

Welcome

Stan Lee's birthday is just before the end of the year. Since he died last year, on his birthday, Robert C. Cargill shared on Twitter a really cool story about Stan. Now, you probably don't know who Robert C Cargill is - he co-wrote the movie Doctor Strange with the director, Scott Derrickson.

So, according to Cargill, at the world premier of Doctor Strange, one of Stan's people came over to Cargill and said, "Stan would like to see you."

That's right: Stan summoned people, like a king.

So Cargill goes over to the great Stan Lee, the guy who literally invented Doctor Stephen Strange, Marvel's Sorcerer Supreme. And Stan says, "You're Robert, the writer?"

Cargill says, "Yes sir." Because when someone has the power to summon you, you call them sir.

Stan took his hand and said, "You got Stephen just right. Thank you so much."

A small moment, but Cargill reflected on how that small act of generosity on Stan's part buoyed him through the turmoil of being the writer of one of the biggest movies of the year, a movie that fans pick apart and fight viciously over. He said that, no matter what the Internet said, he was bulletproof because the great Stan Lee himself had taken time to let him know how much Stan loved his take on Stan's work.

When I read that story, I got a little teary. Not just because we lost Stan last year, but because the replies to Cargill's story were filled with people sharing their own stories of how kind and gracious Stan was. It turns out, Cargill's experience wasn't a one-off. It was a single example of a larger pattern of kindness and generosity to which Stan had committed himself a long time ago.

And he didn't *have to* do that. After all, he was the great Stan Lee. He had people to summon people he wanted to talk to. We have all heard stories of THOSE celebrities - the people with so much power and influence they have become untouchable, living on another level from the rest of us mortals here on the ground.

But Stan refused that. He made it a point to be gracious and kind, to go out of his way to show regular people how much he loved and appreciated them.

When you ask comic book people why Stan Lee is so beloved, you will of course hear that he created so many of the greats - Spider-man, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men and Doctor Strange. But almost always, you first hear a personal story about Stan's kindness and generosity.

Isn't that weird? That one of the most famous guys in our culture right now - the one guy who's been in every single Marvel movie - is best remembered not for what he created, but for how he treated others?

That's not how we usually think about power, fame and glory, but it's the truest thing in the world. So today, we're going to ask what makes God so great. And we'll find that, much like Stan Lee, what makes our God so great is not how powerful God is, but what God does with that power: comes down to our level and extends kindness to us.

Message

This is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate that the God who came to us at Christmas is not only for us, but for the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Church Words with Friends". We're going to be exploring some of those words Christians use that can be confusing. Maybe they're words like "Gospel" that are unique to Christianity. Or words like "grace" or "blessed" that pretty much everyone uses, but no one is exactly sure what they're supposed to mean. Our goal is to understand our faith better so that we can be better conversation partners with our friends and neighbors outside the Church.

And since friends are so nice, we're going to do two words each week. By learning these 'church words' together, we'll uncover new dimensions to our faith.

We began with God, and explored how understanding God as Trinity is essential for Christians. Trinity means God is most basically self-giving Love, who created us to join God in loving by giving ourselves to God and those around us.

Today, we're going to look at two words that are very "Church", but point to what God's self-giving love looks like: Gospel and Incarnation.

So let's start with "gospel". This word comes to us from the four stories of Jesus' life in our New Testament - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The four Gospels.

Why do we call them that? Well, because of Mark, which is the earliest written account of Jesus' life we have. He opens his story with this sentence:

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. -- Mark 1:1

See that Good News that's capitalized right there? That's a Greek word *euangelion*. It literally means "good announcement", and when that word was translated into Old English (think before Shakespeare, when English was still 75% German), it was God (with a long o, meaning 'good') and Spel, which meant 'news' or 'story' (like our word spiel). So *euangelion* means 'good announcement', which was translated as Godspiel, and our modern translations render it 'good news'.

And in case you're curious, yes, our word "evangelism" comes from *euangelion*.

Clear as mud?

The 4 Gospels are 4 'good announcements' about Jesus.

But it's actually a little more interesting than that. Because Mark didn't make up that word *euangelion*. It's a word the Roman Empire employed as a propaganda tool.

Euangelions were specifically announcements that reinforced Rome's worldview and rule. So if Roman legions won a decisive victory, evangelists were sent out across the empire with a good news announcement: Rome is victorious!

If a new caesar was born or crowned, evangelists were sent out with a good news announcement: the gods show their favor to Rome! The message was always, subtly: Don't forget who's in control. Don't forget whose world you live in. This Gospel is only good news if you're on Rome's side.

Now, that's not actually so far removed from our present day, is it? After all, we have books and articles about the Gospel of Apple or Google. Large companies have Brand Evangelists whose job it is to spread good words about their company - get them, their products, their philosophies out into the world.

And every government in the world, including ours, uses propaganda. Maybe our most formal version of that is our annual State of the Union address, which is coming up in just a couple of weeks. The whole thing is pageantry and propaganda, where the sitting President and his party try to convince everyone they're doing a great job and offer a plan for the next year.

So, hold onto that idea, and let's jump back to Mark. When Mark wrote his story about Jesus, he chose to open it like this:

This is the *euangelion* about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. -- Mark 1:1

Can you imagine how you would feel if you were living in Mark's day and you heard a story begin like this? Maybe it would help if you imagined a pastor today opening his sermon with, "Welcome to Catalyst. Today, I'm going to address you regarding the State of our Union."

It would instantly feel political to you, wouldn't it? That's how those first listeners to Mark's story heard his opening line, too. They immediately understood Mark's story about Jesus was a political story, one that was meant to comment on Jesus as compared to Caesar.

Of course, Mark wasn't the only Gospel writer who made this connection. Luke begins the story of Jesus' birth with this sentence:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. -- Luke 2:1

Why start the story of Jesus' birth with a census (which was about tax policy)? Ask everyone who hated Star War: Episode 1. Tax policy is not an exciting way to begin an epic story. But Luke had an agenda in mind. Take this inscription: before I tell you when and where it's from, can you guess who it's about?

Whereas Providence that orders all our lives has in her display of concern and generosity in our behalf adorned our lives with the highest good: _____, whom she has filled with virtue for the benefit of humanity, and has in her beneficence granted us and those who will come after us a Savior who has made war to cease and who shall put everything in peaceful order; and whereas _____, when he was manifest, transcended the expectations of all who had anticipated the good news, not only by surpassing the benefits conferred by his predecessors but by leaving no expectation of surpassing him to those who would come after him, with the result that the birthday of our God signalled the beginning of Good News for the world because of him.

It sure sounds like a reflection the Christmas story, doesn't it? The birth of a god who brought peace and ended war?

But this is from an inscription on a Roman Calendar, a calendar written a good five years or so before Jesus was born. This was more Roman propaganda, specifically about Caesar Augustus, who declared himself to be a living god.

And Luke, who wrote his Gospel a decade or so after Mark and seventy years or so after Caesar Augustus's rule, chose to imitate the language Rome used in its *euangelions* about its Caesars to talk about Jesus.

This fact has caused all sorts of problems for theologians. Because guess who else was born of a virgin? Caesar Augustus, according to later Roman historians. Guess who else claimed to be God? Caesar Augustus. And Jesus was far from the only person who claimed to be the Messiah - Rome crucified a would-be Messiah every generation or so. Jesus wasn't the only miracle worker in his day - rabbis who worked miracles weren't exactly a dime a dozen, but they weren't hard to find either.

All the reasons today we think Jesus is so special and singular weren't actually as noteworthy as we think in Jesus' day. So the question becomes: What is so good about Jesus' good news?

What separates Jesus from the Roman Caesars on the one hand and all those other religious teachers on the other?

That's where our second word, Incarnation, comes in. This word comes to us from Latin. It literally means "enfleshment" or "becoming meat".

It's a word that refers to the idea we find in John 1 - the way John starts *his* Good News about Jesus. It's not about Caesar, but about all humanity. We heard John's introduction last week to Jesus as God:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. -- John 1:1-3

Jesus is God, the second person of the Holy Trinity. John goes on to explain what this divine Word does:

The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. -- John 1:14

The Word, Jesus, became flesh. He became human *so that we could see God*.

Or as the writer of Philippians puts it, Jesus surrendered his divine privileges and took the form of a slave. Jesus, the creator God, who had all power, gave up that power to become like us so that we could become like him.

There's a reason we don't just celebrate Easter, when Jesus is raised from the dead. Because we see Jesus' work as so much more than just his death and resurrection. That event is part of a larger pattern of self-giving love, the very essence of God, that we see from the creation forward. We celebrate Christmas because the manger shows us who God is.

God is not like Caesar, born in a palace, working the system to rise to the top, put himself on a pedestal and make everyone worship him. That's Caesar's way: worship me or else.

God, rather, becomes one of us to show us what a fully human life looks like. And (as we're going to talk about more next week), God demonstrates God's love for us by dying for us.

Because God took on flesh and became one of us in the person of Jesus, we know how we are supposed to live - not like Caesar, but like Jesus.

Are our lives characterized by trying to be right, enforce our will on others, getting our way? (Isn't it amazing when you abstract Caesar's behaviors how much they sound like a toddler?)

Or are we a people who live in self-giving love? Do we put others before ourselves and treat others as we want to be treated?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus shows us what a fully human life looks like.

1. Asdf
2. Asdf
3. Asdf

4. Asd

Assignment + Blessing

Secret Service challenge