

“Lord in the Manger”

Luke 2:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on December 25, 2016 (Soli Deo Gloria) by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please turn in your Bibles to Luke 2.
- Bumper stickers are modern day creeds. A creed sets forth a statement of belief. The apostle’s creed for instance begins by saying, ***“I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord.”*** If you believe that it changes how you live your life.
 - Bumper stickers are marvelous examples of modern day creeds. They reflect what a person believes, how they think, what they value, and what they despise. Your creed could be as simple as ***“I want to be happy.”*** If so you shape your whole life around that goal.
- Let me give you some examples of bumper sticker creeds:
 - ***“He who dies with the most toys wins.”*** People who live by this creed devote their lives to gaining material possessions.
 - Another bumper sticker creed in our culture is, ***“Look out for number one”***. People who live by this creed make their choices based on what it will do or not do for them.
 - The Darwin fish is a bumper sticker creed. Most people who put that on their car are trying to say that their life is not defined by God because they do not believe God exists.
 - In a Canadian context people will add one more point to this idea of personal creeds and that is to say that no creed is greater than another, that my creed is true for me, yours is true for you, and there is no one creed that all others must come in line with.
- Two thousand years ago, God became a man. God took on human flesh, was born of a virgin, and was given the name Jesus. With His coming a new creed confronted the world. This creed cannot be viewed as good for some but not others. In fact this creed requires that every creed in this world and in our lives be made secondary to it.
 - This creed transforms all our personal and cultural creeds regarding what we think about sex, how we spend our money, how we respond to the poor and to those who hurt us.
 - This creed comes from Jesus’ birth. At his birth the angel announced to the shepherds that this baby is “Christ the Lord.” The creed, therefore, is very short and simple: Jesus is Lord.
- I want to reflect on this Christmas creed and I want to do three things: First, I want to demonstrate the difference this creed made to the early Christians. Second, I want to define the heights of this creed by looking at it within the Christmas story. And then third, describe what we should do with it.
 - So demonstrate the difference, define the heights, and describe what to do.

DEMONSTRATING THE DIFFERENCE OF THE CREED

- First, then let’s **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** demonstrate the difference this creed made in the lives of the early Christians. After Jesus was crucified, raised from the dead, and gone back to heaven millions of people became Christians. In those next decades, history tells us that a great outbreak of persecution came against the early Christians, especially under the infamous Emperor Nero. Let me read to you from Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian from the first century. He tells us what Nero did to Christians.
 - ***“Nero charged and tortured some people hated for their evil practices – the group popularly know as ‘Christians’. The founder of this sect, Christ, had been put to death by the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was Emperor...First those who confessed to being Christians were arrested. Then, on information obtained from them, hundreds were convicted...In their death they were made a mockery. They were covered in the skins of wild animals, torn to death by dogs, crucified or set on fire – so that when darkness fell they burned***

like torches in the night. Nero opened up his own gardens for this spectacle and gave a show in the arena.”¹

- In 112 AD the Emperor Trajan received a letter from the governor of Bithynia, a man named Pliny. He was perplexed as to how to enforce the persecution against Christians in the province and so he wrote his overlord saying,
 - *“This is the course that I have adopted. I ask them if they are a Christians. If they admit it I repeat the question a second and a third time, threatening capital punishment. If they persist I sentence them to death, for their inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished.”²*
- Now what is it that brought on this terrible persecution that lasted for centuries? As emperors gained power they began to demand that they be worshipped as gods. So as an oath of loyalty every citizen had to come before an altar, offer a pinch of incense and recite a very brief creed – just two words: **“Caesar Kurios”** which translated means, **“Caesar is Lord.”**
 - Now the Christians said, *“We believe, as the scriptures teach, that we are to submit ourselves to the governing authorities but the one thing that we will not do either publicly or privately is to give a man the worship that is due to God alone.”*
 - Historian Ward Gasque writes, *“Christians refused to offer a pinch of incense on an altar to the divine Emperor – an act which most intelligent people considered to be merely symbolic – and this was interpreted as unpatriotic.”³* For this they were terribly persecuted.

POLYCARP’S MARTYRDOM

- In A.D. 168 an 86-year-old man named Polycarp was arrested. He had been a disciple of the apostle John and was the pastor of the church in Smyrna. On his way to the arena the town ruler brought him into his carriage.
 - He said, *“What matter it for you to say, “Lord Emperor”, and to offer sacrifice or incense before him, to save your life?”* At first he would not reply. They badgered him terribly because he would not answer. Finally he did answer, and said *“I shall never do what you request and counsel me to do.”*
- The guards led him into giant amphitheatre amongst the roars of the crowd. He stood before the proconsul who had compassion on the old man and said, *“Polycarp, deny Christ and swear that the Emperor is God.”* There he stood, one final chance to change his mind. All he had to say was **“Caesar Kyrios.”** But this is what he said:
 - *“I have now served my Lord Jesus 86 years and he has done me no harm. How can I deny my King, who has saved my soul?”*
- The proconsul threatened, *“I have wild beasts ready who will tear your body limb from limb if you do not curse Christ.”*
 - *“Let them come for my purpose will not be changed.”*
- The proconsul answered, *“If the wild beasts do not scare you, I will have you burnt in the fire.”*
 - *“You threaten me with a fire which will burn for an hour and then will go out, but you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgement of God reserved for the everlasting torment of the ungodly. But why do you delay? Bring on the beasts, or the fire, or whatever you choose; you shall not move me to deny Christ, my King, Lord, and Saviour.”*
 - And Polycarp took off his robe and laid down on the pile of wood where he was burned and eventually run through with a sword.⁴
- These stories could be multiplied many times over. The early Christians refusal to recite two words resulted in the first three centuries of the church being soaked with blood.

¹ Tacitus, Annals, 15.44. From W. Ward Gasque, “The History of Christianity – A Lion Handbook”, pg 85.

² S.M. Houghton, “Sketches from Church History – An illustrated account of 20 centuries of Christ’s Power”, pg 11.

³ W. Ward Gasque, “The History of Christianity – A Lion Handbook”, pg 82.

⁴ Thielman J. van Braght, “Martyrs Mirror – The story of 15 centuries of Christian Martyrdom from the time of Christ to AD 1660”, pg 113.

- So why did the early Christians refuse to say, “*Caesar is Lord*”. Why not just say the two words and live? Why make such a big deal about it?

DESCRIBING THE HEIGHTS OF THE CREED

- Because one cannot affirm that Caesar alone is Lord and affirm that Jesus alone is Lord at the same time. There can be only one Lord. So having demonstrated the difference this creed made in the lives of those early Christians let us turn now to ask what the creed fully means – let us **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** describe the heights of Jesus is Lord.
- Let’s read from verse 1. **READ 1-6**
 - *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.*
 - Now as we read verses 7-11 I want you to pay careful attention to how the angel describes Jesus, the titles and terms that are used. **READ 7-11** - *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*
- Did you see them? Don’t skip over little words. They are all there for a reason. How many descriptive terms? There were three of them.
 - He is the “*Saviour*”, he is the “*Christ*” and finally this baby in the manger is described as “*the Lord*”... “*The Kurios*.”
- This word “*lord/kurios*” has three meanings attached to it in the NT. They begin on a small level and then ascend to a cosmic level.
 - The first use was the common use. To call someone “*lord*” in those days could simply be a polite form of address, akin to our use of “*Sir*” or “*Mr.*”
 - So for instance we see many people calling Jesus “*lord*” but that is simply because Jesus was a Rabbi and Rabbi’s were respected.
 - The second use is a little more defined. It is “*lord*” in the sense of a slave owner or master. The one who owned the slave was the lord of the slave. Paul often refers to himself as a slave of the Lord Jesus.
 - Both of these are the lower order of meanings.

THE ULTIMATE SENSE OF “LORD”

- The third use is not just one step higher, it is a quantum leap higher. You see when Caesar demanded that people call him as “*lord*”, he was not simply saying, “*Respect me, call me sir, view me as your leader.*” It was not just “*sir Caesar*” or even “*master Caesar.*” That would all have been right and good.
 - Nero and the other emperors were claiming for themselves the supreme and universal title of worship.
- To understand this fully we need to go back to the OT. The OT reveals many titles to describe God but there is only one sacred name for God and that is Yahweh.
 - Yahweh is the sacred name but the Jews never used it. To avoid blaspheming it they came up with other titles that acted as substitutes. The supreme substitute title for Yahweh was “*Adonai*” – which means “*absolutely sovereign.*” Throughout the OT Adonai is exclusively reserved for God.

- But when the Jews began to speak Greek they translated the OT into Greek and what word do you think they used to translate Adonai? That's right, it is **"Lord."**
- Scholar Colin Brown notes that of the 9000 references to Lord in the OT, ***"In the overwhelming majority of cases (some 6156 times)... 'kyrios' replaces the Hebrew proper name of God."***⁵
 - What does this all mean? It means that this third usage of Lord in the Bible refers exclusively to God Himself, to Adonai, to Yahweh. "Lord" refers to the sovereign one of the universe to whom all worship is due and to whom no one can compare.

JESUS IS LORD

- Now look at Luke 2 again. Follow this. Look at verse 9. **READ 9** - ***And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.*** That is, an angel of Yahweh the sovereign of the universe appeared to them and the glory of Yahweh shone around them.
 - **READ 10-11** - ***And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.***
 - The baby in the manger is called, "The Lord". This man Jesus who walked the planet earth 2000 years ago is called, "The Lord". He proved that He was the Lord by healing people, by raising people from the dead, by doing miracles, and ultimately by coming back to life after being in the tomb three days.
 - And that is why the very first Christians creed was, ***"Yeseus ho kurios" "Jesus is Lord."***
- Paul quotes a Christian hymn that predates him in Philippians 2.
 - He says that Jesus, ***"Who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! And after saying this Paul breaks out into praise saying,***
 - ***Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."***
- The earliest and simplest creed of the Christian faith is ***"Yeseus ho kurios". "Jesus is Lord"***. You know you are a Christian if you believe Jesus is the Lord, that you worship Him, that you seek to obey all that he taught because He is Lord. Christians refused to bow the knee to the emperor because there is only one Lord in the ultimate sense; one being to whom supreme allegiance is due. To say "Caesar is Lord" would be to commit cosmic treason.
 - There is only one Lord. There is only one sovereign. There is only one being who can command obedience. There is only one being in the universe to whom all worship, adoration, and glory are due. His name is Jesus and He is the Lord.

DESCRIBING WHAT WE SHOULD DO WITH THE CREED

- Let us move finally to **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** describe what we should do with this creed. Really there are only two things we can do:
 - If Jesus is Lord, if Jesus is the sovereign reigning King of the universe, the one who created all that there is, the one who will one day come to judge all people, the one and only God, the one to whom every creature will one day bow, there can only be two possible ways to respond to Him – either submit you life to Him, worship Him, love Him and obey Him, or you can say, ***"I reject Him Jesus as Lord."***

⁵ Colin Brown ed., "Dictionary of New Testament Theology", pg 512.

- In the first option a person comes before Jesus and says, ***“I affirm that you are Lord and I want my life to be lived under your lordship. I confess I have made myself Lord over my life but now I ask for your mercy to be upon me. I want to live under your Lordship.”***
 - And Jesus is a gracious Lord. To rebel subjects he offers pardon and eternal life with God. As the scriptures say, ***“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.”***
- But consider with me what happens to those who reject the Lord. What should God do with people who shake their fists at him, defying His rule, and set themselves up as their own Lords in rebellion to his rule? What does any just judge do with people who flaunt the laws of society and refuse to live by them?
 - And so the scriptures also say, ***“Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”***
 - You see it can only be one of these options.
- The Lordship of Jesus does not allow a third option. In our culture that third option is to say, ***“Well yes, I think Jesus was a great teacher who can help people. I take some of what he said and reject others.”*** But if he is the Lord you cannot have some of him and not the rest. He cannot be viewed simply as a good teacher because he claimed to be the Lord and judge of all. The words of C.S. Lewis are unmatched. He said,
 - ***“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic - on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg - or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.”***
- Friends the good news of Christmas is that this Lord is not a vindictive judge out to harm you. No, he is a merciful and loving Lord.
 - The great message of the gospel is that we, who have defied the Lord of the universe, can be forgiven and made right with him. So how will you respond to Jesus? Will you reject the Lord of all and face Him one day as His enemy? Or will you fall to your knees and say, ***“Jesus, I affirm that you are Lord. Have mercy on me for not worshipping you and serving you. I want to have my whole life now shaped by the creed.”***