

## Scripture Readings for May 22, 2022

### Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NIV)

<sup>4</sup> Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup> Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. <sup>6</sup> These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. <sup>7</sup> Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. <sup>8</sup> Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. <sup>9</sup> Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

### Isaiah 44:6-8

<sup>6</sup> “This is what the LORD says—Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. <sup>7</sup> Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let them foretell what will come. <sup>8</sup> Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

### Revelation 21:1-6

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup> I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

<sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

<sup>6</sup> He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

## Sermon: “We Believe in . . . God”

When you think of the word “God,” what are the first things that come into your mind? The general public’s responses are likely to be varied; for some the idea of God brings comfort, reassurance, and hope; for others the word God is linked to disappointment, fear, and even anger. Atheists, of course, would say God doesn’t exist; others accept God as the Creator but claim we are ignorant about any thing else concerning God. On the other hand, I suspect many people when asked, “What is God *like*?” would immediately say, “God is Love.”<sup>1</sup> I agree, but that perspective is not obvious. Christians would say that “God is love” is part of divine *revelation*. We can’t deduce that quality by the use of reason, rather God chose to *reveal* the divine nature to us as fundamentally loving. Moreover, for Christians, that love is ultimately expressed in the person and actions of Jesus Christ. *We believe it to be true by faith*. Curiously though, “God is love” is *not* mentioned in the Nicene Creed. So what does the Creed say about God? That’s what we are exploring today.

You will note two obvious things about the Nicene Creed. One concerns its structure, the other its style. Its structure is a series of paragraphs that each begin with “*We believe...*”: We believe in God the Father, we believe in Jesus Christ, we believe in the Holy Spirit, and we believe in the Church. Concerning its style, the wording is very condensed, which makes it a little cryptic, and that’s why it needs unpacking. Part of the problem is that in speaking about God we have reached the limit of all human language, because there will always be a mystery to God. What we *say* about God, we believe to be *true*, even if our words are inadequate and there is still *more* to God than we currently know or can possibly experience. Naturally, we choose our words with care, but they are based on human analogies and so can only partially describe the divine.<sup>2</sup> That’s why the Creed’s wording is compressed and uses complementary wording as it tries to balance different aspects. For that reason, it is at times confusing!

Nicene Creed begins: “We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.”

First, we proclaim God *exists*; that is foundational. While my granddaughter, Beatrice, won’t agree with me, nothing consequential follows from whether or the existence of unicorns is true or false. But *everything* depends on whether the statement “God exists” is true or false; atheists would also agree. Of course, different religious traditions have diverse understandings of the concept of God. They disagree on whether God is singular or plural, involved with humans or not, entirely good or both good and evil. But all are convinced that when they say “God,” they speak of something *real* and that truly exists. It also follows that the physical world, all that can be measured and calculated, is *not* all that

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 John 4:8, 16.

<sup>2</sup> As we will consider in a moment, we are creatures and God is the creator and whatever our understanding of God is, we believe it is due to divine revelation and not something we have deduced from reason alone. The abstract ‘God of the philosophers’ is *not* the personal God of revelation.

there is. And that *more* of reality is incorporated into the word “God,” and it cannot be grasped or measured - hence the element of mystery or hiddenness.

Second, “We believe in *one* God” and you will remember our Old Testament reading of the Jewish *Shema*, something I also mentioned last week,<sup>3</sup> which states: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”<sup>4</sup> The Christian creed therefore begins in *continuity* with the defining statement of the Jewish faith. Whatever the Creed later affirms about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, it cannot be understood without the context of the Old Testament. At the beginning, Israel’s profession of the Lord as one God might have been understood as their deity being *superior* to all the others within a broader polytheistic culture.<sup>5</sup> However, by the time we get to the prophet Isaiah, YHWH is presented as the *only* real God and the others are mere fictions or idols.<sup>6</sup> Isaiah writes, “I am the first and I am the last, there is no God but me.”<sup>7</sup> As we also heard, the writer of Revelation echoes that thought, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”<sup>8</sup> Israel’s faith therefore became a robust *monotheism* and that continues in the New Testament, but Peter and Paul came to understand this one God as not merely Israel’s God but the true God of the *whole* world.<sup>9</sup>

Third, God is described as “Father,” which must not be interpreted as a gender but more fundamentally as God being *relational*. In the Old Testament, God is frequently presented in relational terms as “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” In Hosea we also read of God’s relationship with his people in lovingly intimate terms: “When Israel was a child, I loved him,” says God, “And out of Egypt I called my son. . . It was I who taught [them] to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.”<sup>10</sup> Referring to God as Father is also to be found throughout the New Testament; indeed, the Lord’s Prayer begins with “Our *Father* in heaven...” I appreciate the legitimate concerns of feminists and those whose abusive or neglectful fathers makes this human analogy for God deeply problematic. In calling God Father, we do *not* mean God is male! The *important* contrast here is between *personal and impersonal*, *not* between male and female. Eliminating gender language for God can seem appealing, but this can reduce God to an impersonal force<sup>11</sup> - an “it” - and so lose the notion of God as “person” exhibiting intentionality, love, grace, and experiencing joy. Again, the limits of language are problematic.

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<sup>3</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/A-Controversial-Creed.pdf> .

<sup>4</sup> Deut 6:4. Jesus affirms the *Shema* as central to his understanding of God (Mark 12:29-31).

<sup>5</sup> Or henotheism. See, for example, Ps 29:1; 82:1-6; 86: 8-10; 89:5-8. (YHWH may have originally be seen as a *tribal* god; cf. Rom 3:29.)

<sup>6</sup> Isa 40:12-31; 42:5-9; 45:10-21; Ps 96:4-5; 135:5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Isa 44:6.

<sup>8</sup> Rev 1:8; see also Rev 21:6-7; 22:13 – in the latter case, *Jesus* utters those words!

<sup>9</sup> See Acts 10:34-35; Rom 3:28-30.

<sup>10</sup> Hos 11:1-4; cf. Ps 68:5.

<sup>11</sup> Akin to destiny or fate, or the uncaring god of deism.

Fourth, God is described as “almighty” or supremely powerful, a word frequently used to describe God in the Old Testament. When we hear that adjective describing God, we tend to equate it with the Greek word omnipotence; God, then, is assumed to be literally all-powerful in an *absolute* sense<sup>12</sup> and that, in turn, leads us to the “problem” of suffering and evil. If God is literally all-powerful then, on the face of it, God should be able to do something more about evil but chooses not to. And that’s inconsistent with Hosea’s description of God as a loving Father and Isaiah’s descriptions of God as a loving Mother.<sup>13</sup> I have spoken on this important topic several times before.<sup>14</sup> The Creed doesn’t solve that conundrum, nor does it define “almighty”; instead, it points us back to the scriptures where we can discover more about what God has done – and is doing – about evil and suffering.<sup>15</sup>

The Creed does however add an important clause, which can be seen as a qualifier, namely: “Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” God is the Creator, the source of all things, and has the capability to transform or make all things holy.<sup>16</sup> That mention of “heaven and earth” goes back to Genesis 1:1 and again connects the Creed to the Old Testament. However, it’s not simply that God created once and for all, like making and winding up a mechanical clock; no, God *continually* calls into being and establishes the cosmos moment by moment.<sup>17</sup> God’s involvement with creation, which is both *personal* and *powerful*<sup>18</sup> leads to salvation; two examples are the exodus and the return from the exile. God’s action is also evident in Christ’s resurrection and in human renewal,<sup>19</sup> and, ultimately, in the new creation, as we heard in our reading from Revelation.<sup>20</sup> Saying: “We believe God is . . . Creator” is *not* anti-science. Believing in evolution is perfectly compatible with believing God as creator, such that people of faith can look at the intricacies of nature (on multiple levels) and see the glory of God.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that the Creed then adds “of all that is, seen and unseen” to the phrase, “Maker of heaven and earth.” We might think that the latter statement from Genesis 1:1 is sufficient to mean God made

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<sup>12</sup> You will notice that “almighty,” a word frequently found in the Old Testament is the *only* attribute of God that is mentioned in the Nicene Creed. There is no mention of God as all-knowing (omniscient), all good (omnibenevolent), everywhere, (omnipresent), timeless or unchanging (immutable), unable to experience pain or pleasure (impassible), and simultaneously transcendent (independent of the material universe, i.e., space and time) and immanent (encompassing or found within creation). These classical attributes of God, along with omnipotence, arose over time with the merger of Christianity and Greek thought, and as theologians and philosophers formalized and systematized Christian thinking. This (influential) Hellenization of God has, I suggest, had some negative consequences for Christian theology and needs re-examining and reforming. See Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Baker, 2001). (See also [2].)

<sup>13</sup> See Isa 49:15; 66:13.

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Where-is-God-in-Lifes-Tragedies.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Why-Is-This-Happening-To-Me.pdf> ; <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Why-Doesn%E2%80%99t-God-Do-Something-Il.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> See also Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> Literally, “sanctify,” which is often seen as one of the roles of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>17</sup> God’s spirit breathes *life* into things and is an intimate part of creation (as well as distinct from it).

<sup>18</sup> Or effective – sufficient for the divine purpose intended.

<sup>19</sup> Rom 12:1-2.

<sup>20</sup> Rev 21:1-5.

<sup>21</sup> See Ps 8:1, 3-4; 19:1; 104:24-25; Isa 40:26; Rom 1:20.

literally *everything*. Why then add, “things visible and invisible”? That’s because an influential 2nd century teacher called Marcion (ca. 85-160) insisted on a radical break with Judaism. He thought matter was evil and the spirit was good, and this led him to believe in two Gods. First, the creator God of the Old Testament formed the material world in which humans find themselves imprisoned. Second, he thought that Jesus represented the superior spiritual God who liberates humans from the bonds of material existence. This Gnostic tendency, which can also be traced to some of Plato’s thinking, is being rejected by these words in the Nicene Creed. “Maker of things *seen and unseen*” explicitly reveals that matter is *good*, not evil, and consequently the Christian faith rejects the Maricon’s teachings as a heresy.<sup>22</sup> As Paul says to Timothy, “For *everything* God created is good, and *nothing* is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.”<sup>23</sup> The same Creator God who Jesus called “Father” created matter *and* spirit, indeed – *all* things. I mentioned last week that the Creed created boundaries to protect the Christian faith from emerging distortions; this is one example. Nevertheless, it continues to be relevant and important today. This dualistic virus still infects some aspects of Christian consciousness, particularly with regard to the human body, and most especially with regard to sex and sexuality. The challenge for Christians is to find some way of affirming the goodness of all created things - including sexuality and sexual pleasure - without being corrupted by the idolatrous aspects of addictive hedonism that’s present in every age. God has given us good things as gifts from God, but they are not ends in themselves; when we take them out of the context of the Creator, they become idols.

Furthermore, in the western world we find that scientific materialism is still an influential worldview. It embraces the *physical* world, the one that science *can* investigate, and claims the *material* world is the *only* reality.<sup>24</sup> It therefore rejects spirit and spirituality – the world of the unseen – as *unreal*. Such things are seen as superstition and ignorance. While the Christian faith can embrace the findings of science, it still insists that the unseen world of the spirit is also a genuine part of reality. While the writers of the Nicene Creed didn’t anticipate that aspect, perhaps you can see why this claim still has huge relevance for today.

In conclusion, the Nicene Creed begins: “We believe in *one* God, the *Father*, the *Almighty*, *maker of heaven and earth*, of *all* that is, *seen and unseen*.” Nevertheless, that doesn’t necessarily exhaust what Christians believe about our Creator God. But this much we believe to be true by faith.

I leave you with some questions to consider. What *kind* of God do we believe in? And why? Do we believe in the God described in the Nicene Creed? What other things might we want to add to that short list? Those additions may well be appropriate, such as “God is Love” that I mentioned earlier. However, we must ask and answer, “On what *basis* do we alter those qualities?” Let’s be aware that it’s too easy to make God in our own image, a God *we* can control, rather than the Creator of all that is. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>22</sup> There are *not* two Gods, one the creator of matter and the other created spirit; there is only *one* God who creates all.

<sup>23</sup> See 1 Tim 4:4; cf. Mark 7:19. This also counters asceticism.

<sup>24</sup> Or the only reality of *importance*.