

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

John 1:29-41

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

I have trouble making out faces from a distance when I am not wearing my contacts or glasses. I end up guessing who a person is until they get closer, and even educated guesses are sometimes wrong. There've been several times in the store when I was sure I was cordially approaching a member only to realize it was just a poor, confused shopper trying to figure out who the weirdo was in the sweater vest smiling and yelling hello.

Epiphany is the season when we put on our glasses. We are not told how much contact the cousins Jesus and John had while they were growing up, but St. Luke says John was in the wilderness until his public appearance to Israel (1:80) and John himself says, "I myself did not know Him." Today, however, the glasses go on, and John sees the Christ for whom he's prepared the way, and he announces in some of the most significant words of Scripture, "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"

One hundred sermons would not be enough to mine the depths of this one short sentence, but let's try. "*Behold!*" Remember who is speaking. This is the great forerunner, the last and greatest prophet of the Old Testament. Gone is blurry speculation and conjecture about the Messiah. Here He is in person, introduced by the most powerful preacher of the time. "*Behold!*" Every prophet could speak these words as the Christ took flesh in the Word of God they proclaimed and recorded, but John can say it with added emphasis today because, the Word made flesh stands before Him, fresh from His Baptism, determined to keep that first promise from Eden.

He is "*the Lamb of God.*" The Jews needed no glasses for this one, but perhaps we do. The allusion is meaningful, marinated in imagery. Lambs were a crucial part of the Old Testament sacrificial system and when a lamb was mentioned people thought about sacrifice and their relationship with God. A lamb was offered every morning, every night, and at numerous other times. Most notably, however, a lamb was offered at Passover.

Before the tenth and final plague on Egypt—the death of the firstborn—the LORD warned the Israelites to offer a lamb without blemish, place its blood above their doorposts, and eat it that night with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. This was the sacrifice of the LORD's Passover, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites who had done this, sparing their children. The LORD then enshrined the Passover celebration in Old Testament law as an enduring testimony to His delivering power. It was the most important feast of their church year, their Easter, and the lamb was the center of it all.

Jesus is our new and better Paschal [Passover] Lamb. All four Gospels connect Jesus' death with the Passover. Maundy Thursday was the very day the Passover sacrifice was slaughtered and eaten. Jesus surely had this in mind when He instituted His new Passover meal. Just as the Jews really ate the lamb they offered to God, so now the Lamb's flock really eats the sacrifice offered for them by God to take away the sin of the world.

The Jews hastily fled Egypt after the plague of the firstborn. There was little time to prepare, so God told them to make unleavened bread. We too have little time. Our exodus is always as near as the next beat of our heart. The Holy Meal we celebrate today is a meal for people on the go. Like the Israelites, we may not have as much time to prepare as we would like or expect, and so we take unleavened bread, but more than unleavened bread: we take the pure and holy Lamb of God. But do we sing, "*O Christ, Lamb of God, You*

take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us,” with the urgency of slaves seeking long-awaited deliverance from a cruel master or the joy of a people brought to a land of promise so different from the barren servitude and destitution into which they were born?

“*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” Perhaps we cannot relate to this great Passover song anymore because we cannot relate to the ancients’ hunger for deliverance, hope, redemption, and forgiveness. As evidence, hymnals in America have suffered in the last century because people can no longer identify with the cross and trial hymns that once defined our Lutheran hymnody. We live in a cultural, historical, and spiritual vacuum. We find our identity within the carefully contrived and loosely defined standards of our materialistic, ethnocentric, ahistorical, and fad-driven culture. We are uncomfortable with the traditions and teachings we’ve inherited from the past, because the past seems too primitive, too rooted in superstition like sin and grace, the eternal and sacramental, and an obsession with the next life, seemingly at the expense of the present one. We have lost touch with the spiritual, confusing Christianity with emotionalism, pop psychology, platitudes, and a market-driven lust for glory. A concern with the transcendent and eternal crisis of sin is lost in a sea of temporal trivialities.

“*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” Notice what the Lamb of God takes away: not the sins, but “*the sin of the world.*” It is an important distinction. Sins are what we think, speak, and do. Sins are what, more often than not, we want a quick fix for, but sins are merely symptoms of the disease: sin. Sin leads people to fly planes into buildings, shoot up houses, cheat on their spouses, abuse their children, gossip, neglect their work, and so on. We can try to curb these and other sins, but we cannot pull up the root, which will just find new and equally ugly ways to manifest itself.

Do you fear sin? Does it make you sick to know it resides in you and defines who you are? Do you want to get rid of it, or is it enough to harness it for your own benefit, as capitalism encourages, and attempt to direct it into less obvious or disturbing manifestations? St. John the Baptist wanted deliverance from it. The throngs of repentant pilgrims that came to him wanted the same. They wanted the Lamb of God. They wanted deliverance, hope, redemption, and forgiveness. What about you? “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*”

Maybe you’ve taken the contacts and glasses of faith off as of late. Maybe you’ve only blurrily seen what is distributed from this altar in the divine service and to whom St. John the Baptist points in our liturgy. Maybe sin hasn’t looked as ugly as it truly is. Take off your sin goggles, and see the detestable harlot you’ve lain with and with whom you’ve conceived so many illegitimate deeds. Look at your doorposts. Are they marked with the blood of the Lamb? “*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” Seriously, “*Behold!*” The Israelites breathed the same air and walked the same roads as the Egyptians. Race or church membership did not spare them from death. The difference was not within them. The difference was the lamb. *Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away your sin!* In Baptism, His blood has marked your doorposts. In His supper, you partake of His sacrificed Body and Blood. Be ready, therefore, to depart unexpectedly and with haste, delivered through the Blood of the Lamb, guided by the One who sent Him. Amen.