

In March of 2013, while running for leadership of the Liberal Party leadership, Justin Trudeau was on an airplane and was asked if he thought that he could beat Conservative incumbent Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Trudeau responded with, “Just watch me.” Which, of course, sparked a flurry of reactions both from social media as well as political pundits.

“Just watch me.” It’s odd that such a simple phrase would spark both outrage and excitement from both sides of the political spectrum. However, the truth is, that Trudeau was not simply making a statement about his potential ability to beat Harper in an election. This statement was loaded with all kinds of meaning.

Back in October of 1970, in response to the October Crisis, Justin’s father Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau decided it was necessary to suspend some civil liberties in order to maintain order in the province of Quebec. When asked by a reporter how far he would take this suspension of liberties, Trudeau’s answer was, “Just watch me.”

So when Justin Trudeau, in 2013, responded to the question “Can you beat Stephen Harper?” with the phrase “Just watch me”, it was loaded with all kinds of meaning and symbolism that went beyond the literal words themselves. However, if you were unfamiliar with the weight and significance of that phrase and you heard Justin Trudeau use those words, you would have missed everything he was saying.

A lot of the time, the Bible works in a very similar way. The Bible was first written to real people in real places in history and usually the authors would take words and phrases that were loaded and heavy with contemporary significance. And they would use these phrases in a way to convey truth that moved beyond simple a literal interpretation of the words. They would say things in a way that evoke emotions like shock or excitement. Today we’re going to look at one such phrase.

We’re in the middle of our series One talking about the unity of the church. In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul gives us a list of seven reasons why the church should strive for unity. He says, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

We’ve talked about what it means that we’re all part of the same body of Jesus. That we collectively make up the new temple where God resides. We’ve talked about how we all have the same Spirit of God residing in us, guiding us into all truth. And last week we talked about how we’re all called to one hope. We talked about how Jesus is in the process of renewing, restoring and reconciling all things and how we’re called to participate with him in that.

This week we turn our attention to the phrase “one Lord” and dig into what exactly that meant for Paul and the early Christians in Ephesus. But before we jump in, let’s go to God in prayer.

In the spring of 44 BC, Julius Caesar was assassinated by some of his closest friends. Upon his death, his great-nephew Octavian was adopted and made his heir, making him the ruler of

Rome and the first emperor of the new Roman Empire. Four months later, in July of 44 BC, while people gathered in Rome to mourn Caesar's death and pay tribute to him through games, a comet appeared in the sky.

This was a clear sign to the people that Julius Caesar must have been divine and that he was now ascending back into heaven. And if Julius Caesar was a god, then Octavius, now known as Caesar Augustus, must be the son of a god. This was the start of what was known as the imperial cult of Rome and it was believed that each Caesar was divine and must be worshipped as divine.

The interesting thing is that, except for Caesar Claudius, each Caesar was the adopted son of the previous Caesar. Typically this new Caesar would be your great-nephew or your grandson or something like that. But upon your death, they were adopted as your son and named your heir.

So when one Caesar would die and a new Caesar was adopted and became the new Caesar, a proclamation would go out to all the citizens of the Roman Empire that would say something to the effect of, "Regarding his son [blank] (Caligula or Tiberius or Nero), who as to his earthly life was a descendant of [blank] (whoever his earthly lineage was), and who through the spirit was appointed the son of god in power."

This time, starting with the reign of Caesar Augustus in 44 BC was also known as *Pax Romana* or the peace of Rome. It was the first time that the entire known world was relatively at peace. However, the way this Pax Romana came about was the Roman army would march into town and with all of their swords and military power they would declare that "Caesar is Lord."

And at this point, you as a citizen would have one of two choices. You could agree, declaring that Caesar is lord, in which case you would keep your life and go on to sell radishes or horseshoes or whatever it is that you did in town. Or, alternatively, you could disagree with the empire. You could stand up and say, "No, I disagree. I don't believe that Caesar is Lord." In which case, you would be crucified. You wouldn't just be killed. You would be killed in the worst possible way. The Romans discovered that crucifixion was the most excruciating, torturous possible way to kill someone. And these crucifixions were always done in the most public of places because the Roman army wanted everyone else to see what exactly happens when you cross the empire.

And so peace was achieved, but it was peace through violence. It was peace because anyone and everyone who disagreed with you was dead. It was peace brought on by Caesar, who was the divine son of a god. Because of this peace, people would say, "There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

Now... what does all of this have to do with our Ephesians passage? We'll get there. But first, in Acts chapter 4, verse 11 through 13 says this: "Jesus is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.'

"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John.” What was so courageous about what they said? Well, they just took this well-known phrase that people would use to describe Caesar and how Caesar is bringing salvation to the world and they used it to describe Jesus.

And so Peter and John aren't simply saying that salvation is found in Jesus, although that's true. They are directly attacking the belief that salvation is found through Caesar and his way to peace. Or if we take a look at the open line of Paul's letter to the church in Rome.

“Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul writing to the Christians in Rome, the capital of the Roman empire, uses the same language of the Caesar's to talk about Jesus. Everything Paul says here is literally true. The gospel was promised beforehand through the Scriptures, Jesus was a descendant of David, he was raised from the dead. But beyond literally true, this is a loaded statement. The first Christians in Rome would have picked up on this language. This would have been like if Paul were writing to group of Christians in Washington DC and wrote that Jesus is the true president, elected by God himself. They would have recognized that Paul is challenging the imperial cult of Rome and declaring that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord.

He does this again later in Romans 10:9 when he says, “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” This is not a magic formula for how to get God to save you. Rather it's a statement.

Saying that someone other than Caesar was Lord was a good way to get yourself killed. But Paul says that if you declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart—in our culture, we view the heart as the seat of your emotions, but in the first-century world they considered the heart the place where you thought and reasoned.

So Paul says if you declare with your mouth the Jesus is Lord, thus putting yourself in danger of death, but recognize that God raised Jesus from the dead, then you've just robbed Rome of all of its power. The very worst that Rome can do is kill you. The last weapon the Empire has at its disposal is death. But Paul declares again and again that death itself has been defeated by Jesus.

One last passage. In Philippians 2:9-11, Paul says, “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 acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

There will come a day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. This is a bold claim when you're surrounded by an empire that insists Caesar is Lord. But at every turn, the first Christians were subverting the empire of the day. At every opportunity,

they were talking the words and phrases of the empire, the ways that people would sing the worship and praise of Caesar, and they were using it to talk about Jesus. And Ephesians 4 is just one more example of that.

Last week we talked about how unity is God's entire plan for the world. He desires to sum everything up under Jesus. And Paul is insisting that we can have unity as a church because there is one Lord and it certainly isn't Caesar. Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. Jesus, not Caesar, is the one to whom we owe allegiance. Jesus, not Caesar, is the one who brings true peace to this earth.

There are a couple implications of this reality. The first is the contrast between Pax Romana, Roman peace, and the peace of Jesus. Jesus, in his teaching, and the early Christians in their writings, insisted that peace through violence isn't really peace. That it was the illusion of peace, but not true peace. And yet, I grew up believing that Jesus was pulling a kind of bait-and-switch with us.

What I mean by that is that I grew up believing that Jesus, while on earth, was simply acting meek and mild. But that wasn't who he really is. Rather, when he comes back the second time, we're finally going to see Jesus show his true colours. That Jesus, when he returns, will use the same threat of violence to bring peace to the world. But what Scripture constantly reaffirms is the idea that Jesus, as he lived and acted while on earth, was the very embodiment of God.

Jesus insists in John 14 that anyone who has seen him has seen the Father. Which means that when Jesus avoids violence, it's because God abhors violence and is calling us to a better way.

I think a lot of times, at least for me, I struggle to believe that the way of Jesus is really the best way to live. And so I get into situations where I think, maybe a small little lie is the right thing to do here. Or I think, I know Jesus calls us to forgive others, but I also have to look out for myself and if I choose to forgive that person, they might hurt me again.

But the way that Jesus lived and taught us to live really, truly is the best way to live. Grace, mercy, peace, forgiveness and love really are better ways to live than violence, bigotry, hatred and selfishness.

Secondly, the writers of the gospel consistently affirm that the gospel, the good news, is about the fact the Jesus is Lord. The good news that they went out and enthusiastically declared was about something that has happened already. The good news was about the fact that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has fundamentally changed the course of human history. That Jesus is already risen, already reigning, already Lord.

Or as N.T. Wright in his commentary on Romans, "The 'good news' is not, first and foremost, about something that can happen to us. What happens to us through the 'gospel' is indeed dramatic and exciting: God's good news will catch us up and transform our lives and our hopes like nothing else. But the 'good news' which Paul announces is primarily good news about something that has happened, events through which the world is now a different place. It is about what God has done in Jesus, the Messiah, Israel's true king, the world's true Lord."

The good news is not “You’re a terrible person but there’s a get out of hell free card.” The good news is “Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord of the universe.”

Which brings us to our third reflection. When we say, “Jesus is Lord” we don’t just mean, “Therefore you must be obedient.” It’s true, that since Jesus is Lord then we need to obey him as Lord. But our obedience to Jesus comes as a response to the fact that he is already Lord.

What I mean is that “Jesus is Lord” is a promise more than a threat. Once again, I grew up in a form of Christianity that focused mostly on the fact that since Jesus is Lord, he has the authority and the holiness to punish me if I don’t live up to his standard.

But when we say that Jesus is Lord what we’re declaring is not simply that he will condemn us if we don’t act right. What we’re saying is that all power and authority belongs to him. We’re saying the Jesus has the ability to put everything in the world right. When we talk about Jesus reconciling the world, renewing the world, redeeming the world, these aren’t just wishes. Jesus is Lord and his responsibility as Lord is to do what only he can do and that is to save us from our destruction, reconcile us to himself, and create in us a new humanity. Our obedience to Jesus comes from a place of trust that he is who he says he is.

We can live united together because there is one Lord, and it’s not Caesar, it’s Jesus. He has shown us the best way to live, the good news is that he is already reigning in power and authority and his lordship is a promise to do what only he can do.

Let’s pray.