

THE SHEPHERD LAMB

Sermon, April 17, 2016

Texts: (Psalm 23), John 10:22-30; Revelation 7:9-17

Does anyone know or remember the name Polycarp? (*ed. note – just one hand went up in the early service, so I didn't ask for a show of hands at the second service!*) I'll take some blame for that, because I think I've only mentioned him once in a sermon, and that was sixteen years ago (*"Oh, now I remember ... not."*). Polycarp is a name that might make you think of a freshwater fish wearing a leisure suit, but it's from two Greek words: πολυς (polys) which means "much" and καρπος (karpos) which means "fruit." His Christian parents gave him that name in the hope he would bear *much fruit* for the Kingdom of God ... and he indeed did go on to live up to his given name and fulfill his parents' hope.

Born in 69 (*not the Summer of '69; that's the Bryan Adams song*) and martyred in 165, Polycarp lived at the end of the age of the original apostles, when the church was making the critical transition to the second generation of believers. Scholars tell us Polycarp was personally discipled by the apostle John ... the one Christians have long believed (*though some modern scholars dispute it*) to be the author of the Gospel of John, the three letters of John and Revelation ... and was eventually appointed by John as the bishop of the church in Smyrna (*which is across the Aegean Sea from Greece in what is now Izmir, Turkey*). John, you may remember, was the brother of James; they were the sons of Zebedee. As we noted two weeks ago, James was the first apostle to be martyred, beheaded by Herod Agrippa. John went on to live more than half a century longer than his brother; he lived into his eighties (*and some say his nineties; there is a foreshadowing hint of John's long life cryptically inserted into the last verses of John's Gospel; see John 21:23*), which was remarkable for that day and age. As also mentioned two weeks ago, John was the only apostle not to have suffered a martyr's death. Not that they didn't try ... historians cite ten major persecutions of the church in the first three centuries; it was during the second persecution under Emperor Domitian in AD 81 that John was arrested, sent to Rome, and reportedly put in a vat of boiling oil, but emerged miraculously unscathed. He was then banished to live in exile on an island called Patmos in the Aegean until Domitian's death in AD 96; accounts vary, but most affirm that John left Patmos in AD 97 and went on to die a peaceful death in Ephesus some years later. It was at Patmos where John received the grand vision he recorded in the final book of the Bible, the Revelation, the vision that speaks often and frequently of this central figure of the **Lamb Who is the Shepherd**, a Shepherd Who fully understands what it is to be a Lamb, and Who is also on the throne of heaven; Revelation 7:17 – *"For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes."*

Now, hold that thought ... we'll come back to Polycarp and John in a bit.

More of you may remember the name Archimedes. It was Archimedes who, after having figured out the laws of buoyancy as he was stepping into his bathtub, ran into the streets naked crying out "**Eureka!** (*I have found it!*)" The Archimedes Principle of Buoyancy remains the standard today. Archimedes also calculated the value of π (*no, not the kind of pie we might enjoy in coffee hour*), invented the compound pulley, and defined the principle of the lever. It was Archimedes who said: *"Give me a lever long enough, and a place to stand, and I will move the world."* Well, a little over two centuries after Archimedes said that, a lever was found that was long enough to move the whole world. The lever was about ten feet high, and it sat on the fulcrum of Calvary. The cross of Jesus Christ was the lever that turned ... and is still turning ... the world upside down. More correctly, it is turning the world *right side up*. Ever since Eden, this world has been upended, upset. We live in a world where things are too often upside down, a world where sin is too often exalted and virtue is too often mocked. We live in a world where nasty people too often prosper and good people too often suffer. But the central message of the Bible is about how God is *leveraging* this topsy-turvy world right side up again through the redeeming work of His son, the Lamb of God, the Shepherd of our souls. In a nutshell, that's the message of this entire sixty-six volume of books we call the Bible, AND the central theme of John's Revelation, that God will see this all through to completion!

The converted Saul (*we looked at that story last week*) and the other apostles were certainly doing their part to use the leverage of the cross to turn their world upside down. In fact, we're told in Acts 17 that a mob in Thessalonica said just that; they went to the authorities and said, *"These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also; they are defying Caesar's decrees, saying there is another king, one called Jesus."* **Two quick things:** First, wherever the apostles went, there were people who were upset. There's always something unsettling, upsetting ... yet in the long run profoundly *beneficial* ... when the leverage of the cross goes to work putting things upright; it always unsettles the way things are. Martin Luther once wrote, *"Where the Gospel of Christ is preached accurately and boldly, there will always be conflict."* Conflict is not always a bad thing! Don't seek out conflict, but sometimes it is necessary to set things right side up again. The **second** thing to note is that this *"turning the world upside down"* was an idiomatic phrase in that era specifically used for an act of sedition or treason, as in "upsetting" the established order. The mob was making a specific allegation of treason against the apostles. Similarly, when Jesus was brought before Pilate, the official charge was sedition, that He was seeking to upset the established order, the Pax Romana, by claiming to be a king. Over the cross upon which He was crucified Pilate had written the charge: *"Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."*

And we know from the vantage point of history that after the cross, after the resurrection, after He appeared to hundreds and hundreds of His followers over the course of the next forty days, and just before He ascended with royal and divine majesty into heaven, Jesus said to that little band of the first generation of His followers gathered on that hillside (*slightly embellished*) *"You've seen all this! You are personal eyewitnesses to My majesty. And you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth."* This was the final marching order for the church, to faithfully testify to what they knew, to what they saw, to what they experienced in Jesus Christ, the King. You may not know the Greek word for "witness" is the word "marturia"; it is the word from which we derive the word martyr. The early martyrs were killed *because* they were faithful witnesses, faithful *marturia*. Many were martyred because they took the "witness stand" and firmly and faithfully proclaimed the true King of Heaven and Earth, and the cross as the power of God to leverage an upside-down world right-side up again.

This became especially problematic in the empire that already had a recognized King, especially when the new emperor Nero ascended the throne in AD 54 for the next fourteen years. Nero reigned over the first major persecution of the Christian church. Roman citizens were required to give the loyalty oath, *"Kaiser Kurios."* "Caesar is Lord." When the Christians were brought before magistrates and required to give this oath, the faithful witnesses of Jesus Christ responded, *"Jesus ho Kurios"* "Jesus is Lord." By their lives and examples, they were humbly saying in so many words, *"Look, we'll pray for Caesar, we'll pay tax to Caesar, we'll render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, we'll be good citizens for Caesar ... but lordship has not been given to Caesar. Lordship has been given to Jesus Christ."* Thus the very first confession of faith, the first Christian creed, was this simple assertion, "Jesus is Lord." For saying that, many were sent to their deaths. But in the meantime, the world was being moved, leveraged by the message of the cross. In his book The Rise of Christianity, sociologist and historian Rodney Stark does the math, and shows this movement that began with a dozen or so went on to number a few thousand by 40 A.D., then grew exponentially and rapidly to 25 - 30 million by the fourth century, despite persecutions. In fact, Emperor Constantine's conversion and the resulting Edict of Milan was, according to Stark, a response to, not the cause of, the rapid expansion of Christian growth. It was an expansive, rapid social growth unparalleled in the history of the world up to that time; the population of the entire world then is estimated to have been less than one half billion.

And now, let's jump ahead to 165 AD, and come back to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who is now 86 years old. Like his mentor John, Polycarp lived to advanced years remarkable for that era. Over six decades have passed after John died a peaceful death in Ephesus. Polycarp was most likely the last person alive in that world to have personally known an apostle. Then the fourth major persecution of Christians broke out under the reign of Marcus Aurelius Antonius. The accounts vary, but the basic story is that Polycarp was arrested, brought to the arena and commanded to recant his faith in Christ. The authorities really didn't want to kill this venerable 86-year-old man; they tried to get him off the hook. *"Look -- All you have to do is say 'Kaiser Kurios' and you can go."* Polycarp replied, *"If you imagine I will swear by Caesar, then you do not know who I am. Let me tell you plainly: I am a Christian. Eighty and six years I have served Christ. For eighty and six years, He has been faithful to me; how can I now blaspheme him?"* Then they offered, *"Well, look, just quietly repudiate the false religion."* Christians were accused of atheism because they didn't believe in the gods of the Romans. So now the interrogator says, *"All you need to say to save your life is, 'Away with the atheists.'"* Polycarp reportedly smiled and said, *"Well, I can do that."* He stood and waved his hand toward the Roman authorities and the spectators in the arena, and said, *"Away with the atheists!"* He was then executed, burned alive. But he went to his death calmly, because he knew where he was going. He knew there was life beyond this shadow we call death.

To quote myself from Easter, ALL of the original apostles were beaten, stoned, thrown in prison and all except John died a martyr's death without ever once renouncing their belief in the resurrection of the body. They were fearless, they were confident, they weren't afraid of death anymore, because they SAW JESUS. Knowing first hand that Jesus had risen from the grave literally took away their fear of death; it made that first generation of eyewitness believers fearless witnesses! And when the last of them, John, had this vision while in exile, he wrote it all down. John wrote it down for the benefit of the church then and now. He wrote it down for people like Polycarp, who was the last person alive to have known an apostle. He wrote it down to encourage those facing persecution, he wrote it down for the generations who would not have this first hand experience of seeing the resurrected Jesus, that they would know the Lamb of God Who was slain has indeed conquered death, that they would know His sacrificial work as the Lamb of God on the cross was the *leverage* that guaranteed life eternal for the faithful, and that God would fully complete the work of redemption. He wrote it so they would know ... *"the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd [through this life and the next]; He will lead them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes."* He wrote this all down so we would know that because He lives, so shall we ... all who have been washed by the blood of the Lamb will one day be part of that *"... great multitude no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands."*

And until that Day, may we have the confidence, courage, faith and grace to stand with these faithful witnesses, buoyed by the hope of heaven which buoyed them, and using the divine leverage of the Gospel to do our part in helping turn this world right-side up. *"Give me a lever long enough, and a place to stand, and I will move the world."*