

"Behold, the Lamb of God!"

John 1:29-41

January 19, 2020

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"

Dear Friends in Christ,

I. Many Lambs and the Lamb of God

The disciples of John the Baptist knew all about lambs.

There were stories of one-time sacrifices, like the story of Abraham and Isaac where the son was nearly killed. You know the story: Abraham and Isaac climbed that mountain together, with Isaac innocently asking where the sacrifice was. Abraham, unable to speak the truth, uttered those famous words, "God will provide for Himself the lamb" (Gen. 22:8). And so it proved: Just as Abraham lifted the knife to sacrifice his only son, the Lord pointed him to a ram, caught by his horns in a thicket. The ram was sacrificed that day. Isaac was delivered because God provided the lamb.

There were the annual sacrifices, too, like the Passover Lamb. Every year, the people of Israel were to remember the Exodus by the sacrifice of a lamb for Passover dinner. They were to recall how the Lord saved the firstborn of each family because the angel passed over the doors marked by the blood of the lamb. The lamb died, the firstborn sons lived.

And then there were the twice-daily sacrifices, too, still going on at the temple: Morning and evening, a lamb was sacrificed to God by the priests, in accordance with God's command: "One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight" (Deut. 29:39). Two lambs every day, offered to the Lord.

John's disciples knew all about these lambs, because with these sacrifices the Lord constantly held the theme before them: Lambs shed their blood and died; and because lambs shed their blood and died, people lived. Century after century, the Lord had kept this message in the faces of His people, with good reason: They were to look for the Lamb of God, the one who would save them all.

His people, however, had not always taken well to sacrifices. Rather than sacrifice to remember the Savior who was coming, they got it in their heads repeatedly that they were saved by their work of sacrificing. "As long as we kill these lambs on schedule, we'll be keeping God's rules and He'll be pleased with us. We'll work our way to heaven by the flocks that we offer."

That was precisely not the point that the Lord was trying to make. The lamb was supposed to remind them that their Savior was coming, not that they could save themselves. So the Lord declared, again and again through His prophets, words like these: "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats" (Is. 1:11).

And really, in John's day, had it gotten any better? The lambs were still sacrificed twice a day, but for the wrong reasons. The sacrifices had become business as the moneychangers and priests worked them for profit; and with the Pharisees about, so many believed that heaven was theirs because of their goodness, because they kept the

rules and killed the lambs. So these disciples found themselves far from the temple, out there in the wilderness, following John the Baptist who declared the Savior was coming soon.

Very soon: On this day, as John preaches to the crowd about the Savior, the Savior is there in the crowd. There He is-Jesus, the long-awaited Savior who made John jump before he was born. The Word made flesh. The One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The One who comes after John, but is still greater than John, the thong of whose sandal John isn't worthy to untie. This is the Savior whom John has been pointing to; and now that He is here, John must become lesser while He becomes greater. It's John's job to point to the Savior, and so He does. He singles out Jesus in the crowd and declares, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The Savior is the Lamb of God.

That makes sense. Isaac was saved by a lamb, as were the firstborn sons at Passover. Makes sense to call the Savior the Lamb.

He takes away the sin of the world. Lambs aren't exactly known as fierce creatures able to battle death and the devil; but then again, the prophet Isaiah declared that the Savior would be gentle: "A bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench" (Isaiah 42:3).

But the unsettling part may be this: When John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God," he announces that there is suffering and death ahead. The Lamb will save by dying: That's what lambs do. The lamb who saved Isaac didn't live to tell the tale, nor did the Passover lambs or the ones at the temple.

Lambs have saved by dying, and this, too, has been told of the Lamb of God by Isaiah: "He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth" (Is. 52:7).

Jesus is the Savior, and the Savior is the Lamb of God. The Lamb is destined to suffer and die. Who's going to follow a Savior like that?

By faith, John's disciples do. Trusting in the Word of the Lord proclaimed by John, they are willing to abandon all and follow Him. They don't keep it to themselves, either: right away, Andrew's telling Peter. It doesn't seem to make sense: They follow a Savior who will never amount to much in worldly terms, a King who will never gather an army to fight and conquer. They'll put their trust in the Son of God who will allow Himself to be arrested, beaten, spat upon and killed. And after He is risen, what will happen to His disciples? They'll tell others of Jesus, and they too will be arrested, beaten, spat upon and killed. Not real attractive to the world.

But that is how the Savior saves. He's not there to make peace with the world, but with God; and the only way to make peace with God is to sacrifice Himself for the sins of the world. That's how this Savior saves. And the world which puts Him to death has no better care for His disciples, but by faith they know that the world is no friend, but the Lamb is the Savior. There might be more attractive messiahs to follow, but only this One takes away the sins of the world. Therefore, much later, the disciple Peter would write that the Christian should expect suffering. But forgiveness and eternal life were even more certain-because of the Lamb:

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps: He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, he did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we, might die to sins, and live for righteousness -- by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (I Pet. 2:21-25)

II. Behold! The Lamb of God!

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

This text is full of rich treasures for us, but let us concentrate on two. With these words, John the Baptist teaches us much about **worship** and about **suffering**.

When it comes to worship, there is always a dangerous idea that seeks to change what worship is. It is the idea that "Worship is all about what I do."

Back in the Old Testament, as we mentioned before, it was tempting for worshipers to believe, "As long as I make the trip and sacrifice a lamb, God will be pleased with me." The Lord made abundantly clear He was not. In our day, it is still easy for the Old Adam to rear his ugly head and reason, "As long as I attend services, this is what pleases God. If I show up for the head count on Sunday morning, He will reward me with forgiveness." This, dear friends, is actually a religion of salvation by works: God forgives me because of my work of showing up. It also betrays a lack of love on our part: If you want to get into big trouble very quickly, say to a loved one, "I'm only here and talking to you because I feel like I have to." We're wise enough not to speak such words to people, yet our Old Adam makes it seem perfectly reasonable to communicate the same to God.

Another variation is the idea that worship is about the love that we show for God on Sunday morning by our praises and thanksgiving-the things that we do on Sunday morning. The rationale makes perfect sense: Jesus has done so much for us, and worship is an opportunity for us to give something back by showing Him our adoration. I would venture to say that this is overwhelmingly the idea of worship in most Christian churches today: that worship is our chance to show our love to God, and God is pleased by a worship service in which we emphasize our love for Him. Therefore, worship is really about what we do.

But then we hear John's cry, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The Church was smart, and early on this proclamation was added to the liturgy. We sing it today: "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us." We sing it just before the Lord's Supper, and in doing so we make an important point: Our Lord Jesus Christ is not somewhere far away. He is here-really present, body-and-blood present-here. He is certainly fully present, God and man, in the Lord's Supper; and He is just as fully present in His Word and Holy Baptism. John saw Jesus present at the Jordan and cried out, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Trusting His Word that He is just as present with us, we sing the same.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is here! Now! And that, dear friends, turns worship into something else indeed. He is the guest of honor, and He is here to work-to take away our sin by giving us forgiveness. Therefore, worship is not about us and what we do-it's about Him and what He does! Our Lutheran Confessions get it exactly right when they say that "The highest worship in the Gospel is the desire to receive the forgiveness of sins" (Ap. IV:310). The highest worship is to receive forgiveness! In other words, God the Father declares, "Do you want to please Me in worship? You will never please Me more than when you receive My gift of forgiveness. My Son has died to give you that gift: You please Me when you honor My Son. Therefore, don't try to please Me by your efforts, by trying to give Me something; I have all that I need, thank you. If you want to please Me, be given to. Gladly receive the forgiveness that My Son has died to give you. Receive the forgiveness that My Risen Son is present to give you now."

That's who worship is about-the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. If we must go into surgery, it is not what we do that brings healing, but what the physician does to us. Likewise, the Lamb of God is here in worship: It is not what we do that brings healing, but what the Great Physician does as He heals us of our sin. That's why we

cling to the truth of the Agnus Dei and sing of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world: As we sing, we confess the truth that the Lamb is here, and He is here to forgive.

Worship is about the Lamb of God, who comes to take away our sin. Therefore, we repent of other ideas of worship, that the focus is our worship of God. And as we repent, we rejoice that-right now!- the Lamb is here to forgive our sins.

John's proclamation of the Lamb of God also gives us comfort in suffering. No one likes to suffer, yet suffering inevitably comes. It may come in the form of physical distress or emotional pain. It may be the suffering of a spiritual desert, or alarm at a church body in turmoil. You may suffer because of pain that you experience. You may suffer because of the pain that a loved one is experiencing. Suffering must come.

When suffering comes, the devil makes good use of it. He begins to whisper things like, "Obviously, God cares little for you-you must have done something unforgivable," and "Do you really think that God is around at a time like this? Face it: He's forgotten about you." Such temptations can be easy to repel for a while, but suffering has a way of grinding us down until we have little defense left-just ask Job, for one. Therefore, the devil keeps tightening the screws, and he especially whispers such evil when death is approaching-after all, it's his last shot to coax us into abandoning the Lord.

But when the devil whispers such lies into our ears, we do well to repeat the words of John the Baptist: "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" For with these words, you announce two important, comforting truths in the midst of suffering.

First, your Savior is the Lamb of God: He has suffered and died in order to take away your sin.

Furthermore, He tells you that the world will have no better treatment at the hands of this world than He did. Therefore, when you are tempted to believe that some suffering should not be yours if you are truly a Christian, you can say, "I know better than that. The Son of God Himself endured suffering and death, so I cannot expect to be exempt from it. Furthermore, He suffered and died for me-and then He rose! Therefore, I know that this suffering is a temporary thing, because He will raise me, too."

Second, you announce that the Lamb of God is not far away, nor has He abandoned you: He is as near to you as His Word and His Supper. As you hear His Word of forgiveness and receive His body and blood, you can be confident that the Lamb who has already suffered and died will keep and shepherd you through all things, even the valley of the shadow of death.

In suffering, we declare, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This truth short-circuits the devil's ploy, for suffering then does not drive a wedge between God and us. Rather, it teaches us how faithless and trouble-filled this world is-and how faithful God remains.

"Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" What marvelous truth these words still declare, that the Lord Jesus Christ is present with us here to forgive our sins, to give us faith and eternal life. No wonder we respond by faith. No wonder we, like those first disciples, tell others about this Savior who has died for their sins, too. No wonder we respond to the Lord's presence with hymns and prayers, and with tithes and offerings so that this message can continue to be heard. We respond by faith in these ways because of this glorious news: The Son of God is with us to give us life, both now and forever.

Behold. The Lamb of God declares to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen