

THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:29-42

Second Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 15, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 1, verses 29 through 42.

In this gospel lesson, John the Baptist reveals who Jesus is and what he has come to do. During Advent we saw the first part of John's ministry, when he prepared the way for Jesus to appear. And now we see the last part, when John points to Jesus, reveals who he is, and then fades into the background.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 1, beginning at verse 29, we read in Jesus' name.

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Every once in a while there are words so pregnant with meaning they speak volumes. That's what happens with John's testimony of Jesus. In thirteen words, John the Baptist teaches us what the Old Testament is about, who Jesus is, what Jesus is on earth to do, and how we are saved. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29).

Now, why does John call Jesus a lamb? Why not any random animal, like a duck, or a swallow, or a rabbit? Why the *Lamb* of God?

Some animals have a certain symbolism. For instance, at the risk of being offensive to foxes, if you call a person a fox, like Jesus did to King Herod (Luke 13:32), it indicates that the person

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is, perhaps, rather sneaky and mischievous. Or a wolf would be along the same lines as a fox, but even more malevolent and ferocious, even murderous. And other animals have other negative symbolism, like a pig, a rat, or a snake. And I really hope there are no foxes, wolves, pigs, rats, or snakes listening. They might be offended, and I do not want these animals, or their lawyers, on my bad side.

Other animals have a positive symbolism. A cheetah would be a person who is really fast. Or a lion would indicate strength and royalty. So it is quite glorious when Jesus is called “The Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev. 5:5). It means he is a conquering king.

But the most common animal Jesus is compared to, is a lamb. And this should catch our attention. Most of us would take offense to being called a lamb. Lambs are kind of weak. After all, they’re just little sheep. On the positive side, they’re cute and innocent looking. But they are completely defenseless. They can’t protect themselves. Most of us would not want to be compared to a lamb. But John the Baptist calls Jesus, “The Lamb of God.” And it’s not an insult. So what does this mean?

These words summarize several Old Testament passages. Basically everything that has to do with a lamb finds its culmination in John’s statement. All the stuff about lambs is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. So we’re going to do something a bit different this morning. Even though this text is from the New Testament, in order to get a feel for what John is talking about, we’re going to spend most of our time in the Old Testament, going through a brief survey of lambs in the Old Testament.

There are a lot of lambs in the Old Testament, and most of them end up dying in some kind of religious ceremony. Death was the religious purpose of lambs. They got sacrificed. Over the course of Old Testament history, literally millions of lambs were sacrificed.

The period of the time that we call the Old Testament was a difficult time to be a lamb, especially if you didn’t have any spots or blemishes.

So when John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God,” there were several Old Testament references that would have immediately come to mind for the Jews.

One of them is the story of Abraham and Isaac. This is from way back, close to the beginning of the Bible. Isaac was the son that Abraham’s wife Sarah eventually bore to him in old age. Among the many promises God made to Abraham, he promised to make of him a great nation (Gen. 12:2). But there was a problem. Abraham had no children. He was becoming a very old man, and his wife Sarah had been barren her entire life. God made them wait. And because of this, when God’s promise was finally fulfilled, it was obvious that it only happened by divine intervention. Abraham was a hundred, and Sarah was ninety, when Isaac, the child of the promise, was born (Gen. 21:5).

And then, some years later, as Isaac was becoming a young man, and Abraham and Sarah were even older, God tested Abraham. He told Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:2). And Abraham was obedient. He took his son Isaac on a trip. They were going to make a sacrifice. Isaac was kind of in the dark about what was going on, at least for a while.

So they’re hiking up a mountain with a bundle of wood and some way to start a fire, when Isaac notices something is missing. Maybe in his old age Abraham is getting forgetful, so Isaac asks his father, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). And Abraham responds in a way that seems at the time to be a bit deceptive, but it really

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turns out to be more prophetic than anything. He says, “God will provide for himself the lamb” (Gen. 22:8).

So when they get to the place God had told Abraham to go to, Abraham built an altar, put the wood in place, and bound his son Isaac on top of the wood. Then, as he was about to plunge a knife into his son, the angel of the LORD spoke from heaven and told him to stop. It had now been demonstrated that Abraham trusted the LORD’s promise, and God never intended for Isaac to be sacrificed in the first place. So his life was spared.

Then Abraham noticed a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. So Abraham sacrificed that ram in place of his son. That ram served as a substitute until the time would come for God to provide for himself a lamb for the sacrifice. For thousands of years the words, “God will provide for himself the lamb,” were remembered. And then John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus is the Lamb that God provides for himself as a sacrifice.

Another sacrifice that comes to mind is the Passover lamb (Ex. 12). We fast forward now from the time of Abraham to the time of Moses and the Exodus from Egypt.

On the last night the Israelites spent in Egypt as slaves, God sent a plague on the land. It was the plague of the firstborn. The LORD swept through the country and all the firstborn males died, both of humans and of livestock. But God provided a way of protection for the Israelites. Each household was to kill a lamb and paint the blood on the doorposts of their house. Then they were to stay inside, eat the Passover lamb, and not come out until morning. During the night, God swept through the land of Egypt and killed all the firstborn. But he passed over every house that had lamb’s blood painted on the doorpost. Thus it is called *Passover*. The next day the Israelites left Egypt forever. God had delivered them from slavery and protected them from his wrath by the blood of lambs.

It took a lot of lambs. At this point, a moderate estimate for the population of Israel would be about 1.5 million people. And when you consider that each household sacrificed a Passover lamb that adds up to a lot of lambs, a few hundred thousand, I suppose.

And then this sacrifice was instituted as a yearly remembrance of God’s deliverance. Once a year, for thousands of years, every Israelite family would reenact this sacrifice. Now we are talking about hundreds of millions of lambs. That’s a lot of lambs, and a lot of blood. And every single one of those lambs was a prophecy of Jesus Christ, “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” It is also no coincidence that Jesus was crucified on the Passover.

So the Passover lamb is another that would have come to mind when John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

And there were more lambs, many more lambs, and many more sacrifices. That’s what the Israelites used the tabernacle, and later the temple, for.

There was a sacrifice called, “the perpetual sacrifice.” And it was exactly what it sounds like. Every day, for as long as the Israelites had a tabernacle or a temple, once in the morning, and once in the evening, a lamb was sacrificed. Twice a day, every day (Ex. 29:38-42). That’s a lot of lambs, and a lot of blood.

There was also a sacrifice for purification after childbirth. And it usually involved a lamb (Lev. 12:6-8). Every time a woman gave birth, they had to make this sacrifice. That’s a lot of lambs and a lot of blood.

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And there were all sorts of other sacrifices involving lambs, as well as a few other animals. There were so many sacrifices, it's almost impossible to keep it all straight. We start to get the impression that the temple was basically a slaughterhouse, and the priests were basically butchers. It's what happened at the temple every single day.

Now, this wasn't some kind of animal cruelty. With most of the sacrifices, someone typically got to eat the animal. They weren't commanded to just throw them away. The blood was poured out, they cooked it, and somebody ate it.

But it was still a bloody mess. And this bloody mess was a perpetual prophecy of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Messiah, who is "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." When the people heard John the Baptist refer to Jesus this way, they would have thought of the temple, and all the lambs that died there.

And they would have thought of the prophecy in Isaiah. In Isaiah 53, the prophet speaks of the Messiah as "The Suffering Servant." Speaking of Jesus, he says,

"He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth" (Is. 53:7).

Jesus would end up doing the same thing all those lambs did. He would walk up to the slaughter peaceful and willingly. The lambs, I suppose, were peaceful and willing because they didn't know what was coming. But Jesus did know. And that's part of what makes it so marvelous.

So when John the Baptist calls Jesus "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," he teaches us what Jesus has come to do. He has come to die. He has come to be sacrificed for the sin of the world. All those lambs in the Old Testament were a shadow of Jesus. They were a living and breathing, but ultimately dying, prophecy of Jesus Christ. In his sacrificial death, he fulfilled the prophecy they proclaimed. And since he fulfilled that prophecy, the sacrifices can stop. *The Letter to the Hebrews* refers to Jesus as the "once for all" sacrifice for sin (Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 26; 10:10).

"Once for all." This is good news for lambs. It means they can stop dying. But it is also good news for you. It is good news for the entire world, because the blood of lambs and bulls and goats can't actually take away sins (Heb. 10:4). They're just animals. The sacrifices were simply a reminder of sin and a placeholder while we waited for the real sacrifice, Jesus Christ, "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

His blood is actually worth something in our redemption. As a true man, he is able to stand in our place. And as true God, his sacrifice has infinite worth. He is able to stand in the place of all sinners. And we have confidence in this because God raised him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the proof that Jesus is who he says he is, and God has done what he promised to do. Jesus is, "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Now, you may have noticed that this sermon is kind of bloody. There's a lot of death going on. Animals, humans, even God himself. And to people with our modern sensibilities today, it might make us blush a little bit, maybe even question God, and why there had to be so much blood.

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There's a lot that could be said about that. But this, at least, needs to be said: God doesn't care about our modern sensibilities. He doesn't care how evolved we think we are. Because the fact of the matter is, we're not. We are the reason there had to be so much blood. The real reason we get uncomfortable talking about sacrifices and blood being poured out for the forgiveness of sins is because we underestimate our own depravity. We brush aside our selfishness, our greed, our lust, our rebellion, and all sorts of things. Some of it we minimize, and other parts we try to spin to make them seem like virtues. We take a sin like lust and redefine it as love, when it's not, and we're only fooling ourselves.

Then we blame God for things like suffering, guilt, and even damnation. When, in his justice, God punishes sin, we blame God. But he is the one who simply executes justice, while we are the ones who possess so much wickedness.

God is not the one who brought sin into the world. We did that. And we keep doing it every day. God is not the one who brought sin into the world, but he is the one who gets rid of it. And we can say the same thing about death. God did not cause death. We did. God is simply the one who reverses it.

So in the sacrifices, specifically in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, God is executing justice. And he is executing justice upon himself, against his own Son. He sacrifices "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Here's the point: Jesus Christ bore the sin of the entire world in his body, suffered the punishment for sin, died, was buried, and rose from the dead. This is what was appointed for the Lamb of God to do to take away the sin of the world.

And this last part should be obvious, but we'll state it anyways, because it's that important. If Jesus takes away the sin of the world, that means he takes away your sin, because you are part of that world. So, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.