

LAMB OR LORD?
Isaiah 49:1-7; John 1:29-42
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Sermon from Sunday, January 20, 2008.

“Caesar is Lord!” --- Gaius Julius Caesar was reared in a patrician family that was not very influential. He rose from minor political posts to become governor of Spain, then governor of Gaul. After his friendship with Pompey soured, the Roman Senate recalled him. But instead of returning to Rome as a recalled governor, he amassed about 5,000 troops on the border between Gaul and Italy. And on a day that changed the course of human history, he crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC, not as a fallen political figure, but as a conquering military leader.

After a series of civil wars all around the Mediterranean in 46 BC, he was made dictator for 10 years. Two years later in 44 BC he entered a perpetual dictatorship. He wore a purple robe like that of early kings. He sat on a throne. However, when he was hailed as king, he would reply, “I am not a king, but Caesar.”

Those determined to restore the Republic plotted and killed him. On the Ides of March, one month after declaring himself perpetual dictator, he was stabbed to death by 20 of those had put in power. Rather than power and control returning to the Senate and a new Republic, it passed into the hands of a triumvirate. By 43 BC they had bestowed on the dead Caesar the title of “The divine Julius.” And so began emperor worship. By 4 BC subjects all over the empire would say, “Caesar is Lord.”

And in those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. So Joseph went up from Nazareth to his home town of David to register in Bethlehem. While there his pregnant wife gave birth to a child in a cattle cave and laid him in a manger. Poor shepherds on the Judean hillsides were told by angels to look for the one who would be Savior of the world. Wise men from afar looked at stars differently than do shepherds. One star set them on search of a king, bringing them months later to Jeru-shalom: City of Peace. Disturbed King Herod, hearing another king born as a threat to his puppet regime, inquired of the teachers of the law. They found that the prophet Micah had once said, “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” (Micah 5:2/Matt. 2:6)

What strange and mixed signals: Savior, king, ruler, shepherd. When Jesus came to the world he was not born, patrician, or even Levite. For 30 years he quietly apprenticed for what would be a brief, intense “show and tell.” He was deemed extremely wise by early hearers because he spoke with authority, not like the teachers of the law. He performed miracles and wonders. So those seeking signs of a coming messiah began to feel perhaps Jesus was the one.

But after they got past the thrills of water becoming wine, bread being multiplied, the sick being healed, and even the dead raised to life, they could not understand why he wasn't making his move. Everyone knew, or at least assumed, when messiah came he would lead Israel with a mighty show of force and power to overthrow the yoke of Roman rule and restore Israel to her former greatness as experienced under David and Solomon. All nations would turn to her and their peoples would come to Mt. Zion. Had Jesus not broken into his public ministry preaching, "The Kingdom is at hand—repent?"

Yes, he had said just that. The problem was they were using the same words but the meaning was totally different. Kingdom, for the Jew, meant place and power. For Jesus it meant reign and relationship. For that reason, and for that lack of understanding, by the time Jesus got to the cross he was chalked off as another loser: a stumbling block to the Jew, and foolishness to the Greeks.

Is it that different in our world today?—in our own culture?—even in our own church? Haven't we assumed that God is all powerful, ever-present, and on our side? It is always painful when truth confronts our assumptions, revealing that they are either inadequate or wrong. Have we adopted Caesar's model and renamed it "Christ?" Was Christ revealing from the cross something about the nature of God we don't like and are unwilling to accept? What does it really mean that Christ is the power and wisdom of God? The open secret is found in scripture and history.

(Illustration) The development of the scope and the cross-hair was a great boon for recreational hunters, to say nothing of serious warfare.

SCOPE = pulls the world into focus

CROSS-HAIR = identifies the target.

It is the Bible that reveals the scope of all life. It is the cross that is the intersection of ultimate meaning. Let me illustrate:

CREATION = DEED – GOD ACTS + GOD SPEAKS

Cannot separate the action/deed from the word. In the beginning God DID: created the cosmos. In the beginning God SAID/SPOKE: light/firmament/land-seas-vegetation/lights-sun-moon-stars/ fish/birds/animals/humans

In Genesis 3 we read the story of:

Fall/expulsion = word/judgment – deed/grace

Flood/rainbow = word/judgment – deed/grace

Babel/Abram = word/judgment – deed/grace

God's process of redeeming and restoring focused in a person, then a people.

Here we begin to see something of God's "weakness" – if by that we mean self-limiting – the tying of God's own hands to a covenant promise to a people he loved and freely chose to be a servant people.

Then collectively they grasped for power (ala Adam/Eve – Babel). After all if you can't see God, and all your surrounding role models are embellished with kings, armies, money and power, it is easy to do the same thing – then use "God-talk" to justify what you are doing. Who wants to be accused of being "God-less?"

INCARNATION = WORD - GOD SPEAKS + GOD ACTS

With the incarnation, God crossed a rubicon in a "show and tell" of what God is really like. Jesus, truly God and truly human, crossed a rubicon the day he approached John the Baptist in the wilderness. And John, seeing Jesus, said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

From there to the wilderness Jesus engaged in an intense civil war. Matthew 4 reports the temptations:

- 1) stones to bread: relevance (relieve human suffering)
- 2) jump from temple: spectacular (establish reputation by signs and wonders)
- 3) bow to Satan: power (inherit kingdoms, i.e. LORD CAESAR).

But what set Jesus apart was the reality that he always faced the right direction: faced God/obedience. To face God is to be committed to God's purposes – in God's way. That ultimately led Jesus across the Brook Kidron to the Garden of Gethsemane and on to Golgotha – foolishness/stumbling block.

A stumbling block to the Jews because Deut. 21:23 says "Anyone that is hung on a tree is under God's curse." So God's Messiah could never die on a cross. The crucifixion proved he was not the Son of God. They were looking for signs that would prove Messiah's strength to knock down walls and retrieve power. MEEK, SUFFERING SERVANTS DON'T MAKE GOOD MESSIAHS.

Foolishness to the Greeks because, for them, the first characteristic of God was "apathea." (more than apathy) = Total inability to feel. If God can feel and suffer, God is not God.

They rejected Jesus because both their assumptions and their presuppositions about God were wrong.

John Austin Baker, Bishop of Salisbury, said, “The crucified Jesus is the only accurate picture of God the world has ever seen.”

At the turn of the 20th Century, C.E. Rolt said, “The only omnipotence known to God is the almighty power of suffering love.”

In meditations on the cross and resurrection entitled *Weep Not For Me*, Britisher John V. Taylor asks, “A God who cannot set a limit to self-giving, who cannot ensure himself against suffering, who cannot be wholly in control of the relationships he initiates – what strange God is this?”

It is a God who has the ability to achieve purpose. I Cor. 1:18 “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”

The cross was not a defeat that had to be reversed by the resurrection. No! The cross was God’s victory over the power of evil and sin that was affirmed by the resurrection. For all who are facing the wrong direction, the invitation from the lips of a suffering, dying and resurrected Lamb is: Turn around. Let me help you change your mind, your heart, your direction, your Master.

When you do, you will experience him as both Lamb of God and Lord of Life.

Galatians 6:14 “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Amen, and Amen.

“The true perspective of our lives is not the small, moderate bourgeois world that we pretend is ours – but a cosmic stage on which the great extremes of the gospel are stark realities – Light and darkness, life and death, luxury and starvation, heaven and perdition. In this struggle of immense opposites, the cross of Jesus Christ towers to its true height. For in the world as it is today, nothing can avail to save us but an act of God making available once more to humanity the divine wisdom of strength and love.”

--John V. Taylor from *Weep Not For Me* (p, 4)