

## WHO IS THIS BABY: LORD

Dave and I were watching *America's Funniest Videos* the other night, and they showed a whole sequence of clips in which people found out they were going to become grandparents as they opened Christmas gifts that contained pregnancy tests and ultrasounds.

And the funniest part of the clips was, most of the time the parents didn't get it. One woman looking blankly at a pregnancy test and told her daughter, "I don't need this." The expression of those looking at the ultrasound pictures resembled people looking at ink blots and trying to guess what they were. But in every case, as soon as they were told what they were looking at, the future grandparents whooping and hollering with joy.

There are great expectations attached to any birth. We wonder whether this child will look like its mom or dad. My Dad worried that his children would get his nose, and was relieved when none of us did. And even beyond immediate thoughts, we wonder whether an unborn child will become a piano player or a star football player. The gender of a baby used to be a nine-month mystery, but there are some parents today who choose to find out early so they can plan a pink or blue wardrobe.

Today is the First Sunday in Advent, a season of four Sundays before Christmas in which we wait for the birth of Jesus. And like expectant parents and grandparents, we are full of expectations – although some might center more around family gatherings than on the upcoming birth of Jesus.

So for the season of Advent, our focus is going to be on expectations as we ask the question, "Who is this baby?" We will in turn consider the expectations the Jews had for the one who would be called Shepherd, Savior, Messiah and The Word. But we begin this week with the question, "Who is this baby?" And the answer is, "Lord."

Our scripture from Isaiah comes about 500 hundred years before Jesus was born. The Jews are living in exile in Babylon, awaiting the day they will be released so they can return to Jerusalem. And their prayer is that God will reveal Himself as He did in the good old days.

And what were the good old days? Remember Moses and the Red Sea? Once before, the Jews had been slaves. And when they had cried out to God, God's response was liberation. God led them out of Egypt to the Promised Land. And ever since this had been the defining moment of Israel's history, that God acted on their behalf. They were God's chosen people.

In verses 5-6, the Jews acknowledge they are at fault for the change in relationship because they were the ones who turned from God. But now as they turn back, they are expecting God to return, too. But they are not expecting the relationship to return to the way it was just before exile. They want God to be that mighty God they had recorded in their Scripture from Exodus. And for that to happen, they realize that they need to be like clay in the potter's hand; they need to acknowledge with their lives that God is "Lord."

"The Lord" is the most frequent English name used for God in the Old Testament. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had known God as *El Shaddai*, which we would translate as "the Almighty." It is when God appears to Moses that God's name changes to *Yahweh* or "*Adonai*, which King James and New International Version translate as The Lord.

The Hebrews had no problem understanding lord: a lord is owner, and therefore has absolute control. Lord can also be translated as "master," and could be used in the sense of lord over one's slaves, as kings over their subjects, or as husbands over their wives. (I'll be watching to see whether more husbands elbow their wives or wives their husbands on that one!)

And when "lord" was applied to God, it reflected that God was owner and governor of the entire earth. That's what the Jews wanted: They want the one who will serve as Lord. And

God responded by sending a baby, a carpenter's son, who would be addressed by those in need as "Lord."

How good are we today at calling Jesus Lord? Maybe that's the wrong question, because we actually are very good about saying "Lord." The real question is, do we give Jesus more than lip service? Do we live our lives with Jesus as Lord?

Lord – master of the house, having absolute control. Do we really want to accept that in our lives, or do we want to keep Jesus as an innocent baby in the manger without any real commitment on our part?

Remember the harsh words of Jesus in Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone that says to me: 'Lord, Lord' will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is heaven." He is indicating that it's not enough to just say Jesus is Lord. We have to accept him as Lord.

We as American Christians have a more difficult time of this because in truth, we aren't used to lords who have absolute control. We're used to having a president, a person we elect by popular vote. He makes decisions, but has to consider the people's will in those decisions. And if we don't like the way the president is operating, we can elect a new person in four years.

We may say we love God, but the proof is always in our practice. If we love, we will not expect God to serve us as president; if we call Him "Lord," then we should obey His commands.

One of the unsung heroes during Advent was Joseph, the fiancée to Mary. He's a small-town carpenter described in Matthew as a just man. As a just man, Joseph would have known scripture. He would have observed the holy days, supported the synagogue and likely taken pride in his standing.

At some point, this just man entered into a formal contract with the parents of Mary which would have been sealed with a dowry. For one year, there was this special time of engagement in which Mary belonged to Joseph, and Joseph belonged to Mary. They were not officially married, but they were legally bound together. If Joseph had died during this period, Mary would have been referred to as his widow.

Instead, during this time of engagement, Mary disappears to her cousin's house for three months. And when she returns home, she is evidently pregnant.

What's Joseph to do? Certainly the neighbors would have noticed Mary's condition. The city leaders might even have come to Joseph to inquire whether this child is his. If not, scripture was clear: She was to be stoned to death. And as a woman, she would not have been allowed to give any explanation in court.

Joseph is righteous and godly. This child is not his; he is not responsible for it. The law says stone her to death, but Joseph is kind and planned to simply send Mary away secretly to spare her embarrassment and possible death.

But then in Matthew, we're told that an angel of THE LORD appeared in a dream to Joseph and assured him that the baby Mary is carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife.

And so, Joseph does as he is told. He swaps his title as a just man, and takes in a pregnant fiancée and an illegitimate son. Within his household, Mary is now safe. The neighbors may gossip and they may even question Joseph's sanity. But Joseph doesn't care what the neighbors think. He is more concerned with what God thinks. Because he claims God as Lord, Joseph has placed God's plan ahead of his own. He became like clay in the potter's hand.

When we wonder whether we should do as God would have us to do, consider again who this baby is: He is Lord. He is in fact King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And those who call him by this name need to bow in obedience to his will, trusting that God has our best interests at heart, and therefore serve this Lord out of love.