

Epiphany is the season when we focus on the ways that Jesus is made known in the world, the ways his light shines forth in the world. It began with Jesus being made known at the coming of the Magi, the wisemen when he was a baby. It continued last Sunday with Jesus being revealed as God's son at his baptism in the River Jordan. Last week we heard about John the Baptist, John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. And a voice was heard from heaven: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."<sup>1</sup>

And now, today, we hear John the Baptist reflecting on Jesus' baptism in the Gospel of John. John proclaims who Jesus is using a unique term found in no other Gospel. John the Baptizer says,

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>2</sup>

Or in another translation,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>3</sup>

Or in another translation:

"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>4</sup>

Here is the Lamb of God. Behold, the Lamb of God. Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! And in each of these translations the statement ends with an exclamation point.

Why? Because this is an absolutely amazing statement. It cuts right to the heart of why the Good News of Jesus Christ is Good News. It cuts right to the heart of why we gather here week after week to do what we do.

Here is the Lamb of God... Behold, the Lamb of God... Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Exclamation point, exclamation point, exclamation point.

And in case we missed it, the next day John the Baptist sees Jesus again and points him out to two of his disciples. He says:

"Look, here is the Lamb of God!"<sup>5</sup>

Or

"Behold, the Lamb of God!"<sup>6</sup>

Again, it's exclamation point and exclamation point. And these two disciples of John leave John and start following Jesus. They follow the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 3:17

<sup>2</sup> Jn 1:29 NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1:29 ESV

<sup>4</sup> Jn 1:29 NIV

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1:36 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Jn 1:36 ESV

So why is this image of Jesus as the Lamb important to John the Baptist? Why is it important to the two disciples who leave John to follow Jesus? Why is it important to the writer of the Gospel of John?

And why did I make the rather bold claim a moment ago that this image of Jesus as the Lamb of God cuts right to the heart of why the Good News of Jesus Christ is Good News? And why did I claim that it cuts right to the heart of why we gather here week after week to do what we do?

I'm going to try to defend those strong assertions 3 different ways. I'm going to make 3 basic arguments this morning.

1. The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God is a hugely important New Testament image and symbol.

2. It speaks powerfully of sacrifice.

And 3. It speaks powerfully to us about Christian worship, about why we do what we do week after week.

OK. Let's see if I can back up those claims.

1. The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God is a hugely important New Testament image and symbol.

It's not a very common symbol. The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God only is mentioned 32 times in the New Testament. Once in the book of Act. Once in First Corinthians. And once in First Peter.

The other 29 mentions are all in either the Gospel According to John or the Book of Revelation. I don't want to go off on a big tangent here. But the short form is to state that the Gospel of John, the 3 Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation probably come from the same school of thought, they probably come from the same Christian community.

The Gospel of John, the 3 Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation were all probably written by members of the Christian church in the city of Ephesus around the turn of the first century. Biblical scholars refer to this group with the adjective form of John, which is "Johannine." They speak of the Gospel of John, the 3 Epistles of John, and the Book of Revelation, as being written by the Johannine Circle or the Johannine Community.

And 29 times in the New Testament, this Johannine Community refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God. 27 of those times are in the Book of Revelation. If you've done the math, that only leaves 2 other times, both of which are in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John. In fact, we read both of them in our Gospel lesson today.

Verse 29: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>7</sup>

And verse 36: "Behold, the Lamb of God!"<sup>8</sup>

2 verses in the middle of the first chapter of the Gospel of John may not seem like much. And by themselves they wouldn't be. But even though the Gospel of John won't use the words "Lamb of God" again after chapter 1, the bulk of the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of John will center around how Jesus' crucifixion is like the sacrifice of a Passover Lamb. The idea of Jesus as the Lamb of God is central to John's understanding of what the crucifixion is all about. But that's a whole 'nother sermon topic, one I'll probably return to in late March.

For now, we'll have to leave it by saying that 32 times the early Christian writings of the New Testament speak of Jesus as the Lamb. 29 of those come from the Johannine community, and it was central to the way they understood Jesus' death and resurrection. That means it was a hugely important image for them for them.

Which brings us to my second assertion:

2. The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God speaks powerfully of sacrifice.

Sacrifices are largely off of our radar screen. But in the New Testament world, sacrifices were central to the worship of pagan gods in pagan temples. And sacrifices were central to the worship of the God of Israel in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

And a common animal that was often sacrificed was a lamb. Yes, lambs were also eaten occasionally as food. But they were VERY common religious offerings all around the Mediterranean world in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

Sacrifices were done for many reasons. But one of the chief reasons was to restore relationship. Offering sacrifices was a way of showing that you were sorry for the wrongs you had done and to try to restore and fix your relationship with the god or gods you were worshipping.

But we human beings tend to do many things wrong. We make many mistakes. And it was no different in the first century. And it took a huge number of sacrifices by a huge number of people to try to make things right.

But John the Baptist points to Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

And don't miss this. One Lamb. Who takes away the sin of the world. Not the sins of all the people in the world. But the sin, singular, of the world. In other words, this one Lamb of God will do what millions of regular lambs cannot do—fix the problem of sin once and for all.

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<sup>7</sup> Jn 1:29 ESV

<sup>8</sup> Jn 1:29 ESV

And remember, sin isn't about naughty things you've done in your life. Sin is rather about broken relationships with others, and broken relationship with God.

And this one Lamb of God is sent by God to fix all the brokenness of the entire world in his one sacrifice. In the first century world, that was an astounding message. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We damage our relationship with God. And God fixes it. Permanently and utterly. Through the Lamb of God. Through Jesus Christ.

And because God does fix the problem permanently, we don't need to keep sacrificing lambs in temples. The one Lamb of God has been sacrificed for us. And that's enough, once and for all time.

Which brings us to my third assertion.

3. The image of Jesus as the Lamb of God speaks powerfully to us about Christian worship, about why we do what we do week after week.

We don't need to come to church every week to bring a lamb to sacrifice. Jesus, the Lamb of God has been sacrificed for us. He has taken away the sin of the world. He has healed and restored the relationship between us and our heavenly Father.

So we don't need to bring our sacrificial animals in order to worship God. We instead remember and participate in the one sacrifice of the Lamb of God that took place some 1,987 years ago. As Paul says, "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us. So let us celebrate the feast."<sup>9</sup>

That's what we do. We share in that one perfect sacrifice. We break the bread remembering his body broken for us on the cross. We share the cup remembering his blood shed to take away the sin of the world.

We are restored to union with God. It's no accident the meal is called communion. "Com-" "union" — literally "union with."

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" That was a moment of Epiphany, a moment when he revealed more deeply who Jesus is. At this altar every week, in this sacrament of Holy Communion every week, we also have that moment of Epiphany.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us.  
Therefore let us keep the feast.

Blessed are those who are invited to the supper of the Lamb.

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<sup>9</sup> 1Cor 5:7-8