

When I was in high school, I worked for a gas station called QuikTrip. It was pretty much the best high school job a guy could want. QuikTrip is open 24/7/365, which means it's one of the only places open on Christmas Day. My family always got up really early to celebrate Christmas, and by 10 am, we were all just sort of sitting around for the day, so the last couple of years I was at home, I volunteered to work on Christmas Day at a gas station.

That might sound pretty generous of me, but I loved Christmas at QT. First, I got paid double-time, which was awesome for a 17 year old. Second, Christmas was the one day of the year QT employees didn't have to wear the uniform - if we chose to, we could dress up. I found a bright red blazer at a thrift store, so that plus a Santa hat became my Christmas Day uniform. I greeted everyone with "Merry Christmas" all day, because this was before the so-called Holiday Wars, when everyone just said whatever they wanted and didn't get mad. And the best reason to work QT on Christmas Day was that it was by far our busiest day every year. All day long, the store was packed with people and they were all in a great mood.

No kidding. On Christmas, you could guarantee that no one was going to yell at you or get mad over some silly something (because believe me, the other 364 days, there's no telling what would set someone off). Christmas Day, everyone was in a great mood and grateful that *somewhere* was open.

That's what's so interesting about this time of year - it brings out the best in us. That's a large part of why we all like this season so much. Charities and non-profits *really* like this time of year because everyone's feeling more generous.

But if we flip that around, I don't particularly enjoy what it says about us. What we're really saying is that for maybe a month or so - December - we're kind, thoughtful, considerate and generous. But the other 11 months? What does that make us?

I don't want to be a person who's only kind 8% of the time. I don't want to be a person who's only generous and thoughtful 1 month in 12. I don't want to be a person who thinks about justice and peace on Earth only in that little gap between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

If you're here today, I'm guessing you can relate. That you don't want to be that way either. So let's take a look together at how the Scriptures talk about the Christmas story, how they frame this conflict between the occasional kindness of our culture and the eternal kindness of Jesus.

Luke opens his story of Jesus' birth like this:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census.

And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. -- Luke 2:1-6 (NLT)

Jesus, the king, the Messiah, the savior, was born while Augustus was the Emperor of Rome. Doesn't sound like a big deal to us, but for Luke's original readers, that said a lot. Augustus was the first Roman Emperor, and he created an imperial policy called the *Pax Romana*, or the "Peace of

Rome". The *Pax Romana* was at its core a promise Rome made to the people of the world: if you do what Rome wants, you'll have peace.

Rome said, Pay taxes to us, worship our gods, do things our way, and you can have peace. Rome didn't say, Rome didn't have to say, Or Else.

In other words, Rome was so powerful, the Caesars called themselves gods. They claimed the power over life and death (do things Rome's way and you live. Disobey us and you die). The Caesars took the title Lord, so that everyone had to confess, Caesar is Lord!

At the time Jesus was born, Rome had been ruling Israel for a couple of generations. And Israel chafed under Roman rule. They knew they were God's chosen people, knew that they should be free. In their Scriptures, as we heard earlier, God had promised to free them. So the people of Jesus' day were anxiously awaiting the coming of their Messiah, who was going to ride in on a stallion, sweeping Rome out of there, crushing their enemies and showing the world who the true King and Lord is.

And the Bible announces Jesus is that long-awaited Messiah. So how does Jesus come?

Mary gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. -- Luke 2:7 (NLT)

Jesus comes as a baby. And not even a baby born to a king, in a palace. Not born in some hidden monastery where he can learn mad ninja skills or something. Jesus is born to a couple of peasants on a road trip. His birth is so insignificant that the backwater town he's born in doesn't even notice.

Not very auspicious beginnings for the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Certainly not a good start to this story if Jesus is supposed to grow up and challenge the mighty Caesars of Rome, as Luke is framing the story.

And yet this is how God chose to come into the world. Why? And what does that tell us about who we are called to become? For that, let's turn to Revelation 5.

Revelation was written almost 100 years after Jesus was born, to a group of Christians living in the Eastern Roman Empire. They lived under Caesar's thumb, experienced more persecution and trouble than Mary and Joseph did. And the Revelation was written to encourage these churches, to show them of the true nature of reality.

Last week, we started in Revelation 4. We talked about how Revelation 4 begins this Wizard of Oz moment where God pulls back the curtain of reality to show John and the Christians the truth of reality. We saw that it's not Rome sitting on the throne in the middle of the universe, but God. And in Heaven, all creation is worshiping God all the time, laying down their achievements and identities at God's feet.

This week, the action starts. So again, we're not going to dissect every little detail. Instead, we'll pay attention to the main story. Let's start in verse 1:

Then I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who was sitting on the throne. There was writing on the inside and the outside of the scroll, and it was sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel, who shouted with a loud voice: "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll and read it. Then I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it. -- Revelation 5:1-4

Obviously, this scroll is a big deal. Since we don't live in the first century, some of this (okay a lot of it) isn't clear. For us, scroll is something you do on a touch screen, but in the ancient world, scrolls were legal documents. And a scroll in the hand of a king was a proclamation. It was the king's will.

So John's first century readers would instantly have recognized this scene as God revealing God's will to the world. What they'd naturally expect to happen next would be for someone to take the scroll, open it and read it. Once the scroll had been read, it was legally in effect.

But something's wrong here: when the angel announces, like we expect, "Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?", no one steps forward. In fact, it says "No one on heaven or on earth or under the earth." It's John's fancy way of saying No one anywhere.

Again, this all seems pretty opaque to us, but John is making a basic theological claim (he's just doing it really creatively). What is keeping God's will from being done here on earth as it is in Heaven? Or, we could ask, Why doesn't the world look the way God intends it to?

The answer, of course is Us. Humanity. We constantly try to remake the world in our own image rather than follow the Way of God. The theological word for that is Sin. And that's the problem here: the reason God's will isn't being done on Earth is Sin. Sin has broken humanity's relationship with God.

Revelation sets the scene as a battle between God and Caesar. So consider what an Empire is. An Empire is a group of people who think the world would be better if everyone lived *their* way. That's what Caesar Augustus did. That was the heart of the *Pax Romana*: If you want peace, if you want life, you do things Rome's way.

Strip away all the trappings of Empire and it's the same basic impulse each of us knows very well: That voice inside us that says, They'd all be better off if they just agreed with me. If they just did it my way. And *that* is Sin. Saying "My way" instead of following God's Way.

And when John sees the painful reality of Sin, that no one in the world can bring about God's will, that Sin has utterly cut us off from God, he weeps. Of course he does! Coming face-to-face with the ugly reality of sin, the hopelessness of our enslavement to our own pride can only lead to despair!

But then, one of the elders, one of those worshipers who casts his crown of achievement on the ground, grabs John:

But one of the twenty-four elders said to me, "Stop weeping! Look, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals." - Revelation 5:5

Ah! This is what we were hoping for! The elder says, Don't worry, John! Look over there! The Lion of Judah has come conquering! He is worthy to open the scroll!

Good news! God intervenes! If you were here last month, we looked at Amos. And in Amos, God was this terrifying lion (think Aslan), roaring judgment out on the wicked. This is the God we've been waiting for! The God Israel was waiting for! God the Lion of Judah has come to conquer Rome, to overthrow Caesar and all human sin! Caesar might have been big and bad, but God is bigger and badder! Let's meet the conquering Lion of Judah:

Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been sacrificed, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which represent the sevenfold Spirit of God that is sent out into every part of the earth. He stepped forward and took the scroll from the right hand of the one sitting on the throne. -- Revelation 5:6-7

Wait. What? Where's the Lion? Instead of God the terrifying, conquering Lion, we get God the sacrificed Lamb. That's a huge confusion. It's not like John's seeing a tiger, so we can say, Oh... Lion, Tiger. They're not really the exact same, but... close enough.

This is a Lamb. And not just a Lamb, a *sacrificed* Lamb. Can you get any more opposite of a powerful, terrifying Lion? There's nothing *less* threatening than a Lamb, is there? Oh yeah... a *dead* lamb.

A Lamb instead of a Lion is quite the bait-and-switch. But this is the same contrast Luke gave us in his Christmas story. This is the very heart of who God is:

Jesus conquers by dying. Jesus wins by losing. God the Lion is actually God the Lamb.

That's quite the shock. Especially for John's readers. Because they wanted God the Lion. They lived under the thumb of Caesar. And if anyone in that day was a Lion, it was Caesar and Rome. They were vicious and cruel to those who didn't follow them. You can imagine that they wanted a bigger lion to show up, someone who could out-conquer the conquerers.

But John is telling us the same thing Luke told us: Jesus is a totally different kind of king. Jesus does not rule the way Caesar rules. Jesus will not conquer the way Caesar conquers. That's *why* Jesus came as a baby!

God didn't have to come this way. When you're the all-powerful ruler of the universe, you can choose any number of ways to come into the world. God could've come like a Lion. God could've stormed in with an army of angels at his back, Caesar-style. But that's the whole point. God. Isn't. Like. Caesar. So God didn't come like a lion. God came in the way most consistent with God's character.

God chose to come among us weak, powerless. Under the shadow of a false king who can only maintain his throne through force and intimidation. Because God's Way is fundamentally different from Caesar's. God's way is not the way of the conquering lion. God doesn't simply shock and awe his enemies into submission. God doesn't just have the biggest gun in the fight.

If Caesar is a lion, then God is the sacrificed Lamb.

That's a powerful metaphor, a helpful lens we can use to examine our own lives. Do we look more like lions or lambs? In how we treat other people? In how we organize our schedules and build our lives? In how we disagree, how we treat our enemies?

Are you building an empire for yourself, enforcing your will, trying to make your world as much like you want as you can?

Or are you giving yourself for the good of those around you? Are you kind and generous and welcoming and peaceful?

Jesus is a lamb. Jesus came as a baby. This path of weakness is the way of God. It's not a stop-gap, it's not a half-measure. It's not a last-ditch, Hail Mary pass because God had no other options. This is fundamentally who God is. God is most perfectly revealed in Jesus, and Jesus is the sacrificed Lamb.

That's really hard for us to get our minds around. Especially because the way of the Lion, the way of Caesar is so tempting, and so subtle.

Consider those Holiday Wars, for example. A lot of Christians get really bent out of shape when a person or store chooses to say 'Happy Holidays' instead of 'Merry Christmas'. I was at a Christmas Eve gathering at another church once when I heard a person come up to the pastor and say, "Pastor, I've been telling people this year to have a Happy *HOLY*days and Merry *CHRIST*mas."

Her tone was so belligerent, I couldn't help but hear the Lion in her tone. She had turned what are meant to be words of welcome and peace into weapons she was using to enforce her will on people who disagreed with her. To try to force them to see the world the way she saw it.

That's not the Way of the Lamb. Ironically, she's trying to celebrate CHRISTmas in a way that looks like Caesar, not Christ. It's ironic that so many Christians are fighting this alleged War on Christmas the way Caesar fights. If anyone's taking the Christ out of Christmas, it's us. Shame on us.

This is what Jesus came to change. When Jesus defeated sin - by dying - he proved that Rome's way isn't the way that really leads to life. That's why the Resurrection is so important. Jesus' resurrection is proof that God's Lamb way is the true way. Because even when the lions do their worst, even if Rome kills you, God is faithful to bring life even in the midst of death.

Jesus' weakness is stronger than Caesar's strength. God's life is more powerful than Rome's threats of death. That's why Jesus can take the scroll. That's why Jesus is worthy to open it. And watch what happens in the Throne Room when he does:

And when he took the scroll, the four living beings and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp, and they held gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song with these words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and open it. For you were sacrificed, and your blood has ransomed people for God

from every tribe and language and people and nation. And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God. And they will reign on the earth."

Heaven sings a new song. It's a song that's never been sung before. Never could be sung in a world ruled by Rome and the Way of the Lion. But now, in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, God's Way of the Lamb has been proven to be the most powerful. So all Heaven sings, You are worthy to take the scroll *because you were sacrificed*. Not 'despite the fact that you sort of got killed'. Not 'hey, you hit a few bumps along the way, but you got back up and finished the fight!'

Jesus is worthy *because he was killed*. The Lamb wins by losing. The Lamb conquers by dying. And our response should be the same: we should join in singing that new song, rejoicing in the Way of the Lamb:

Then I looked again, and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. And they sang in a mighty chorus: "Worthy is the Lamb who was sacrificed-- to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing."

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang: "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever."

And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb." Revelation 5:8-14 (NLT)

This season, are you following Caesar or the Baby? Are you living like a Lion or a Lamb? Only one Way leads to life.

Communion Setup

Each week of Advent, we approach the Communion Table as a Revelation of Jesus. Today, we've seen that John reveals Jesus to us as the sacrificed Lamb. This is the same Jesus we meet in this meal. We eat bread to represent Jesus' body, broken for our sin, for our impulse to set up little empires of our own. We drink grape juice to represent Jesus' blood, poured out to restore us to God, to bring us back into God's kingdom.

When we come to this table, we come to the Way of the Lamb. Jesus didn't fight, he surrendered. And in that weakness, we find a far greater strength than anything the Lions of this world offer us.

You don't have to be a member of our church to come to Jesus table. If you want to follow the Way of the Lamb, to renounce the way of the Lion and all the Caesars of this world, if you will give your allegiance to the God who wins by losing, then you are welcome to this table.

Let's pray.