

Here is the Lamb of God!

2nd Sunday after Epiphany – John 1:29-41

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 19, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The people gathered on the river bank would have had a pretty good idea what they were getting into, running out to see, and to listen to John, that shaggy, bug-munching prophet of the wilderness, and all indication from elsewhere in the Gospels is that they came out in droves. The people understood John's rant about their sinfulness. They got it that they were standing there on the banks with a brood of vipers and with white-washed tombs. And all the people said, "Yes, it's in the *Law*." "Amen, brother John! We are sinners!" The people understood that repentance was needed for the forgiveness of their sin. And all the people said, "Yes, it's in the *Law*." "Amen, brother John! We repent!" The people understood that a cleansing of the heart was needed for the forgiveness of sin. And all the people said, "Yes, it's in the *Law*." "Amen, brother John! Baptize us." Then one man steps out of the crowd to join the line of those accepting the reality of the law, and John points to him, and John says, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" And all the people say, "Yes, it's in the..." "Wait... what did he say?"

The people gathered by at the river *knew* about the Lamb of God. The Lamb was part and parcel of their foundation story, the story of Passover. On the very night of their greatest deliverance, the People of God were commanded to slaughter a lamb and place its blood on the door posts of their homes. When the Lord came by in the night to strike down all the firstborn of Egypt, homes marked with the blood of the lamb were spared, and God's People were brought out of their bondage and into God's freedom.

The people gathered by at the river *knew* about the Lamb of God. Every morning and every evening, a lamb was brought to the great Temple of Jerusalem. These lambs were to be spotless, without fault, inside or out. Ever since the People of God received the Law at Mt. Sinai, every morning and every evening, a lamb would be brought to the Altar of the Lord. There it would be ritually slaughtered and offered as atonement for the sin of the People. This was the payment that was required. This was the way that God's people returned to right relationship with God. A sacrifice, a blood offering was needed for the forgiveness of sin. And all the people said, "Yes, it is in the *Law*."

But John points to some itinerant Galilean preacher, some roving prophet, some carpenter cousin of his, and he says, "*Here* is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Filtered through two millenia of Christian history, *we* hear that proclamation and we say, "Amen, brother John! Amen!" But I doubt seriously if that was the response from the people that had come out to the Jordan to fulfill the Law. More likely the people gathered at the river reminded John that the flock of lambs of God were kept not too far to the west, along the road to Jerusalem. More likely the people reminded him that the lambs that paid the price for their sins, and the sin of the People of God, were even at that moment being carefully tended by shepherds whose livelihoods depended on those lambs remaining healthy and whole and spotless. More likely they reminded him that the lambs that were offered one by one on the Altar of God were safe and warm in their folds.

All of a sudden, John *wasn't* calling the people to a more faithful fulfillment of the Law. All of a sudden, John was pointing directly, unmistakably, unequivocally *away* from the Law. All of a sudden, John was declaring that the thousand year parade of spotless livestock, the sacrifice of the blood of animals to cover the bloody hands of the guilty, sinful People of God, the use of go-betweens, the use of stand-ins, the use of scape-goats, was *over*.

John's statement may have confused some of his listeners at the Jordan. But some of them understood, and some of them followed where he pointed. Some of them left the work they had been doing with John the Baptizer, to follow the one whom John himself bore witness was to baptize, not with water, but with fire, and with the Holy Spirit. Those of us on *this* side of the sacrifice of this Lamb of

God, this side of the resurrection of this Anointed One, this side of the ascension of this Christ, we know with *certainty* the power of that baptism – the cleansing, life-changing power of *new life* in Jesus. And we say, “Amen, brother John! Amen!”

What we have a harder time with sometimes, is understanding that when John pointed and declared of Jesus, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” he meant it, just that way. Not only was this man to whom John pointed the replacement for the ritual sin offering of Israel, *this* Lamb of God was the one who takes away the sin of the *whole world!* The Lamb of God was revealed for *all* people at *all* times. Here is the Lamb of God, doing the saving work of God once and for all. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world*. Not just the sins of those seekers at the river one hot day. Not just the sins of Jerusalem or of the people of Israel. Not just the sins of today or sins of tomorrow. Not just the little, unintentional sins of omission. “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” All of it, everywhere, every kind, every time. In Christ, in *this* man, in *this* prophet, in *this* Lamb of God, God has taken the whole *matter* of sin out our hands, and into his own.

Yet many of us live our lives as if we didn’t understand the real *impact* of that declaration. We say, “Who am I, Lord, to have God bother with me?” “But Lord, I keep messing up. I keep falling into the same temptation over and over.” “The same thing keeps grabbing me time and time and time again.” All too often, we slink through our lives like whipped puppies, cringing every time temptation comes our way, hiding naked in the bushes whenever we have done something for which we need to repent, putting up walls between ourselves and the world into which we have been sent as witnesses.

But there we once again see the prophet of the wilderness pointing to Jesus, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” “What sin?” he answers. “Give it to me and it’s gone.” “Here is the Lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world.” Taken away, as in... gone. Taken away, as in... finished. Taken away, as in... we have no need to claim it anymore – we have no *right* to claim it anymore. Taken away, as in... in *his* hands – not ours.

What *is* in our hands is to *live* like we have *known* that Lamb of God. What *is* in our hands is to *live* like we know that he has taken our sin away. What *is* in our hands is to *live* as people who know ourselves to *be* sinners, but who know just as clearly that we have been forgiven. And having put the question of sin and guilt into *Christ’s* hands, we respond to God’s redeeming love *with* love.

When we *know* the Lamb of God, when we *know* that he has taken away the sin of the world, when we *know* that he has taken away *our* sin, we can set aside all the legalistic talk of substitution and satisfaction and atonement. We can set aside the squabbling over what must be done for whom and by whom and to whom. We can set aside the self-indulgent, dismissive delusion of dualistic perfection that turns Christians into bullies. We can set aside the paralyzing guilt that turns Christians into cowards. And with hearts set free and filled only with thankfulness and love, we can set about the wonderful, and joyful, and *blessed* work of sharing with everyone we can, the good news, that we have seen him, that we have *known* him, that we have been *changed* by him, this saving, transforming, *loving* “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”