What does "begotten" mean?

A few weeks ago I did a sermon where I mentioned that for people who don't go to church often, the church - any church - probably seems a lot like a foreign country where we speak a foreign language. I gave some examples of words in our songs like, "sanctified," "incarnate," and even "Ebenezer." For those of us who do come inside the walls of a church building on a regular basis, the challenge is to 'translate' the Gospel message in our everyday lives.

After that sermon we stood up and spoke the Nicene Creed. In that statement of faith we confess that Jesus is the "only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.... begotten, not made." It was following that worship service that I received the question listed above.

That word, "begotten" certainly qualifies as one sounding like a foreign language. It's definitely not a word that gets much, if any, use outside the walls of church. It is an old English word, and we also find it in the King James translation of the Bible is that famous John 3:16 passage.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

 "begotten" is an English translation of the Greek word monogenes As such, we have to look at the original meaning of the Greek word.

So what does monogenes mean? According to the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BAGD, 3rd Edition), monogenes has two primary definitions. The first definition is "pertaining to being the only one of its kind within a specific relationship." This is its meaning in Hebrews 11:17 when the writer refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only begotten son" (KJV). Abraham had more than one son, but Isaac was the only son he had by Sarah and the only son of the covenant. Therefore, it is the uniqueness of Isaac among the other sons that allows for the use of monogenes in that context.

The second definition is "pertaining to being the only one of its kind or class, unique in kind." This is the meaning that is implied in John 3:16. John was very concerned with demonstrating that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31), and he uses monogenes to highlight Jesus as uniquely God's Son—sharing the same divine nature as God—as opposed to believers who are God's sons and daughters 'adopted' into the family by virtue of baptism and faith. This is also the meaning intended by the use of "begotten" in the Nicene Creed which highlights the fact that Jesus is truly divine. John tells us (in the first chapter of the Gospel - "good news" - that bears his name) along with the Father, Jesus is Creator. All else is created.

Since there are so many words that can seem like a "foreign language," I will be starting a new feature in the Sunday bulletin. Each week will highlight - and explain! - one of the words we use in church whose definition may be kind of elusive.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net