

"Behold, the Lamb of God!"

John 1:29-41

"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:

Peter, in his first epistle writes: “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. (1 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 just one. With these words, John the Baptist teaches us much about **suffering**.

John's proclamation of the Lamb of God 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 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.