. The outraged Nicholas got up, crossed the room, and slapped Arius across the face!

“The bishops were shocked. It was unbelievable that a *bishop* would lose control and be so hotheaded in such a solemn assembly. They brought Nicholas to Constantine. Constantine said even though it was illegal for anyone to strike another in his presence, in this case, the bishops themselves must determine the punishment.

“The bishops stripped Nicholas of his bishop's garments, chained him, and threw him into jail. That would keep Nicholas away from the meeting. When the Council ended, a final decision would be made about his future.

“Nicholas was ashamed and prayed for forgiveness, though he did not waver in his belief. During the night, Jesus and Mary his mother, appeared, asking, “Why are you in jail?” “Because of my love for you,” Nicholas replied. Jesus then gave the Book of the Gospels to Nicholas. Mary gave him an omophorion, so Nicholas would again be dressed as a bishop. Now at peace, Nicholas studied the Scriptures for the rest of the night.

“When the jailer came in the morning, he found the chains loose on the floor and Nicholas dressed in bishop's robes, quietly reading the Scriptures. When Constantine was told of this, the emperor asked that Nicholas be freed. Nicholas was then fully reinstated as the Bishop of Myra.

“The Council of Nicaea agreed with Nicholas' views, deciding the question against Arius. The work of the Council produced the Nicene Creed which to this day many Christians repeat weekly when they stand to say what they believe.”

It's technically possible that St. Nicholas was present at the Council. He was a bishop at that time, and there were over 300 bishops there, but “Jolly old St. Nicholas” is not listed as an attendee. There is no reference to this story before medieval times.

Since the story, if true, doesn't seem like something that earlier writers would just forget to mention, it's widely believed to be legend, perhaps told to lift up St. Nicholas as a defender of the divinity of Jesus at a time when Christians were finally celebrating Christmas more widely. The first celebration of Christmas we know of didn't come until about ten years after the Council of Nicaea, and only really caught on in the 9th century.

But the kernel of truth in both the legend and the Christmas threat is that Arius, who was a priest called to the Council for the examination of his teaching and not a Bishop there by invitation, did pose a threat to the understanding of who Jesus was.

His ideas were gaining traction with others in the church, which resulted in conflicts. Such conflicts had been going on amongst Jesus' followers pretty much since the morning of the Resurrection, and different factions within Christianity rose up around different ideas across time. We saw that with the Gnostics a few weeks ago.

But in those earlier centuries, theological differences within the church posed no threat to the government, beyond the inherent threat of both Christians and Jews refusing to recognize kings and emperors as gods. Heresy was a religious concern, not a political one. But the Roman empire under Constantine changed that equation.

When Constantine converted to Christianity in the year 312, he made that personal conversion into a mandate for the empire. Constantine didn't believe he himself was a god; but since he believed that being Christian would ensure his military conquests, Christianity could no longer be a choice for the empire. It had to be the official religion for everyone.

If you remember, Constantine didn't come to Christianity after a long time of study and examination. He had a dream. And a Christian mother. And he became convinced his conversion could secure his power. I've said this before, but when political and military power is tied to a religion—any religion—it naturally leads to pressure to conform to one single expression of that religion. If beliefs are allowed to get too diverse, enforcement of a single narrative becomes impossible, and power structures then have to diversify in response.

That diversification is very good for democratic governments, but really problematic for kings, emperors, and dictators, who keep their positions by at least speaking for God if not claiming to actually be God. They dictate what people can and can't believe and practice according to what best helps them stay in power, adding threats of divine retribution rather than just political repercussions for coloring outside their strict religious lines. Fear of God is stoked by state-sponsored religious violence. In our day and time, do not sleep on that information.

So, Constantine adopted a religion he did not understand, saw conflicting beliefs within it, and saw a threat to his empire if he didn't get the conflict sorted out. At the time, the teaching the bishops were most upset by was being spread by a priest named Arius, so Constantine told the bishops—300 plus of them—that they had better get themselves into a room and sort it out.

Constantine's power—and now that it was a Christian empire—their power as bishops as well, depended on it. So, they gathered in the city of Nicaea, in modern Turkey, and sent an engraved invitation to Arius to be in attendance to defend his views.

My take is that they were all in over their heads on this one, so don't be discouraged if you have trouble trying to follow the arguments; but here's the debate. Largely based on the first chapter of John's Gospel that Kim read earlier and that we hear every Christmas; and with little to no support from Matthew, Mark, or Luke; Christians by the fourth century had come to believe that Jesus was not just the Messiah expected by the Jews, and not just a divine being in human form, but that Jesus was fully God in the flesh. Fully human and fully God at the same time.

That's still Christian teaching today. The problem is, as soon as you say that from a pulpit, as the early church priests and bishops found out, someone is going to ask you... "Um...how is that possible?" And that question will lead to questions that are still asked today, "Well, if Jesus was God, then who was he praying to?"

Then others will bring up all the "Son of God" language in the Bible, not to mention the passage in both Mark and Luke where a man addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher," and Jesus says, "Why are you calling me 'good?' Only God is good." And if Jesus actually *is* God and then ascends and sits at God's right hand, what's that about? Are they using mirrors? And, what's the "only begotten Son" thing? Is God having babies now?

So, priests getting those questions did one of two things. They either went to their bishops and asked how to explain it to their flock, or they came up with answers themselves. Both are problematic, which I'll talk about in a minute, but Arius was in the latter category.

The answer Arius gave was that only God was eternal, but that at some point *before the creation of the world*, God created Jesus as a kind of self-expression, which became known in philosophy as the "*logos*," the Word of God. That *logos* then served as a mediator for the creation of the world, and finally became flesh in the womb of Mary through the Holy Spirit, to be physically born in the person of Jesus.

Now that's still a pretty wild idea, but it's a thoughtful and, I think, still respectful way to put together all the issues about Jesus taught by the church and represented in the Bible. And it was satisfying the curiosity of lots of people who were asking the questions, including other priests, who found it a better answer than they were getting from most of their bishops.

But the bishops were having none of it. To be fully God, Jesus had to be co-eternal with God the Father. There were other teachings around that Jesus was made *along with* Creation, and we've already seen that some of the Gnostics believed Jesus was only human until the dove descended at Jesus' baptism. And the bishops stomped those other things out, too. But Arius' teaching was close enough to their own that it was harder to refute and caused a bigger rift.

To set things right, with the exception of two bishops, the Council of Nicaea condemned Arius, and Constantine produced this edict about his writings:

“In addition, if any writing composed by Arius should be found, it should be handed over to the flames, so that not only will the wickedness of his teaching be obliterated, but nothing will be left even to remind anyone of him. And I hereby make a public order, that if someone should be discovered to have hidden a writing composed by Arius, and not to have immediately brought it forward and destroyed it by fire, his penalty shall be death. As soon as he is discovered in this offence, he shall be submitted for capital punishment.” Those with ears to hear, let them hear.

Arius himself was not executed—just exiled and excommunicated. Although when a Synod in Jerusalem said they would restore Arius to full communion and a new emperor ordered Bishop Alexander of Constantinople to receive him, Bishop Alexander earnestly prayed that Arius might die before that happened. Arius did die shortly thereafter, in a very public and sudden hemorrhage that killed him almost instantly, which some believe was a poisoning and others believed was a judgment by God for his heresy.

But, if Arius was so very wrong, how did the bishops of Nicaea explain the correct view? The Council of Nicaea produced the Nicene Creed, explicitly to wipe out the Arian heresy, and all variations on his theme. It’s about twice the length of the Apostles’ Creed, which we used earlier in the service. The Apostles’ Creed came together across many centuries beginning with some very early sources and representing a consensus of Christians across time.

But the Nicene Creed is a direct shot at Arius, created by the Council for that purpose, and is at its most direct in the beginning of the Jesus section of the creed.

“We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.”

Maybe I’m just dense, but if you’re resorting to words like “consubstantial,” I think you’ve already lost the war. For me, those words of the Nicene Creed clean up exactly nothing. They’re very pointed on the “begotten,” part. Jesus is definitely “begotten,” that’s in there twice. But they insist, that is definitely not saying “made.” “Begotten, not made.” All clear, right?

Here’s the thing. There is absolutely no way for either Father Arius or any of the good bishops at the Council of Nicaea, including St. Nicholas, if he was indeed present, to know the facts of any of those claims. Pontificating about what God did or didn’t do before the creation of time is interesting to consider, but it’s ultimately unknowable in this life. All of the various positions about how Jesus is or isn’t connected to God have Bible passages to back them up. The mechanics of putting them all together isn’t provable. It’s a matter of faith.

What both the bishops and Arius were trying to do was the same fool’s errand as the six blind men trying to describe an elephant from the Indian folktale I shared at the start of this series. Let me remind you of the final stanza of the brilliant poem by John Godfrey Saxe giving the moral of the story:

“So oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!”

That’s how I view almost every Council of the early church, as they moved further and further out of the lane of human knowing to prate about the elephant none of them had ever seen. Doing that is not necessary or, to my mind, useful. Figuring out how to apply what the Bible tells us directly and clearly—that God is love, we are made in that image, and Jesus is what that divine nature looks like when lived perfectly in human form—is plenty to work with for a lifetime and is, I think, all we need.

To go further is not only unnecessary, it can lead to great harm. Killing people for believing something that it is impossible to prove is a gross abuse of power, which is why matters of faith should never, ever become matters of civil law. And insisting that Jesus *must* be described as being in some way “begotten” of God has inspired wars and interfaith animosity that continues to this day.

Jews and Muslims have a very hard time believing that Christians believe in only one God, largely because of the language developed in those Councils prating about the unseen elephant.

Because Muslims recoil at the literal notion of God “begetting a son,” countless lives have been lost to crusades and wars and acts of terror; despite the fact that Muslims view Jesus as a prophet and believe he was born of Mary, who they also believe was a virgin. Mary has an entire chapter of the Qur’an named for her. Muslims affirm many of Jesus’ miracles, and believe that Jesus will come again to earth to restore justice and dispatch the antichrist.

We agree on a lot. And yet, here we are, hating each other and spilling blood, in large part because Christians can’t admit Paul’s claim in 1 Corinthians 13 that our earthly knowledge is only partial and will remain so until we come face to face with God after our passing.

Believing that Jesus and God are one is something that I find useful to my life in many ways. That belief ensures that I see Jesus’ teaching as the way God wants me to live in the world. Believing that Jesus is God gives me a stronger basis for making decisions on close calls and a clear—although by no means easy—path to follow. It would be too easy for me to make excuses for my behavior if I believed Jesus was only human or was some kind of sub-deity.

But does getting clear on whether Jesus is co-eternal with God or instead created by God before the beginning of time make any difference in whether or not you offer food to those who are hungry? Does it stop wars? Will it help a legislator decide to protect clean water or preserve wildlife habitat? Will it help us welcome the foreigner as a citizen among us as Leviticus commands God’s people to do? Will it help us to better love our neighbors or to bear witness to God’s love through our lives?

When Jesus talks about how to identify false prophets in Matthew 7, his answer doesn’t involve words like “consubstantial.” He’s direct and to the point. “You will know them by their fruits,” Jesus says. Boom. And Jesus is just as direct when people come to him asking how to inherit eternal life. To the Pharisee in Luke 10 the answer is to love God and his neighbor as himself. That’s the answer that kicks off the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The start of Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Ruler in Matthew, Mark, and Luke also begins with the young man asking how to inherit eternal life. Jesus’ answer is to follow the commandments. He tells his disciples in John 13 that people will know they are his disciples by their love.

Those things are the fruit that separate true belief from false, and are how I have come to judge the doctrines of the Church. How does believing x, y, or z affect my fruit? And does that same belief produce the same fruit in others?

The distinction between “begotten” and “made” is barely comprehensible to me, so it really doesn’t have an impact on my behavior; but I do know that Arius used his belief to help his flock, while the “begotten, not made” believers had people, likely including Arius, murdered.

But maybe the “begotten, not made” distinction wasn’t the belief producing the good or rotten fruit. Maybe the desire to silence or kill those who believe differently comes from somewhere else. We’ll keep looking for the culprit across the next two weeks. Amen.