

Announce to Every Caesar: God Is Not Dead

Luke 23 – 24:1-7

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To say “Jesus died for my sins” is far too simple and simplistic. When speaking about the magnitude of what the crucifixion and the resurrection really mean, we become too casual. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one who believed in the cross and resurrection, took on the evil of Hitler and the evil of fascism. He was a Christian theologian, and he taught that just saying “Jesus died for my sins, and all I gotta do is just say that,” is a form of cheap grace. Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate, begotten of the Father, was born in poverty. He was born in the midst of oppression. Bethlehem was the smallest of cities, and where he was raised, Nazareth, was considered a ghetto. No one expected anything good to come out of Nazareth.

Jesus and his earthly family—Joseph, Mary, his brothers—were under the occupation of the Roman Empire and the rule of Caesar. Caesar and his governors did not entertain any challenge to their way of life. In fact, they had a phrase: “When in Rome, you’d better do as the Romans do.” Caesar put his face on his money. Caesar put his face on his buildings. Caesar put his gold on his buildings. And Caesar made sure his buildings were higher than other buildings. And Caesar demanded his way or the highway. Caesar had his own set of alternative facts. He told his own lies despite the truth. Caesar, if you worked for him, demanded loyalty to him and him alone, no contradiction. And if you did contradict him, he might fire you. Caesar commanded the military and the police force and would not hesitate to use them. Every now and then, he did it just to keep folk afraid.

In a book that unpacks the world of first century Rome when Jesus was born, in Caesar’s world, only the wealthy thrived, and the wealthy ruled. In fact, that book, the Book of Acts, which is a history, says that the 99% lived under the rule of the 1% in Caesar’s Rome. In Caesar’s Rome, society was deeply stratified between the haves and the have-nots. In Caesar’s Rome, the political structure was filled with those who had money, and the rest were expected to sit on the side because in Caesar’s Rome, the ones who made the policies didn’t live the policies. In Caesar’s Rome, the criminal justice system profiled people and treated the poor differently than the wealthy. Caesar’s ethic was power—that’s what made you important. Who can you bully with your power? Who can you beat down with your power? Who can you lord over with your power?

That’s why, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is charged with sedition. That’s really his charge. He refused to bow down to Caesar. He didn’t pick up weapons; he did it non-violently. Caesar didn’t even want that. Jesus’ very existence challenged every ethic of Caesar. Jesus was a king, but he was born in an animal stall and not a palace, and that messed Caesar up. Jesus was raised among the poor and the working poor. Jesus was forced to pay taxes while Caesar

paid none, or, they never really got to check his returns anyway. Jesus fed the poor. Caesar let them down. Jesus healed the sick. Caesar didn't care. Jesus called on religion to serve the cause of love and justice and the mercy of God. Caesar bought religion and paid off religious leaders to serve him and give him cover for his political brutality. Jesus moved in an ethic of love, service, and concern for all. Caesar moved in an ethic of manipulation, lust, disregard, and domination against anyone not in his circle.

When, during Passover, Jesus entered Jerusalem—a city and a country under occupation—Caesar's police force and military were there to put down any type of revolution. On his first day in Jerusalem, Jesus committed an act of civil disobedience—he turned over the tables in the temple. That forced Caesar's people to say "Enough!" because he was stirring up the nation, and he was not honoring Caesar as his god.

Jesus represents God's spirit in conflict with Caesar's spirit. If you don't get that, you really don't grasp this cross and resurrection. Jesus represents God's saving way of love and worship and justice and mercy in conflict with the ethic of Caesar's sinful way of hate and injustice and idolatry and meanness and oppression. This is why Jesus knew the cross would be his penalty. This is why he knew he would have to suffer, and why that angel told those women at the tomb, "Don't you remember what he said?" He said that he would have to suffer because Caesar said "I'm Lord. I'm divine. I and I alone can save you. I and I alone can make the world right." And Jesus' very existence and his ethic and his divinity and his authority challenged what Caesar said. Neither Caesar nor his cronies, the false priests, Pilate, or Herod could let this pass. No, my brothers and sisters: Jesus had to suffer. He told his disciples so. Why? Not only did he tell them he had to suffer, but he said if you're going to follow me, you're going to have to take up your cross and follow me. There's no way to this kind of righteousness that bypasses suffering.

I need to tell you that this morning, before I want to get to resurrection, but I want to backtrack a minute. You don't experience this kind of resurrection unless you've known the fellowship of his suffering. I need to tell somebody the spirit of Caesar still lives. Caesar may be physically dead, but the spirit of Caesar still lives because oppression still lives, and hate still lives, and racism still lives, and meanness still lives, and injustice still lives. I know it lives. I see the evidence of Caesar's spirit. Whenever you have people in power who will commit the sin of taking healthcare from the sick so that they can give tax cuts to the greedy, knowing that thousands will die unnecessarily, the spirit of Caesar still lives. When drug kingpins can get drugs despite all these satellites we have that can see a dime from 10 miles in the sky, somebody knows what's going on! Lord, have mercy, Jesus! And then when the little kingpins sell drugs in our community and kill our babies more than the Klan ever kills, Caesar's spirit still lives. When greedy government leaders sin—oh yes, I'm saying that three letter word, *sin*—by divesting resources from poor communities—jobs, infrastructure, support—and then those same leaders blame those same communities for the crime that's there, that's proof that the spirit of Caesar still lives. When people with power will commit the sin of making poor people pay taxes but will not ensure poor people have a living wage, the

spirit of Caesar still lives.

I wish I had some help in here!

Whenever persons sin by using their finite power to suppress the vote in ways based on race and class so that those of domination can win rather than have a democracy functioning right, and when they deny the God-given humanity and the human rights of individuals and then stack the courts to protect themselves and their power and then put pornographic sums of money into the political structure in order to dominate it, I can tell you Caesar still lives. And then when they stack the courts so the court will not find them guilty of their unconstitutional acts, their *sin*, I tell you, Caesar still lives.

When folk use the highest office in the land not to enforce justice but to take away and deny the image of God in our immigrant brothers and sisters, calling them aliens, calling them filth rather than human beings, when they will use that power sinfully to prosecute our brother and sister immigrants and snatch mothers and children from one another, I tell you the spirit of Caesar still lives.

This week, I read that a member of the North Carolina Legislature said that Abraham Lincoln and Hitler were the same. Whenever you see this kind of *sin*, it's called revisionist history. When you lie about the past in order to justify modern-day oppression, that's proof that Caesar still lives. The only truth Caesar cares about is his own. When tyrants over there bomb children with chemical weapons, and tyrants over here weaponize water in Flint, and nine or ten other cities around America are poisoning children and families simply because they're poor, they're black, and they're not well-connected, and they're poor, and they're white, and they're not well-connected, Caesar still lives.

Any time our society declares a person presidential when they drop bombs, that's SIN. Any time our society forgets all the regressive and politically violent actions leaders are pushing that will bombard and hurt the lives of the least of these, Caesar still lives. And whenever some who claim allegiance to religion, allegiance to the religious community, or allegiance to Christ, and when they don't say a word about these public sins that run counter to the deepest values of Christ, we are not seeing a battle between left-wing religion and right-wing religion, we are seeing *sin*—a battle between the spirit of Caesar and the spirit of God. We are seeing an attack on the very moral core of our deepest values—an attack on love and truth and justice. We are seeing a battle between right and wrong. We are seeing the spirit of Christ versus the spirit of Caesar, non-violence versus violence. And my brothers and sisters, when you dare, when the church dares to challenge these things, to challenge this *sin*, to challenge the spirit of Caesar, we too will suffer.

Jürgen Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God*, unpacked redemptive suffering. He said this: "The knowledge of the cross brings a conflict of interest between God who has become man and man who wishes to become God." That's where the battle lines are! He says, "God allows himself to be humiliated and crucified in the Son, in order to free the oppressors and the oppressed from oppression and to open up to them the situation of free, sympathetic humanity...God became man that dehumanized men might become true men. We

become true men in the community of the incarnate, the suffering and loving, the human God....The God of freedom, the true God is... not recognized by his power and glory in the history of the world, but through his helplessness and his death on the scandal of the cross of Jesus.” And then I love what Moltmann says: “The problem of modern man is no longer so much how he can live with gods and demons, but how he can survive with the bomb, revolution, and the destruction of the balance of nature. He usurps more and more of nature and takes it under his control. His main problem is no longer the universal finitude which he experiences in solidarity with all other creatures, but the humanity of his own world.”¹ In other words, the way of Jesus challenges the inhumanity of the spirit of Caesar. And Jesus’ way calls us to recover our humanity in the way in which God would have us live. And the cross is what happens when Caesar sees his inhumane world being challenged.

The Early Church understood this. The story is told that at age 86, Polycarp, the second-century bishop of Smyrna and disciple of the Apostle John, was brought to the Roman authorities who ordered him to confess Caesar is Lord. All they asked him to say is “Caesar is Lord.” They said just say this and you’ll be all right. Just a noun, a verb, and another noun: Caesar is Lord. That’s all, you say this, and we won’t bother you. That’s all, we won’t hurt you. That’s all, we won’t crucify you. Just say that, just say, “Caesar is Lord.” He was 86, an old man, retired, and he could have said, “Alright, I don’t have time for this. I’ll just say what they want me to say so they won’t bother me.” But he said, “No.” And he was murdered because that’s exactly what Rome calls Caesar. They said *Caesar Kyrios*. Kyrios means Lord. And they expected folks to see Caesar and the systems of Rome as Lord.

But New Testament Christians, those who follow Christ, understand it’s not just being polite when you say Jesus is Lord. When you say Jesus is Lord, you’re making a declaration against every other false god, every Caesar, every other political system that would dare challenge the way of God. Jesus presented a challenge to the empire, and the empire struck back. They didn’t just kill him, they didn’t just isolate him, they crucified him.

The closest thing we have to crucifixion is lynching. Watch the word: I didn’t say hanging. Hanging was what they did in the process when you went through a justice system and you were properly proven guilty and then they hung you. But lynching was a form of political assassination designed to make everybody else who was thinking about standing for freedom make a second guess.

N.T. Wright says that crucifixion wasn’t just a way of getting rid of undesirables; it was the maximum degradation.² It was making sure that everybody who would not declare Caesar as Lord, especially those who dared to stand up against the system, were crucified in order to create fear. That’s why the only folk crucified were rebels and revolutionaries and insurrectionists. Jesus was arrested. He was profiled by the temple police. Ah, help me, God! He was taken before the Sanhedrin, and they brought him up on false charges. Lord have mercy! He was asked, “Are you King of the Jews?” And he was crucified because crucifixion served Rome’s interest. Crucifixion would make folk behave. They thought Jesus was a rebel, a revolutionary. He endangered the

peace that Caesar thought he had. He disturbed the peace.

I don't even know what folk mean when they say Jesus wasn't political. You don't know Jesus. He wasn't political like Democrats or Republicans. He was political. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world." In other words, my way of order and social life and real life is not the order of political authoritarianism and manipulation. Jesus challenged the demands of Rome that everybody be like Rome. We called that the hegemony of the Roman Empire. Jesus said, I'm not going to go along to get along. Jesus challenged Caesar's lordship; he challenged his rulership. Jesus was in direct opposition to the powers of the empire. He could not stand for it, he would not stand for it. And he said those who were following him would be anointed in such a way that they would stand up and say because Jesus is Lord, then hate can't be a Lord, injustice can't be a Lord, meanness can't be a Lord. So Jesus was in direct contradiction to Caesar, and so he was killed by Rome, by Caesar's authority, and he was not just killed, he was crucified because they wanted to make him a curse. They wanted to execute him in public. They wanted to make everybody stand down and believe you'd better do what Caesar says.

But then Sunday comes. And the resurrection defies Caesar and Satan's power. The resurrection comes, and it proves that no matter what Caesar can do, God is not dead.

I was reading just last night... I got up late this morning and I went back into 1852 and read when Frederick Douglass was giving a speech, and he was discouraged because it looked like the abolition movement was getting weaker and the slave system was getting stronger, and he was speaking but he didn't have his "power over." In his speech he didn't have his "power over" as my grandmama called it. She didn't say "power," she said "power over," wonder-working "power over"—that's what she called it. And Sojourner Truth was out there listening, and she could tell Frederick wasn't quite where he ought to be, he didn't have his "power over," and she stood up and said, "Frederick! Is God dead?" Frederick said that shook him down in his dungeon, but he stood up, and that stayed with him five years. And let me just say things didn't get better immediately. Five years later, in 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott decision that a slave has no rights which a white man is bound to respect. Right after that decision, Frederick Douglass preached a sermon like he knew the answer to Sojourner's question—God is not dead!

Let me read a little bit of what Frederick said. After the Dred Scott decision, many said, "It's over. The abolitionist movement is dead. If they can come north and even get Frederick or Harriet [Tubman], it's over."

But Frederick Douglass preached out of this knowledge that God is still alive and said, "To many, the prospects of the struggle against slavery seem far from cheering. Eminent men, North and South, in Church and State, tell us that the omens are all against us. Emancipation, they tell us, is a wild, delusive idea; the price of human flesh was never higher than now; slavery was never more closely entwined about the hearts and affections of the southern people than now." Everything seemed to be supportive of slavery. He said, "In one view the slaveholders have a decided advantage over all opposition... [They have] the pen, the purse, and the sword, and are united against the simple truth

preached by humble men in obscure places.”

“This is one view. It is, thank God, only one view; there is another, and a brighter view. David, you know, looked small and insignificant when going to meet Goliath, but he looked larger when he had slain his foe.... Oppression, organized as ours is, will appear invincible up to the very hour of its fall. Sir, let us look at the other side, and see if there are not some things to cheer our heart and nerve us up anew in the good work of emancipation.” Let’s just see if we can see that God is still alive.

He said, “This great work, under God, has gone on, and gone on gloriously. Amid all changes, fluctuations, assaults, and adversities of every kind, it has remained firm in its purpose, steady in its aim, onward and upward, defying all opposition.” He said,

I, for one, will not despair of our cause....This infamous decision of the Slaveholding wing of the Supreme Court maintains that slaves are within the contemplation of the Constitution of the United States, property; that slaves are property in the same sense that horses, sheep, and swine are property....You will readily ask me how I am affected by this devilish decision—this judicial incarnation of wolfishness? My answer is, and no thanks to the slaveholding wing of the Supreme Court, my hopes were never brighter than now. I have no fear that the National Conscience will be put to sleep by such an open, glaring, and scandalous tissue of lies as that decision is, and has been, over and over, shown to be. The Supreme Court of the United States is not the only power in this world. It is very great, but the Supreme Court of the Almighty is greater.... He may decide and decide again; but he cannot reverse the decision of the Most High.... Such a decision cannot stand. God will be true though every man be a liar.³

I want you to know when we know that God is not dead, as James Cone said, “The cross and resurrection of Jesus stand at the center of the New Testament story....The cross-resurrection events mean that we now know that Jesus’ ministry with the poor and the wretched was God effecting the divine will to liberate the oppressed.... God becomes the victim in their place and thus transforms the condition of slavery into the battleground for the struggle of freedom. This is what Christ’s resurrection means. The oppressed are freed for struggle, for battle in the pursuit of humanity.”⁴

Caesar, the resurrection says, you did your worst, and you still missed. God is not dead. God will not let his creation be destroyed by the system of Caesar. And though killed by the sovereigns of his day, God raised Jesus from the dead. Christ’s resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression. So clap your neighbor high-five and say, “God is not defeated.” And that means if God is not defeated, neither are those who follow God.

I wish I had a witness here!

The resurrection means that God has granted to life possibilities that exceed what looks like is possible right now. The resurrection means that God is invincible over the powers of death. The resurrection overturns the ability of anybody to limit your possibilities and to limit where your human life can be

developed. Touch your neighbors and say, "Neighbor! Ain't no chains holding me! God is not dead!"

I feel something here!

The resurrection said "Yes!" to our liberation. The resurrection means that death is not the ultimate thing that anybody can do to us. If I'm over the fear of death, then I've risen to the newness of life. The structures of death don't have the last word.

I wish I had a witness here!

The resurrection overcomes the power of SIN. The resurrection overcomes the power of death. The resurrection overcomes the power of oppression. The resurrection helps those who are struggling to find meaning in the midst of oppression. Tell your neighbors and say, "Neighbor! Oppression might be around me, but resurrection is in me!" Resurrection says no matter what you have to suffer, God has not forgotten about you. Tell your neighbors and say "Neighbor! Don't have a pity party yet. God has not forgotten about you!" Turn to your neighbors and say, "Neighbors! Tell America don't give up yet. God has not forgotten about us!"

I wish I had a witness here!

But not only does it mean God has not forgotten about us; the second thing is that God has not finished the fight. And if God has not finished, then we can't stop. Because Jesus got up from the dead, we've still got to fight injustice. Because he got up, we've got to fight racism. Because he got up, we've got to fight oppression. Because he got up, we've got to fight against wrong. Tell your neighbor and say, "Neighbor! Please be patient with me. God is not through with us yet."

I'm a soldier in the army of the Lord, and I've got the whole armor, the blood-stained banner because God is not finished. I don't care what executive order the President signed. God is not finished. I don't care how many bills Mr. Ryan passes. God is not finished. And somebody better tell America, your arms are too short to box with God. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, God can shake the earth. God can make it darker. God can split the temple and split the walls. Somebody ought to say, "God has not finished!"

Well that's one more thing the resurrection says, and that is that God has the final say. Tell every Caesar, "God is not dead! Jesus got up from the grave!" And that means that God has the final say. What happens if Caesar is trying to have the last word in your life? You tell that Caesar—"God has the final say!" Look at that Caesar and say "God is not dead!" I don't care what that Caesar's name is: racism, classism, militarism, meanness, hate, wrong, oppression. God is not dead, and that means that God has the last word. Turn to your neighbors and say, "Neighbor! God has the last word." You'd better stand up and give God praise. Don't you believe the hype! Whose report will you believe? I will believe the report of the Lord.

But I want you to know it's not just political. It's also personal. Not only the Caesars in the social arena, but those Caesars that come in your personal life. Cancer doesn't have the last word. Sickness doesn't have the last word. Depression doesn't have the last word. Lupus doesn't have the last word.

Heart attack doesn't have the last word. Despair doesn't have the last word. Hopelessness doesn't have the last word.

He lives! He lives! He lives! He lives! "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). He lives! All things work together for the good, for them that have been called. He lives! He lives! He lives! He lives! He lives!

And because he lives, devils can be defeated. Because he lives, Caesars can be overcome. Because he lives, hate can be handled. Because he lives, oppression can be channeled. Because he lives, joy can be restored. Because he lives, my body can be healed. Because he lives, my sin can be forgiven. Because he lives, life can come out of death. Because he lives, joy can come out of sorrow. Because he lives, strength can come out of weakness. Because he lives, ways can be made. Because he lives, doors can be opened. Because he lives, valleys can be crossed. I said, our risen savior, he lives. And I say to the world today, I know that he is living. Whatever men may say, I see his hand of mercy. I hear his word of cheer.

He lives! He lives! He lives! He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today! Say it!

Slap your neighbor a high-five and say, "Neighbor, tell every Caesar, God is not dead! God is yet alive! And if God is alive, you ought to praise him! You ought to bless him! You ought to shout!"

I'm through. I've got to go in my corner. But tell your neighbor, say, "Neighbor, I've got to shout for myself. I need you to look in your life and remember when you were dead, but Jesus got you up, kept you up, turned you around, planted your feet on solid ground. Say yes! Say yes! Say yes!"

Notes

1 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 71, 301, 92.

2 See Wright quotation in Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith*, 451.

3 Frederick Douglass, "Speech on the Dred Scott Decision," May 14, 1857.

4 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 73-74.