

1-18-26 Sermon “The Lamb of God” – John 1:29-42

This week, we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism from John’s perspective. And twice in this morning’s gospel reading, John sees Jesus and calls him by a peculiar name. He says, “Look, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Now, that’s a weird thing to call someone. We may not realize that initially, because as Christians, we’ve gotten used to the phrase, “Lamb of God – *Agnus Dei*.” Jesus is the lamb, sacrificed for our sins; it’s all familiar theological language.

But John the Baptist is not a Christian; John is a Jewish apocalyptic prophet. So I want to take a moment and strip away all those Christian trappings that we’ve attached to this phrase, “Lamb of God.” I want us to hear what John is actually saying. Because I think John has good news to proclaim – for people like us and for times like these.

The first thing we’ll learn, when we strip away the Christian layers, is that the Lamb of God is *not* a sacrifice for our sins. There was such a thing as a sin offering in ancient Judaism – a sacrifice made to purify oneself and get right with God after doing something wrong – but the animals offered were bulls or goats. No, if we’re talking about sacrificial lambs in ancient Judaism, then we’re talking about Passover.

Passover is the Jewish festival that celebrates God leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. You know the story: How God sent the final plague against Pharaoh and the Egyptians. How the angel of death passed over the Hebrew households because they put the blood of the Passover Lamb above their doors. How Pharaoh finally listened to Moses and let the people go. How God parted the sea for the Hebrew children but drowned the Egyptian armies.

The Gospel of John takes great care to portray Jesus as the new Passover Lamb. He even changes the timeline of Jesus’ last days, ever-so-slightly, so that Jesus is crucified on the Day of Preparation – the same day when the Passover lambs were slaughtered.

And so Jesus becomes exactly what John prophesied: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But the Lamb is not a symbol of sacrifice or purification; the Passover lamb is about *liberation*. The Lamb of God comes, not atone for individual sins, but to break chains and set the world free from the power of sin and evil.

This is a little different than how we’re used to thinking about Jesus’ death, isn’t it? My guess is that, when you learned about the cross in Sunday school, you were taught something like this:

God is righteous and good, but humans sin, which makes us bad. However, God loves us so much that, instead of *us* having to pay the price for our sins, God sends Jesus – God’s only Son, God’s very self. Jesus dies for our sins so that we don’t have to. God’s justice is satisfied, and we all live happily ever after. Does that sound familiar?

That *is* how most modern-day Christians understand atonement, understand the cross. But friends, what if I told you that it’s not the only way? In fact, what if I told you that no one talked about the cross this way until more than 1000 years *after* Jesus’ death and resurrection?

This version of atonement theory that we know today was made up in the Middle Ages by a guy named Anselm. Martin Luther and John Calvin got ahold of it during the Reformation and had a heyday with it. But y’all, I am not convinced that it’s our best option for understanding God’s saving action in human history. Because when you think about it, Anselm’s atonement theory makes God into...kind of a monster. What kind of God requires human death as payment Surely not the God revealed in Jesus Christ...

There is an older theory of the cross – one that I like a lot better – called the Christus Victor theory. I like it because it feels more true about God, and because it feels more true about the world in which we live.

The Christus Victor theory says the world is caught up in an ongoing battle between God and the powers of good and Sin and the powers of evil. We, God's people, were created good, but we are captives to the power of evil in the world. Try as we might, we cannot free ourselves from the bondage of Sin.

In order to save us, God comes to earth in Jesus Christ. Jesus lives in the ways of love and justice, dies on the cross as a victim injustice and evil, and rises from the grave defeating Sin and showing us that the powers of evil do not get the last word. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection free us from our slavery to sin. We are set free to love and to serve God and one another.

In this understanding of the cross, Jesus the Lamb of God is not a purifier...he is a liberator. Like the Passover Lamb, Jesus shows us that the power of God's goodness always triumphs over raging tyrants their evil schemes. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world.

Of course...it doesn't feel like that these days, does it? Often it feels like evil is winning. If the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world, well, no offense, Jesus, but it feels like there's a lot of sin you forgot to take.

Perhaps it is helpful, in times like these, to remember that the Bible was written by and for occupied people, living under the shadow of empire. Whether the prevailing power was Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Romans, the story was much the same: Greedy tyrants. Dehumanization. Injustice. God's people crying out, "How long, O Lord?"

Into this world, God sends the Lamb. It's a strange choice of animal – that's for sure. Lambs are not exactly known for their strength and battlefield prowess. And that is precisely the point.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ triumphs over sin. Not through strength or power, but through an unwillingness to return evil for evil. The Lamb of God clings to goodness and to love. He defeats sin by exposing its vacancy, its meaninglessness. And we who follow the Lamb are called to do the same.

Friends, we know that evil often rules the day, but it has no staying power. For in Jesus Christ, we have seen how the story ends. God wins. Love wins. Goodness is stronger than evil. Every single time...

*And though this world with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us.
We will not fear, for God has willed
His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure,
For lo! His doom is sure;
One little word shall fell him.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.