

# **"Behold! The Lamb of God!"**

## **John 1:29-42, Epiphany 2-A, Jan. 19, 2014**

One day a church secretary found it necessary to leave the church office to go to Staples to purchase more paper. The custodian was there, however, so when the telephone rang he decided to answer it. But rather than answering the telephone with the customary greeting of the church secretary: "Good Morning! St. John Lutheran Church," he simply picked up the receiver and said "Hello!" When the first telephone call came it was the voice of a female caller that spoke up rather loudly and said, "I'd like to order two pound of barbeque, three pints of Cole slaw, and one dozen hush puppies!" The custodian was stunned at first and then he replied, "Excuse me ma'am this is not a restaurant, you must have a wrong number!" But before ending the telephone call the woman had a question: "Well then, tell me kind sir, if you don't mind, what business are you in?"

What business are you in? This is always a good question for people like us who make up a church family to contemplate from time to time! Think of all the answers that people might come up with in response to that question! Some of the best answers might be, "We are in the disciple-making business, committed to making more disciples for Jesus Christ!" Or we might say in the words of St. Paul, "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us—be reconciled to God and each other out your reverence for Christ!" But certainly John the Baptist also gives us a great insight to that question in our Gospel lesson today. We are in the business of constantly pointing one another and all people everywhere into the direction of Jesus Christ; thereby proclaiming: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried!" But have you ever noticed what a sudden leap there is in the Apostle's Creed between the news of Jesus' birth and the news of Jesus' death! The text says: "He was born of the Virgin Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate!" There is no mention of anything else in between. But aren't those great teachings of Jesus, like his Sermon on the Mount and all of those wonderful miracles of divine compassion and healing that he performed, also important? Yes, they are important, but Jesus' most significant calling as given to him by his Heavenly Father is to be: "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29)

Friends in the opening words of our Gospel lesson today we are brought face to face once again with that great preacher of the wilderness, John the Baptist. Just a few verses this, however, the Apostle John has this to say about John the Baptist: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. For the true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world!" (John 1:6-9)

When the religious authorities came to John the Baptist one day to learn more about him, they asked him point blank: "Who are you? He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, 'I am not the Christ!'" (John 1:20) And in a spirit of true humility John the Baptist was really to reduce his whole life and ministry to that of being a voice, not just any voice. "Who are you?" they asked him. He said, quoting Isaiah 40: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord!'" (John 1:29) And John the Baptist, all throughout his ministry has one central message to proclaim: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me!'" (John 1:29-30)

I always find my personal study of God's Word to be an exciting adventure. For God is always willing, to constantly be showing me something new in passages I probably have read over 100 times. And the good Lord showed me something new this past week! Stop and think about it: When John the Baptist makes this powerful proclamation about Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth was fresh out of the carpenter's shop. Our Lord was 30 years old, and at this early juncture in our Lord's ministry that was initiated at the hour of his Baptism, Jesus had made no enemies. Jesus had issued no controversial teachings. Jesus had not yet ruffled anyone's royal feathers. Jesus had not yet performed any miracles. Jesus had not yet predicted to anyone his own future death and resurrection. -- And yet, here John the Baptist is proclaiming, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John is comparing Jesus to the paschal lamb that was often sacrificed for the sins of the people in the Old Testament era, not only down at the temple, but also in people's own home as part of their annual celebrations of the Passover meal.

When John asks us to “Behold the Lamb of God,” he is also pointing us ultimately to that dramatic scene that is presented to us in 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Revelation, when countless thousands upon thousands of angels and saints angels are gathered around the throne of God and the twenty-four elders are bowing down before the ONLY ONE who is worthy to break the seven seals and open the sacred scroll. Together they sing, the same song that we just sang as our hymn of praise this afternoon/this morning: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing!” (Revelation 5:12)

And isn’t this our highest calling as the church of God, the church of Christ, in this place too? So much of everything we do here together day after day, and Sunday after Sunday, is to continuously be bearing witness to Jesus Christ, as we constantly point one another and all people in his direction, saying: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Yes, we know that in the Old Testament era, the lamb without spot or blemish was sacrificed in the annual celebration of the Passover meal; looking back to God’s own final act in delivering his people from their bondage to Pharaoh. Perhaps the most significant part of that meal was God’s command for the Jewish people to sacrifice the lamb and place its blood on the doorposts and on the lintel of their front doors. When the Angel of Death flew over Egypt, he passed over all the first born sons of human beings, and all the firstborn males of all livestock, whose homes were marked clearly with the blood of the lamb so that their lives were saved! (Ex. 12)

But please note that John does not suggest that he came to this profound understanding now of who, Jesus really is, simply because he was such a very smart and astute fellow! No not at all. Listen to what John says: “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!’” And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God!”

In I Corinthians 12:3, St. Paul writes: “No one can say that Jesus Christ is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit!” And the second part of our Gospel lesson reminds of something else very important too. Those who come to see Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, for who he really is, will then find themselves deeply compelled to share the message with others.

Friends, what will your eyes be beholding in this New Year? There are so many other people to look at especially in the popular culture. Millions of people tuned in two weeks ago to watch the Golden Globe Awards presentations. The television camera was focused very intently on many of these great Hollywood celebrities one at a time! The MC wanted to know which famous designers designed the evening gowns that the ladies were wearing, and which famous designers designed the good looking suits and tuxedos that the gentlemen were wearing! But out of his great love for us, God our Heavenly Father is constantly inviting all of us to behold Jesus, and to point Jesus out to other people too, by saying: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

One of my favorite stories in Matthew’s Gospel is found in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter involving Peter; who to large degree was a very impetuous person. He was one of those people, who not only figuratively speaking, but also literally, at times, would “shoot first and ask questions later.” Do you remember how he pulled out sword so impulsively in the Garden of Gethsemane and cut off one of the high priest’s servant’s ears? And how Jesus reattached that ear to the side of the servant’s face demonstrating that he was and is God! Well, one night the disciples had been out on the Sea of Galilee fishing all night, when at 3 AM, Jesus comes to them in his divine and omnipotent power, walking upon the water. Peter calls out: “If that really is you, Lord, bid me come to you on the water!” And Jesus said, “Come!” And Peter stepped out of the boat and was looking squarely at Jesus, and so long as he kept his eyes fixed firmly on Jesus, he kept his cool and was actually walking upon the water. But then he took his eyes off of Jesus and became terrified by looking at the wind all of the big waves surrounding him and he began to sink! He called out to Jesus for help, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus did save him and when Jesus got back into the boat with all of them, he asked the disciples: “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31) It’s a rhetorical question really—the answer to the question is built in the question. The reason they doubted was because of the littleness of their faith!

The same thing can happen to us as we face life's problems and challenges. If we keep our eyes fixed exclusively upon our problems, our frustrations, our disappointments, our limitations, all the things we don't have rather than being grateful for all that we do have, it can certainly feel that we are drowning in an ocean of life's problems too. But look to Jesus! Take up the cross and follow Jesus!

If you are unhappy, is it possible that one reason you are an unhappy person is because you have never been caught up in a cause that is greater than yourself? People who are passionate about life are oftentimes people who are passionate about other people. And people who are passionate about other people are oftentimes people who are passionate about God! If you don't ever feel the joy and the love of Christ's saving presence being made available to you in your life, it may be because there is no real sacrificial cross on your shoulder.

When Lisa and I were on our vacation last week and both had become quite ill, we found a program on that channel called "ME TV" that we had not seen in years. "Mr. Ed," you know; the talking horse who was constantly having conversations; deep and meaningful conversations with his owner, a man named Wilbur. Though that program was nonsensical, it sometimes gave a very good message. Well, I don't want to tell you a little story about a talking-horse, but about three talking trees which were once all planted in close proximity next to one another some 2000 years ago. Because they could communicate they often had discussions about their future too! One day, one of the trees said, "I would like for my wood to be used for the making of a cradle; for a little baby to sleep in someday." The second tree said, "I'd like my wood to be fashioned into part of a mighty ocean-going vessel, carrying useful cargo all over the world!" The third tree said, "I want to just remain a tree; to just stand here and point upwards, reminding people that there is a God in heaven who loves them!"

One day the wood cutters came for the first tree. "We'll make this one into a feed trough for animals," they said. "No," protested the tree. "I don't want to become a feedbox, I want to be a cradle." But the tree was made into a feedbox, also called a "manger," just the same. And that manger was then sold to an inn-keeper in Bethlehem. When the Lord of all the earth was born, he was cradled in that manger.

Then the woodcutters came for the second tree. "We'll make this one into a small fishing boat," they said. "No," protested the tree, "I want to be a mighty ocean vessel." But that tree was fashioned into a small boat and sold to a fishing family in Capernaum. One day when the Lord of heaven and earth needed a platform from which to preach the good news of God's coming kingdom to hundreds of listeners, the Lord stepped into this little boat and made it his pulpit.

Finally the woodcutters came for the third tree. "The Romans are paying good money for sturdy crosses to be used at a crucifixion," they said. The tree protested, but was cut down anyway. And one Friday, the Lord of heaven and earth hung on that cross as the greatest demonstration and most profound expression of God's love ever! And to this very day the cross is still pointing upward, reminding people everywhere of the God who loves them, unconditionally, with an everlasting love!

Do you see the point of this little parable? All three trees had to surrender their own selfish ambitions in order that they might find their greater destiny within God's will for them in their relationship with Jesus Christ. This message confronts us this morning with two important questions. First of all, have you and I, by the grace of God, placed our ultimate trust in the Christ who gave himself on the cross for us and for our salvation? And secondly, is there a cross on our shoulders too? Is there some service or sacrifice that you and I have undertaken or become involved with, that clearly expresses our gratitude to our Lord Jesus for all that he has done?

Brothers and sisters, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world! Amen