

“The Lamb of God who Takes Away the Sin of the World”

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First Baptist Church
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Text: John 1:19-34

Title: “The Lamb of God who Takes Away the Sin of the World”

Series: Who is Jesus?

On the Sunday the members of this church voted to call me to this ministry, I made a claim that I can think of no more challenging time in history to be a disciple of Jesus than the one in which we are now living. I can think of more frightening times (!). like the last half of the first century when under the increasingly aggressive rule of Rome, publicly confessing the crucified Jesus meant the real possibility of being crucified yourself. But I can think of no more challenging time in every sense of the word – to be a disciple of Jesus then right now.

The whole world is going through massive change in every sector of life . Change in the economic order, the scientific order, the technological order, in the demographic order, in the moral order in the philosophical order; one way of making sense of reality giving way to another .. and then to another! It feels like change is the only constant.

And on that Sunday I was formally called to join this ministry, I made the claim that I can think of no other challenging place to be a disciple of Jesus than in the place we are living. I can think of more dangerous places (!) – other cities of the world where to name the name of Jesus means certain torture or death. But I can think of no more challenging place to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth than right here. So many of our contemporaries have written off ‘religion’ and in writing off ‘religion’ have sadly written off Jesus. What makes it so challenging is that many who have written off Jesus do not know who he is and what they have written off! Oh, they think they know. But they do not. Wherein lies the challenge. Its one thing to speak to Jesus and His Gospel in a society that has never heard of Him and His good news. It is another thing all together to speak of Jesus and His gospel in a society that thinks it has ‘heard it all before’ and has written him off.

On the Sunday that members of the church voted to call me to this ministry I made a claim that I can think of a no more challenging time to be a disciple of Jesus than the one in which we are now living. I can think of more frightening times – like the later half of the first century – when to confess the crucified Jesus in ways we have this morning meant to the real possibility of being crucified yourself. But I can think of a no more challenging time to be Jesus’ disciple than the one in which we now live.

An I made the claim that I can think of no more challenging place to be a disciple of Jesus than the one in which we are now living. I can think of more dangerous places – other cities in the world where to name the name of Jesus meant almost certain torture or death. But I can think of no more challenging place to be Jesus’ disciple than this place.

So on that Sunday when you members of First formally called me to this ministry, I suggested that in this most challenging place at this most challenging time, the most practical discipline of disciples is to keep asking the question, “Who is Jesus”? We are a community following Jesus, we say, with a heart for the city and beyond’ OK. Who is He? Who is this Jesus we are seeking to follow?

Every new change, every new turning point, every new development in our lives poses the question anew. Or, more accurately, in every new circumstance at every new turning point Jesus himself poses the question in the form ‘who do you say that I am?’ In this challenging time and place, ‘who do you say that I am?’

The answer is going to determine the quality and limit of our dreaming of what ministries can be done in His name in the city.

I want to begin our fall series of sermons by turning to John the Baptist. Why? Well, it seemed like a good thing for a Baptist church to d!! Ask the great Baptist who he thinks Jesus is.

But why him? Why ask him? John the Baptist is a close relative of Jesus, likely a cousin. John the Baptist grew up with Jesus and would have been aware of all the things people were saying about Jesus. John’s mother, Elizabeth, would have surely shared with him the conversations she had with Jesus’ mother Mary. She would likely have told John about the day Mary came to visit when both women were pregnant. When Mary came into the house and greeted Elizabeth, John leaped in Elizabeth’s womb. Even ‘in utero’ John knew there was something special, unique, life altering about his cousin. And I want to begin by turning to John the Baptist because of all the people that ever lived, he had the greatest privilege anyone ever had. Rivalled only by the privilege given to two women: Mary the mother of Jesus; the first person to hold Jesus, the person who nursed Jesus, who raised Jesus. And Mary Magdalene, the first person to meet Jesus alive from the grave. To John the Baptist was granted the privilege of being the first person to formally introduce Jesus to the world! To prepare him for that privilege God lead John into the wilderness away from the city away from all the noises and ??? and hype. Out here he could think more clearly. Out here he could hear and see more clearly. In the wilderness John came to realize that his cousin could somehow met the horrendous needs of the city. As John told the religious leaders they came to interrogate him and although he was the prophet foretold by Isaiah, he was not worthy even to stoop down and untie the straps of Jesus’ sandals.

As John set out to introduce his cousin to the world, how was he to adequately articulate what he came to understand? How are we? How do we introduce Jesus to our city and

our time? What words or phrases should we use? What titles or names could possibly do justice to Jesus?

As Issac Watts sang
“ Jesus all glorious reigns
of wisdom, love and power
that ever mortals know
that angels ever bore
All one too poor to speak His worth
Too poor to set my Saviour forth”

John the Baptist sees in Jesus one who has existed from all eternity. Although Jesus is born six months after John, Jesus existed long before John was even a dream in Elizabeth’s heart. John 1:30 ‘After me comes a Man who has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’

And John the Baptist sees his cousin Jesus the only begotten son of God (John 1:34). John sees in Jesus the one who comes from the heart of God the Father who through His words and deeds reveals the nature and character of the Father.

John 1:34 “I myself have seen, and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

And John the Baptist sees in his cousin, Jesus, one who Himself comes to baptize not in and with water but in and with the Holy Spirit.

John 1:33 “this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit”, he declares. This is the one who fills and infuses human life with the very life of God!!

And John the Baptist sees in his cousin “the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”!

John1: 29 Behold, he says. Look, he says. That is John’s characteristic posture. He points away from himself to Jesus. It is the characteristic posture of all church witness and preaching. Behold! Look!

“the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”

Will you say the words with me

“ the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”

again please

“ the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”

This title has, for centuries, played a powerful role in the worship life of God's people; we experience the mercy.

???? ???? of Australia was right when he said

“There is something about the expression which does not require explanation before it can appeal to the depths of the heart. In the words themselves there lurks a luminous quality. (The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross) pg 129.

“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”

No-one before John used the exact title. It is a strange way to refer to a human being. What does John want us to know about Jesus? What did John have in mind when he used the phrase? What picture stirred in his imagination as he spoke in this way?

There are four terms in the phrase:

1. Lamb
2. takes away,
3. sin,
4. world

I invite you to explore them with me in reverse order:

1. World
2. sin,
3. takes away,
4. Lamb

True, is it not?

World... sin... takes away... lamb.

On the cross the world's sin takes away the Lamb. And then in the brilliant reverse of Gospel the Lamb takes away the sin of the world!

First term is 'world'. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. The Greek word for world is 'cosmos'. In using it, the Baptist is announcing the universal scope of Jesus' work as Lamb. His concern is not only the sin of Israel, not only the sin of the church. His concern is also the sin of Rome and Greece and Egypt and Iraq and India and Afghanistan and China and the U.S. and Canada. He came to deal with the sin of the whole world. He came to do a cosmic work.

And in using the term 'world' the Baptist is announcing grace. Amazing grace. For in the Bible, and especially in the fourth Gospel 'cosmos' particularly refers to the whole human order “which exists in enmity against God” (Thomas Oden, Guilt Free pg 126) In

the Bible, cosmos stands for ‘human society organizing itself without God’. Jesus the Lamb comes for that world, the real world, our world which ignores God and even resists God’s rule and God’s kingdom. Mercy!

This leads to the second term, sin. “The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.” Note that the Baptist uses the singular, not the plural. Although it is true that the Lamb of God takes away the sins which suggests John ??? the fact that the Lamb is to take away sin itself.

Specific acts labeled sins like gossip, stealing, rape, murder are only symptoms of Sin with a capital ‘S’. In his helpful book, “Sin: The Ultimate Deadly Addiction,” Keith Miller defines the reality behind the word as “a basic and all encompassing, self-centeredness, a need to control in order to get what we want, an attitude that colours every relationship, and emasculates the one with God.... Sin is about our apparent inability to say no to our needs to control people, places and things in order to implement our own self-centered desires... we may believe in God and love Him a great deal but at the essential level we are in control – or struggle to be (pg 27) Ouch!

Miller goes on to argue that this self-absorption we call sin “is the same elusive underlying dynamic as that in the life of the traditional chemical addict. Sin is the driving dynamic that leads addicts to fasten upon an addictive chemical or behavior that promises to fulfill their self –centered and often grandiose dreams and to blot out the feeling that threaten to overtake them. Sin is the universal addiction to self that develops when individuals put themselves in the centre of their personal world in a way that leads to abuse of others and self.” (pg 52)

Infection is another word we might use to describe this dynamic: ‘deadly infection’. How we got it, and whether or not we are born with it is beyond the scope of this text but the fact is it is there and it has a hold on everyone on the face of the globe. And here is the tricky thing about this infection: its chief symptom is denial.

And again Keith Miller “denial is the chief characteristic of Sin, as it is of traditional addiction; neither addicts nor sinners can see the extent to which their addiction is ruining their own lives or relationships. This makes both chronic addicts and self-absorbed sinners hard to treat. Both are honestly unaware of the disease’s effect on them. (pg 54-55)

Religious sinners are sometimes the hardest to treat for we have devised all kinds of ways to cover up the fact. We use nicer-sounding euphemisms like ‘mistakes’ or ‘lapses’ or ‘issues’ or ‘oversights’ or ‘struggles’ or ‘dysfunctions’. And as a result miss the joy of the Gospel. It is that deeply rooted need to be our own gods, resulting in alienation (from God and others) and bondage (to drives and desires) beneath our dignity, all culminates death.

Which leads to the third term. ‘Takes away’. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. In what sense? Obviously Sin is still around after the coming of the Lamb of God. What is the Baptizer announcing? The verb he uses has two meanings. 1. Take up and carry, 2. and carry off (Joachim Jeremiss Theological Dictionary of NT Vol. I p 185-186. John the Baptist looks at Jesus of Nazareth and sees in Him one who comes to take up the sin of the world, to carry it as His own and to carry it off. In what sense? How? and when?

We come then to the fourth term and most important term, ‘the Lamb of God’. What was in John’s mind when he chose it? The problem is there are many possibilities. Did he have in mind the so-called ‘apocalyptic lamb’? For many people of John’s day ‘lamb’ especially a many-horned lamb was a symbol of power and conquest. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown tells us that “ In the context of final judgement there appears in Jewish apocalyptic the figures of a conquering lamb who will destroy evil in the world. (John Vol I, pg 59) (see I Enoch 90:9-12)

Is the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the champion of God who fights with sin and overcomes it by superior force? If John had this idea in mind it would explain the ferocity in his early preaching. Matthew remembers John preaching this way: “The axe is already laid at the root of the trees... and His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ (Matthew 3:10, 12). Does John have this warrior lamb in his mind? Or did John have in mind “the lamb led to the slaughter” spoken of in Isaiah 53?

Isaiah 53 has been called the fifth Gospel. I agree.

Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.
But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.
All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

Right in the middle of Isaiah’s song we read:

Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers. (Isaiah 53:7)

Is John saying “there He is, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who voluntarily bears the judgment of the world’s sin”? Or did John have in mind the Passover Lamb? Israel of old was held in bondage in Egypt. God told Moses that as the final act of judgment against the oppressors, the ‘angel of death’ would go through the land and kill all the first born. God told Moses to instruct the people of Israel to each find an unblemished lamb. The people were to kill it and then take the blood of the lamb and spread it on the doorposts of their homes (Exodus 12:10). And God told Moses ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plagues will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 12:13)

John the Baptist sees Jesus of Nazareth coming towards him. It has been suggested that even as John the Baptist saw Jesus there passed by flocks of lambs, being driven up to Jerusalem from the country districts to serve as sacrifices for the Passover Feast (John, Vol 1. 1 pg 81)

John sees those lambs, those lambs who recall the lambs by which the Israelites were delivered from slavery and death. And pointing to Jesus says ‘there is the one and only lamb whose blood can finally deliver’. Is that what he means?

The way John the apostle works with the Passover in his Gospel leads in this direction. It is in his Gospel that we learn that Jesus was condemned at noon the day before Passover (John 19:14,31) at the very time the priests would begin to slay the Passover lamb. (Brown, *ibid*, pg 62). It is in John’s Gospel that we learn that a sponge full of wine was raised to Jesus’ mouth on a hyssop branch (John 19:29). Hyssop was what the Israelites used to apply the blood of the lamb to their doorposts.(Ex 12:22) It is in John’s Gospel that we learn that none of Jesus’ bones were broken as He hung on the cross. The Apostle comments on this saying ‘For these things came to pass to fulfill the Scripture, Not a bone of him shall be broken.” (John 19:36). The verse he quotes refers to the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12:46) Is that the lamb the Baptist had in mind?

Or did he have in mind the scapegoat of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? On that highest of Holy Days the high priest was to take two goats. One goat was to be slaughtered as sin offering. The priest was then to take the other goat and over it confess all the sins of the children of Israel. Then the priest was to lay his hands on the goat symbolising a transfer of the sin of Israel to the goat. The goat was then sent into the ‘wilderness’ carrying away Israel’s sin (Leviticus 16:20-22) It is argued that in that moment ‘on the cross’ when Jesus dies and cries out that He is in fact all alone in the wilderness of isolation from God carrying the world’s sin. In that moment, says one New Testament scholar (Herman Waeten), Jesus ‘became the embodiment of the scapegoat who bears the human infection into the oblivion of nothingness. Jesus not only uses his suffering to atone for sin and thus to satisfy God’s justice he also inaugurates the abolition of sin without which eradication of sin, the incarnation of God’s Kingdom rule could never be actualised (A Re-ordering of Power A Socio-political Reading of Mark’s Gospel, p 236) Even though the scapegoat is (after all) a goat and not a lamb is this what the Baptist had in mind when he pointed at Jesus?

Or did he have in mind the lamb of ‘the daily sacrifice?’ Every morning and every evening an unblemished lamb was offered on the alter in the temple (Leviticus 4:32) The priests were instructed to lay their hands on the lamb, transferring their sin and the sin of the people to the lamb. It was thought that when the lamb then died on the alter, the lamb was suffering the punishment for the people’s sin, thus ‘covering it over’ and making possible the restoration of the Divine-human relationship. This act was repeated everyday even when the people were starving or at war or under siege.

In addition to the daily sacrifices, a host of others were prescribed. Of particular interest to us is the guilt offering. Although usually a ram, on certain occasions a lamb was used (Leon Morris, *ibid* p 141). We even find the expression “the lamb of the guilt offering” (Leviticus 14:12). The offerings of this lamb supposedly took away the guilt of the one making the sacrifice. Interestingly, John the Baptist’s father Zachariah was a temple priest, which meant John grew up in the midst of the whole sacrificial system. He knew what the sacrifices were all about. Can we paraphrase his claim this way: every morning and every evening, day after day, year after year, priests like my father offer lamb after lamb. But are we free of guilt? Are we any more secure in our relationship with the Holy God? Look, there is THE Lamb who does free us from guilt and restores fellowship with God. Lay your hands on Him and your sin is truly taken away.

Is this not the way the rest of the New Testament sees it? At the cross the sins of the world is transferred to Jesus. The apostle Paul boldly declares “God made Him who knew no sin to become sin for us’ (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Lamb without blemish took upon himself the sin of the world and shed his blood thus reconciling the world to God. Is this what John had in mind?

Or did he have in mind the lamb that God provides in the Abraham and Isaac story? (Genesis 22) God had commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only and precious son Isaac on Mount Mariah. Abraham obliques this strange command. Up the mountain he goes, knife in hand. Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice. Then they reach the top of the mountain. Isaac asks the question that had been haunting him at the top, “Behold, the fire and the wood, father, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Genesis 22:7 Abraham replies “God will provide Himself the lamb for the burnt offering my son (Genesis 22:8). An amazing statement to say the least.

Abraham then prepares the altar. He binds Isaac upon the wood and then just as he is about to thrust the knife into the body of his son, God stops him and over in the bushes they see the substitute – a ram for the sacrifice. Is this the story in the baptisers mind when he says look, the Lamb of God. God’s Lamb.

The New Testament scholar Alan Richardson points out that “Jewish thought increasingly came to hold that the covenant relationship with God was founded upon Abraham’s offering of Isaac” John is asserting that the new relationship of God and humanity in Christ (the new covenant) is based upon the fulfilment of promises contained in Genesis 22:8. That God would provide the lamb, which would make atonement for universal sin. Jesus is the Lamb of sacrifice promised by God to Abraham

the father of many nations and thus he is the God-given universal sin bearer” (an Introduction to theology of New Testament p 228)

Is the baptiser saying; “Look! God’s own Lamb? No one need offer any more lambs or goats or bulls. No one needs to offer their sons or daughters for God is offering up Himself as the Lamb.

Which of these lambs did John the Baptist have in mind? Or is it a case of John the apostle’s habit of taking a word, which has a variety of meanings, and embracing something of all meanings? Is it not a case of John seeing Jesus and composite of all possible meanings of the terms? I think so. Jesus –the –Lamb-of-God fulfills something of all ‘lambs’.

1. He is the conquering lamb who breaks the back of evil
2. He is the suffering lamb, who exchanges places with sinful humanity
3. He is the Passover lamb, who delivers us from slavery and death
4. He is the scapegoat, who bears the world’s infection into the wilderness, inaugurating the eradication of sin, making way for the Kingdom
5. He is the lamb provided to Abraham, whose blood seals the new and everlasting covenant between God and humanity
6. He is the one great final sacrifice who fulfills all that is foreshadowed in all the sacrifices (Morris p 143)

Which is why God’s Lamb sheds His blood. He can cry out “It is finished” (John 19:30). It is something final, something ultimate and cosmic. Look, finished. The implications for this are many and profound. Let me emphasize two as I conclude.

1 First, it is safe to be in the presence of Jesus. We can dare to come forward in our sin. For everything that needs to be done about sin has been done! Everything! ‘There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ’ says the apostle Paul. No condemnation!

So Charlotte Elliot could sing

“Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me
And that thee biddest me come to thee O Lamb of God, I come

Jesus as I am, thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, Relieve;
Because thy promise I believe
O Lamb of God, I come

There is no need to hide anyone. It is safe to be in the presence of Jesus.

Second application. It is possible to change. The power of the great infection has been overcome. The stronghold of the addiction has been broken. We do not have to be what

we have become in the grips of sin. The deeply rooted patterns of sin can be up-rooted. We can change. Finally we can change. We do not have to yield to sin anymore. We do. And we will. But there is no longer any inner necessity. Something has ??? to sin. All we have been /// into that something.

‘Such were some of you’ says the apostle Paul to the Corinthians “Such were some of you but you were washed but your were sanctified but you were justified”

This is no perfectionism. This is hope. We can change. Sometimes it feels like a uphill battle. But the good news is it is no longer our battle. The lamb of God takes it up in His battle. We are changed by the power of his victory. Our Part? Yield his victory. Be honest, come clean, come as we are and throw ourselves on Jesus.

Got Junk? He’ll take it? Got Junk in the shack, in the secret places of the heart? He will take it.

Look! Look! The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.