

Sermon for 2 Epiphany, Year A
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“Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.”

We use these words every time we celebrate the Eucharist. But our Gospel narrative this week is their source. Although the image of the lamb is used in several ways throughout the bible, the phrase “Lamb of God” is not found anywhere else. So this is, in a sense, a new image that John is using. He is pulling together several ideas from the Old Testament and Jewish thought of the day to present a new idea.

One of these was an idea found in some Jewish writings but not in scripture. These writings sometimes described the Messiah, the Lord’s anointed one, as a powerful horned lamb who would bring about the great Day of the Lord, the final judgment. The day of the Lord, of course, is a scriptural idea. The wicked would eventually be punished and the righteous would be rewarded. God would rule his people with justice.

But in the actual Old Testament, the lamb is usually a sacrifice, an offering to God. In Genesis chapter 4, we have the record of the first sacrificial offering to God. Cain offers grain, and Abel offers lambs. It is interesting that even then, Abel’s sacrifice of lambs was the one that was acceptable.

In the book of Leviticus, the sacrifice of a lamb provided atonement for sin. But even before God gave Israel this sacrificial code, he brought them out of Egypt. The great Jewish feast of Passover is a commemoration of the final plague God sent upon Pharaoh and Egypt. The killing of the first-born. But the Hebrews were saved from this plague. They were “passed over.” The reason for this, if you remember, is that God had told them to sacrifice a lamb for every household. They were to put the blood of the lamb on the door-frames of their houses so that the Lord would pass over and not kill the first-born of the household. The lamb was supposed to be a male yearling that was “perfect,” without any blemish. And after the business with the blood, they were to roast the lamb and eat its flesh.

So what do we have here? By calling Jesus the “Lamb of God,” John is saying quite a bit. He is saying that Jesus is the apocalyptic figure that will usher in the great judgment. But he is also saying that the way this is going to work is a little different than some people are thinking of the Messiah. Before the final judgment, he is going to make it possible to be judged righteous before God. He will take away the sin of the world.

But if we think like Jews, how is that done? How are sins removed? Well, if we are just talking about particular sins, we need a sacrifice. That could be a lamb, among other things. But if we are talking about all sin, the sin of the world,

we need to be delivered from the whole evil system of sin at work in us and around us. We need God's perfect passover lamb. And John says, "This is him! This is God's sacrifice. This is the one without any blemish, who will be killed for God's entire household. His blood will be shed and displayed. The whole family of God will eat his flesh. And by his perfection and sacrifice, they will be delivered from sin and death.

All this is packed into that strange little exclamation from the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God!" But did people get it? Most of them evidently did not. Even the twelve got confused when Jesus talked about his own death. And some of them had heard John with their own ears. We know from today's gospel that some of them were there when he said it.

You see, what people have a hard time with is that being a sacrifice looks a lot like failure. Death looks a lot like failure. And people don't like their leaders to fail. People don't like to fail themselves. People want to win, and they don't want to delay their success or pleasures.

But John the Baptist had done his homework. He had lived with the scriptures till they burned into his soul. He knew the passage that we read from Isaiah this morning. It is a song of the servant of the Lord. The same servant we heard about last week, in chapter 42. We know, as Christians, that this perfect servant ultimately is Jesus the Christ. Last week, it said that he would "not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth." But that must not have to do simply with an emotional state, because this week the servant certainly sounds discouraged. He says, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." He is described as "one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of tyrants."

The Baptist knew, from this and other passages, that the Messiah would be someone who seemed like a failure. He would be the sacrificial Lamb of God.

As we follow our Lord, as we take up our own crosses, we will also sometimes feel like failures. And it won't be just a feeling. We will look like failures, because that is what death looks like. When you give up career opportunities for the sake of your family, when you don't take advantage because it wouldn't be right, when you put others first and take care of them, postponing your own gratification. You will feel bad. You won't like it. And you will probably feel sometimes as if you've done it all for nothing. That's OK. Jesus on the cross said, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

But if we go back to our Isaiah passage, we will be reminded of the end of the story. Even in his despair, the servant says, "Yet surely my right is with the Lord, and my recompense with my God." Earthly failure doesn't matter as long as we cling to God and serve him. God says to the servant, "Kings shall see and arise; princes, and they shall prostrate themselves; because of the Lord, who is faithful." This has certainly been true of Jesus. In our own ways, it will be true of

us. Not because of our own faithfulness, but because of the faithful one himself. The Holy One of Israel.

St. Paul says that it is Jesus “who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And then he reminds us, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son.” Don’t be put off by your own weakness or pain or death or failure. Jesus, the Lamb of God, experienced all of those things. But never forget that weakness was his strength, that death was his life, that failure was his success.

The Lamb of God shows us the way of life. Sacrifice. As we receive him and accept his giving everything for us, we also accept his life of sacrifice as our own life. In Communion we consume his flesh, accepting his sacrifice for us. And we also consume his blood, receiving the life of sacrifice into ourselves. It won’t always be fun, and it won’t always be easy. Yet surely your right is with the Lord, and your recompense with your God. On the other side of the sacrifice is life and victory, because God, who called you, is faithful.