

“Jesus is Lord”  
A sermon preached at  
Heart of the Rockies Christian Church  
(Disciples of Christ)  
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To be able to sum up the distinctiveness of one’s faith in a single phrase; to be able to express one’s worship in a single word; to be able to unite round a single banner; to be able to cling to a simple slogan in the face of persecution and testing – that is important. New Testament confessions do not lose themselves in philosophical abstractions or theological profundities. They are not hedged around with qualifications. They are confessions which the so-called ‘simple’ believer can use as well as the Christian of more ‘sophisticated’ faith.

James D. G. Dunn<sup>1</sup>

Text: Joshua 24:1-3, 14-25



The British Museum in London has to be counted as one of the most remarkable places in the world. I’ve been there twice. I nurture the fantasy of spending a week there – taking each morning to explore a part of the museum’s expansive collection, grabbing lunch nearby, then spending the afternoon recovering from the

experience. Just inside the old entrance is a large expanse recently remodeled as a welcome and information center. The first time I was there, I was attracted to a huge stone carving across this huge lobby. Something about it was vaguely familiar. It’s a carved relief of King Ashurnasirpal II. He ruled over Assyria in the ninth century B.C. I recognized the stone monolith from a picture I remembered seeing in the Old Testament textbook I read in college over thirty years earlier. I’d had no idea how big it was.



Just the other night the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, was on The Colbert Report. MacGregor has written the book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.<sup>2</sup> It was a fascinating interview. He showed a picture of this prehistoric axe head. MacGregor said it is 1.8 million years old. It was found in a valley in Tanzania, one of the first human-made tools. I went on-line to see some of the other chosen objects. There’s a 1903 British penny, defaced with the slogan, VOTES FOR WOMEN,



stamped over the portrait of King Edward VII. At the beginning of Edward’s reign, he denied the right to vote to women, the poor and criminals. The use of the penny was an effective way for women to spread their message of universal suffrage. What do you guess was chosen to represent 2010?





It's a plastic solar-powered light about the size of a coffee mug that comes with a charger and costs about \$45. This simple device has the potential to transform the lives of impoverished millions, illuminating their home at night, connecting them to the world through the internet.

When Colbert asked MacGregor to condense the world's history into just a few words – to get at the heart of the meaning of these 100 objects, what they hold in common – MacGregor said, “Sex, power, money, God.” History, he said, humankind has been driven and shaped by these four pursuits. I'd add another. You might too. But it's hard to argue with his point. Take as a prime example the extraordinary collection at the British Museum. Most of it was gathered from throughout the world by way of conquest.

Not surprising, these human endeavors – pursued at their best as well as their worst – they shape the heart of the Bible's story, including this morning's account from the Hebrew scriptures. We're reading from the Book of Joshua. Joshua, you'll recall, has taken over after Moses' death and led the Israelites into the Promised Land. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, Joshua is all cleaned up for the speech he'll deliver today at Shechem, but he has waded through blood to get here.<sup>3</sup> She reminds us that Joshua and the Israelites have destroyed every major city in the Promised Land as they wiped out the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizites, the Girgashites, the Amorites and the Jebusites. “Wiped out” – meaning that the Israelites, under Joshua's leadership, have killed every man, woman and child with the express purpose of living in their homes and enjoying the fruit of their vineyards and olive groves (Joshua 24:13) – because, according to the text, God wants the Israelites to live in this land. I have to say that, while I believe God led the Israelites to the Promised Land, I don't believe that God had a part in the brutal genocide. This would put God's take on power on a par with that of the gods of the Canaanites, the Hittites and the others. I'm certainly open to a conversation about this – because the text reads differently. But I'm convinced that part of the uniqueness of the God of the Jews is his aversion to violence, which aversion – even repudiation – is revealed most fully in the person of Jesus.

Be that as it may, when God had given rest to Israel from its enemies and Joshua is old and about to pass his authority to others, he gathers the tribes of Israel at Shechem and asks them to re-up with God. To renew their covenant with God. To review their history and name the times and places along the way when God delivered them; then to say again, to declare together as a people, that it is Yahweh, the Lord God Almighty, whom they will worship and serve – as persons, as a people.

Reading from the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Joshua... [with parenthetical remarks: vs.1, describing the common convention of using LORD and GOD in rendering the Divine Name, *Yahweh* – in order to make the point that this wasn't just any god the Israelites worshipped, that they were committing to a very specific God who had invited them to call him by name; vs. 20: these are the gods – as metaphor they still impose

themselves – who offer a different and ultimately destructive take on sex, power and money...].

Every so often, it's a good thing to re-up. To renew our covenant with God. To say again, "There is a God", to name and describe this God as best we can, then recommit ourselves to serving this God. Noah and his family after the flood – they disembarked the ark and constructed an altar to worship the God who had delivered them (Genesis 8). Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba and called on the name of the Lord (Genesis 21). Moses and the people at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-20), just forty years before Shechem. King Solomon and the Israelites, when they had completed the Temple (2 Chronicles 6-7). Later, in the fifth century before Christ the Israelites returned from their exile in Babylon. They found a copy of the Law in the debris of the walls of Jerusalem. When it was read to them and they were given to understand, they cried for joy. Gathered in a solemn assembly, they made confession and re-upped with God (Nehemiah 8-9).

Throughout history, the Church has done the same. I think of the Reformation as a kind of reinvesting, recommitting to the God of grace. For the first time, folks were able to read the Scriptures for themselves, in their own language. Disciples, when we were formed in the early 1800s, we didn't want to start a new denomination. We wanted simply to name the God that, according to our founders, had been obscured by a lot of human-created doctrines and creeds and rituals. When Barton Stone and others wrote and signed *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* and resolved through that document to "...be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large", they were inviting the American church to recommit itself to a life of faith and service in Jesus' name.

Some of you remember reciting the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed in your former churches. You still know it by heart. It's not a coincidence that the Church came to these times of remembrance and recommitment precisely when the values of the culture had changed – when society's norms about sex, power and wealth had shifted and the Church needed to be reminded of God's will regarding these gifts and pursuits. In 1934, the Confessing Church in Germany wrote the Barmen Declaration in opposition to the support the wider church – both Protestant and Catholic – was lending to the Nazis. Disciples of Christ have always been wary of creeds because the creeds have often been used as tests of faith to determine who's in and who's out. But we have a creed. We just don't call it a creed. We call it an Affirmation of Faith (see below).

Here in our own community, there are times when we're asked to remember and give thanks to God, to sign on again. On the occasion of every baptism, we're asked to remember our own. When we bless a child, we're asked to recommit ourselves to a life of faith. Gathering each week at the Lord's Table can be an act of recommitment. You could say that last month's formal vote for our five-year strategic plan, even the filling out of an "estimate of giving" card in our stewardship campaign, that these have been opportunities for us to renew our covenant with God – as individuals, as a community of faith.

At their best, statements of faith have the potential to re-center the Church – just as Joshua sought to re-center the Israelites who are settled now in Palestine, safe, enjoying what could be called a comfortable life compared to the years of war and conquest. Joshua knows that the people are turning to these other gods whose take on sex, power and wealth are self-serving and a threat to the nation's peace. Joshua gathers the people and issues this charge, "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve Yahweh."

These statements of faith appear throughout the New Testament. In the earliest decades of the church, there were many challenges from within and outside the church that called for a reaffirmation of the essentials.

- In Philippians 2, there's a beautiful hymn. It ends, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Scholars think it may have been a primitive statement of faith.
- In Colossians 1. Many think Paul is quoting from a hymn, maybe an early creed, when he writes, "Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God... in him all things in heaven and on earth were created... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through the blood of his cross."
- In John's Gospel, the opening verses read like a creed: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being... And the Word became flesh and lived among us... full of grace and truth."

Scholars are agreed that what marked as distinctive the faith of the earliest Christians was one common creed, one statement of faith shared by the growing number of Jesus followers throughout the Roman world: *Jesus is Lord*. In the New Testament, the affirmation is expressed in at least three ways.<sup>4</sup> Palestinian Jewish Christians were likely to declare, "Jesus is the Messiah." Hellenistic Jews, returning to Jerusalem from exile, would have put it like this, "Jesus is the Son of God." Gentile Christians were more likely to profess, "Jesus is Lord." But in spite of a tremendous, sometimes threatening diversity of race, nationality and ethnicity, liturgy, emerging doctrine and even ethics, the early church was united in its belief that the practice of a Christian life is centered in the person of Jesus: the Jesus who lived among us, teaching, healing, proclaiming the good news of God's inclusive love, who was crucified and resurrected.

Again and again, when the church was drifting or asking questions nobody had good answers to, when the church was challenged, even persecuted, the earliest Christians recommitted themselves – not to a doctrine, not to a prescribed set of rituals, or a list of rules and regulations, not first of all. They recommitted themselves to Jesus, to following Jesus.

In the early church – from little circles of believers gathered in Jerusalem store fronts and village homes throughout Galilee, to the house churches in Athens and Rome – there was this shared belief: forgiveness, wholeness and God’s Spirit are available to everyone in the person of Jesus. This understanding – it’s more than a belief; it shapes the way you and I think about and live into everything – sex, power and wealth, beauty and the arts, relationships with others, the care of creation and the worship and praise of our Creator – it sustained the early church’s life and witness. Jesus is Lord. This simple statement of faith – *Jesus is Lord* – is enough to sustain the church today.

—Jeff Wright  
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<sup>1</sup> *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (Westminster Press, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> See the one hundred objects on the website of the British Museum:  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/british-museum-objects/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Home By Another Way*, p. 14

<sup>4</sup> Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*...

### *An Affirmation of Faith Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*

*As disciples of Jesus Christ*

*We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him risen Lord and Savior of the world.*

*In Christ's name and by his grace we accept the mission to proclaim the gospel to all the world and live in loving service to all people.*

*We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in the covenant of love that binds us to God and one another.*

*Through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God.*

*By the gift of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ. At the table of the Lord, each week we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and presence of Christ and proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

*Within the Body of Christ we receive the gifts of ministry and accept the authoritative witness of scripture.*

*In bonds of Christian faith we yield ourselves to God and one another that we may serve the One whose kingdom has no end.*

*Blessing, glory and honor be to God forever. Amen.*