

Ascension Sunday

May 17, 2026

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Two weeks ago, I traveled to the Schoodic Peninsula up in Acadia along with 50 or so of my clergy colleagues from the Diocese of Maine for our annual Clergy Conference

Intended to provide a mixture of rest and renewal, fellowship and free time, learning and leisure, this annual event is always one I look forward to

Our speaker this year was the Rev. Shaneequa Brokenleg who serves The Episcopal Church as the interim missioner for the office of Indigenous Ministries

Shaneequa is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe and as a wíŋktè (Lakota Two-Spirit), she is called to be a healer and move communities in the direction of positive change

Which is exactly what she offered us in her presentations at our gathering which to an extent could be summed up as Indigenous Relations 101, or, as she aptly named her presentation “Living with Wolakota” where “Wolakota” means “when all things are in right relationship”

Shaneequa had a lot of knowledge and experiences to share and I’m still processing so much of it

But one learning that has stuck with me and which resonates with me on this Ascension Sunday, is that the Lakota language has no future or past tense there is simply the present tense

Shaneequa spoke about how this affects not just how her community speaks to each other but also how her community engages with the world and how her church community relates to God

One of my colleagues reflected on this learning: Shaneequa's "sharing on how the Lakota language has no future or past tense and how that shapes their ability to stay grounded in the present inspired me to consider the same focus on our work leading others in Jesus. The ever present Christ is who illumines, inspires, and through the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. Staying in the present with Jesus is our challenge"

Today we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven – the day he didn't die for the second time but rather the day his resurrected body ascended into heaven where Jesus sits at the right hand of God forever – not "sat" in the past tense but "sits" in the present tense

If anything, Ascension Day is a day to remind ourselves that our faith is a present tense faith – today is a day to remind ourselves that Jesus is ever-present-tense

Our language is different from the Lakota language and we can easily slip into past tense – these are all things that happened in the past for us to learn from, Jesus walked, talked, taught, healed – past tense

We can also easily slip into the future tense – these are all things that are gonna happen in the future if we're good, Jesus will come again!

But, Ascension Day reminds us that Jesus sits – present tense – at the right hand of God

This got me wondering about our language and what we say about our faith – and I mean both each of us personally (how each of us talks about our faith), but also us as a church as a community of believers (how do we talk about our faith)

So, I thought we could look to the liturgy and go right to the heart – in a way – of where we say what we believe: the Nicene Creed

Just a brief glance shows that the Nicene Creed mixes tenses – there is present, past, and future

Could we look at this together and try an experiment: What if we tried our best to put the Nicene Creed, as much as we could, in the present tense only – what would it say? What would it sound like? Would it change how we relate to God and our faith?

Let's try it!

We believe in one God – off to a good start! A declaration in present tense!

the Father, the Almighty,
~~maker of~~ who makes heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally ~~begotten~~ ~~begat~~ of/receives life from the Father,
God ~~from~~ with God, Light ~~from~~ with Light,
true God ~~from~~ with true God,
~~begotten~~ God creates, not ~~made~~ humans,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things ~~were made~~ are.
For us and for our salvation
he ~~came down~~ descends from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he ~~became incarnate from~~ the Virgin Mary bears him,
and ~~was made~~ becomes (hu)man.
For our sake he ~~was crucified~~ dies under Pontius Pilate;
he suffers ~~ed~~, dies, and we burry him ~~death and was buried~~.
On the third day he ~~rose~~ rises again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascends ~~ed~~ into heaven
and ~~is seated~~ sits at the right hand of the Father.

He ~~will~~ comes again in glory and judges ~~to judge~~ the living and the dead,
and his kingdom ~~will have~~ has no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the ~~giver of~~ life,
who proceeds/is from the Father and the Son.

Who with the Father and the Son we worship and glorify ~~is worshiped and glorified.~~

Who ~~has spoken~~ speaks through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world ~~to come~~. Amen.

What was that experience like for you? What insights did you gain from doing this? What moved you? What troubled you?

For me, this exercise reminds me how vital my faith is and I mean that both in the sense of how important it is to me, but also how alive it is

I'm struck by sentences like:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, who *makes* heaven and earth, *all* that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...Through him all things are.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, who speaks through the prophets

Oh how this resonates with me and inspires me!

Our faith is very much alive!

Our faith is a faith of the present tense!

I don't say this to diminish the past from whence our tradition has come, and I don't say it to dissuade you from dreaming about a better future

I think our faith tradition – and so many of the organized denominations – are very good at the past tense and future tense, but, gosh, I really need a faith that is present tense, I need a faith that is vital to me now and fills me with life, love, patience, courage, inspiration, hope

I need to dwell in a relationship with our God who is making heaven and earth with us right now, and with Jesus through whom all things are love, and with the Holy Spirit who is speaking through prophets to inspire us today!

Yes, I believe in Jesus who was, and is, and is to come but our faith traditions can get caught up in the “was” part and it definitely can get caught up in the “is to come” part

Let's get caught up in the “is” part

Our faith is!

My faith is!

Your faith is!

God is! Jesus is! Holy Spirit is!

Thanks be to God! Amen!