

Behold, the Lamb of God
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
January 15, 2023

John 1: 29-42

John the Baptist or the Baptizer has not been my favorite biblical character over the years. There are basically one or two stories about him, repeated several times through the year. But lately I have seen him with different eyes. John the Baptist is known as the most glorious human being, aside from Mary the Mother of Jesus, ever to live! He is the last of the prophets, bearing witness to what God is doing, and specifically bearing witness to who Jesus is. He is the one who baptized Jesus. He is the one who recognized him as the Lamb of God, and testified to this. Like him or not, John the Baptist will be far ahead of all of us in the line of holiness and nearness to Christ!

John the Baptizer has made quite an impression on folks around Jerusalem. The gospels tell us that “all the people” were coming to hear him preach and be baptized by him. Surely this is an exaggeration, but still, there were a lot of people. And one day John says, “Look! There is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” Everyone is looking around, saying, “Where? Who is it?”

They don’t know it just yet, but the one to whom John points is Jesus. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Lambs were important in ancient Israel. They were raised for food, for wool. And they had a religious significance as well. Two lambs were slaughtered every day, one in the morning and one in the evening, according to Exodus 29. The priests did that as a reminder of the presence of God in the midst of the people. The people had of course eaten a lamb roasted whole on the night of Passover, when the angel of the Lord smote the Egyptians, and the people, having been “passed over,” escaped from Egypt. So the lamb had a special meaning there. The Passover lamb was eaten each year as a memory of that deliverance.

When the people came to the festivals each year, as the law required that they do, they brought a lamb for the sacrifice. If a lamb was not available, they could bring two turtledoves. But they were supposed to bring an animal for the sacrifice. The animal had to be without blemish. It had to be acceptable, perfect. When you brought an acceptable animal to the priest, it was sacrificed and your sins were forgiven.

Most people knew that the sacrifice of a lamb didn’t really have any effect on their sins. There was no inherent, intrinsic significance to the sacrifice of a lamb, or anything else. In Hebrews 10 we read, ‘it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.’ This sacrifice didn’t mean anything, in itself. But the sacrifice pointed to something: to something God would do, to something in the future, to some unknown act of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation that God would someday accomplish.

What is it that God will do, in God's good time? What is it that God will do to bring forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation – salvation – to God's people?

God sends Jesus! Well, that is not entirely correct, or not precise enough. God after all sent the prophets. He sends a lot of people. But God in Jesus became incarnate! Jesus Christ is God with us, God among us, God in human form. Because he is God he can save us, and because he is human, his work of salvation actually "works," it actually means something and takes effect in us.

So came into the world in Jesus Christ! Now look, he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John witnesses to this pointedly: there is the one who is the Lamb of God. He will take away the sins of the world.

The Lamb of God. Jesus is the Lamb of God. What might that mean? To call a man the Lamb of God indicates that this man is to be sacrificed, and that he is somehow God's sacrifice. He will die as an offering to God, and he is provided as an offering by God. Jesus comes as God Incarnate to be killed, "as a lamb is led to the slaughter," willingly, and without fighting or contest.

In the book of Revelation, we also read about the lamb. There we find a curious image: the lamb who was slain, who attends the throne. Imagine a lamb slain, but also reigning. The lamb who was slain is also the lamb who rules over us! The lamb is the king of God's kingdom.

In Revelation 5 we find this image of a Lamb. The chapter starts with a question: who can open the scroll? There is great sadness, for no one is able. Then one of the elders says, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." In the very next verse, the writer tells us that then he saw a "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered."

So the Lamb of God is also the Lion of Judah. This is an image of power. The Lion has conquered. In this case, the Lion who is also the Lamb has conquered sin and death. He has come back from the dead, and so is powerful beyond our comprehension. The Lamb of God is not lying lifeless but is able to act on our behalf, and brings salvation to us.

The Lamb of God will take away sins, says John the Baptist. The lamb that is slain in the temple is slain for the forgiveness of sins. On the Day of Atonement, the priests would kill a lamb, then pour its blood on a goat. That goat would then be driven away, chased out of the city and into the wilderness, where it was left to fend for itself and die. It took the sins of the people, symbolically, out into the wilderness and away from the people. In a similar way, the Lamb of God will be slain to attain the forgiveness of sins.

And that is what happens to Jesus on the Cross. He dies to take away our sin. Some understand this as appeasing the wrath of God, the insult to God's honor that sin is. Others understand this as healing the breach between us and God, overcoming the separation between us that sin has caused. Still others see this as healing our disease and giving us the cure. All of these images and symbols have some validity, for the death

of Jesus is a thing with many meanings; there are many ways to understand it. Each way carries with it a meaning and teaches us something new, something else, about our salvation.

This is not what the people expected! They did not expect the Messiah to be one who passively and powerlessly submitted even to death on a cross. They did not expect the Messiah to be slaughtered. Indeed, they expected the Messiah to ride in at the head of some kind of army, taking on the Roman soldiers, and fighting for the people. The Messiah would chase those Roman soldiers away, killing some and driving the others out of the city, out of the country, and back to Rome.

Instead of that, of course, Jesus is slaughtered, killed, for our sins. He is sacrificed as a Lamb, to take away our sins. This is nothing like what the locals expected. This is not what the Messiah was “supposed” to do. This was completely unexpected. But this is what God did, to save us. This is how God’s plan worked out, despite the fact that few could see it at the time. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, dies to take away sin.

And not just our sin, but the sins of the whole world. All people’s sins are forgiven in his death. Salvation is not only or simply for the Jews, but for all people. God works in Jesus Christ to overcome the breach or separation between God and humanity. All of us are included, and all people everywhere are included.

Think about John 3:16: for God so loved *what?* God so loved *the world* that he sent his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him might have eternal life. God brings salvation to the world, to every last human being, even the really bad ones! That is scandalous behavior, God! Everyone knows salvation is for the Jews only. Or at least, only for those who accept and behave in certain ways. But God, in his wisdom, has acted to bring reconciliation and salvation to every person. Our task is to announce and proclaim this message wherever we go!

The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world has come! What are we to do in response?

First, we fall down on our knees in praise and thanksgiving! God did not have to do this. God did not have any obligation or responsibility to forgive us or save us. But God did, in an act of undeserved grace. God’s grace in Jesus Christ has saved us. Our only acceptable response is gratitude! Any ideas that we somehow deserved this or that this was expected are wrong. Grace comes precisely when we don’t deserve it or expect it, and rescues us from the consequences of our own sin. And so we give God thanks and praise. The scripture says that the praises of the multitudes in heaven go on endlessly and unceasingly forever. God gets all the praise and glory. And our first duty is to join the song of praise. Faith that does not include praise is a deformed faith.

Second, we tell others about this grace. We proclaim it, announce it, and share it. We Presbyterians have been called “God’s frozen chosen.” You know, we are just not so good about sharing our faith with others. Part of that is that we haven’t had any practice, haven’t cultivated the habit or the vocabulary. Part of that might be that we aren’t so

sure ourselves about our salvation: if I am not certain myself, how can I share it with others? And so perhaps we need to see that the Lamb of God has indeed died to forgive our sins and offers this to us. And that is what we tell others: here is grace!

Third, we live in ways that proclaim and model the life of the Lamb among us. We seek to build one another up, to encourage one another, to teach and admonish one another. We hold each other accountable to the Lamb. As we do that, we show the world how it looks when the Body of Christ lives together in unity and peace. We are servants of the Lamb, and so our life looks different. We are not Americans first or Democrats first or Republicans first. We are Christians first; the rest is incidental and provisionary. Our lives and our priorities should reflect and embody that reality.

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! Thanks be to God!
Amen.