

"The Agnus Dei"
 John 1:6-8, 19-28
 December 17, 2023

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light."

I. The Face in the Crowd

There's something compelling about John the Baptist. It probably isn't only the camels' hair wardrobe or the diet of locusts and wild honey. There's a commanding presence about him, something that makes you stop and take notice. There must be: All of Judea is flocking to hear this strangely — clad man, yearning to hear a message of baptism, repentance and the remission of sins. He speaks with a rare authority, and the people determine that he can't just be John, son of Zacharias. He must be something more.

"Are you the Christ?" they ask. It would make sense. This powerful man is no respecter of persons; he's the sort who will even tell soldiers what they ought to be doing. Oh, Israel has waited a long time for the Christ, the One who will vanquish their enemies and rule forever. Is John the long-awaited Messiah? No, he confesses openly. "I am not the Christ." "What then?"

"Are you Elijah?" they prod. Oh, for the return of Elijah, the prophet who spoke God's Word and brought famine to the land, then spoke again and brought the rains. The man who raised the widow's son from death to life, who called down fire from heaven and stood up against 400 prophets of Baal. He was taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, you know; perhaps he's making an encore appearance, disguised as John the Baptist. "Are you Elijah?" they ask. "I am not," says John. Strike two.

"Are you the Prophet?" others inquire. The great prophet Moses declared that God would send another one like him to preach to the people of Israel; and it was during the time of Moses that ten plagues afflicted Israel, the Red Sea parted, and manna fell from heaven. Look at the results of John's preaching -- everybody's coming to hear. If John is the Prophet foretold by Moses, wow! He's just getting warmed up, so stick around to see the fireworks. "Are you the Prophet?" they ask. His answer is a simple "No."

"Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" John replies, "I am 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," 'as the prophet Isaiah said.'" So that's it. John is the Voice. For all of his authority and presence and charisma, he's just the preparer, the forerunner. And the Voice is preparing the way for no one less than the LORD. John is not the Christ; but his message means the Christ is coming.

And if this is the messenger, what will the Christ be like? Surely He will stand out head and shoulders above the crowd. There will be the handsomeness of power about him, a strength and authority that is apparent to all. There will have to be: If the Christ is the One anointed by God in order to save His people, govern and lift them up forever, then He must be strong and powerful. Persuasive -- a leader who stands out. John's presence means that He is coming, He is near. And oh, yes: You'll know Him when you see Him. Won't you?

Some sent by the Pharisees ask one more question: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answers: "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." What did he say? "There stands One among you whom you do not know." He's already here! He stands among them, the One so great that John isn't worthy to loose his sandal strap. He's there, in the crowd; but they don't know Him. It's kind of strange. You'd think that they'd recognize someone who was greater than John, Elijah and Moses. The One who flattens the hills and raises valleys. The One they call the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Being pretty good judges of character and all, you'd think they'd sense something. But they don't. They don't recognize Him. He has no special form or comeliness that makes Him stand out; apparently, there is no beauty about Him that makes Him attractive or desirable. He's just a face in the crowd.

How disappointing! A Christ like that means you can't go by appearances. You're going to have to watch what He does and listen to what He says, just to be sure. But who is He? Who is the Face in the crowd? They don't have to wait long — only until the next day, and the very next verse after today's Gospel lesson: It is in John 1:29 that John points the finger at the One coming toward him and cries out, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

There He is — the Savior of the world has been standing among them. And John just called the mighty Lion of the tribe of Judah... "the Lamb of God." When one thinks in terms of mighty conquerors and kings, the image of a lamb usually doesn't come to mind. Lambs don't go forth and fight and take care of others; unless they are taken care of, they wander around until they're attacked. Priests pick up lambs and sacrifice them, shedding the blood of these wooly victims all the time without resistance.

"Follow the Lamb!" is not an inspiring battle cry. Why is He the Lamb of God? Isn't He strong and powerful? He is. He is strong — He's actually almighty, all-powerful. But He's also meek, and He's going to conquer His enemies by meekness. That very day, He does not declare Himself as superior to others on the banks of the Jordan; He submits to Baptism, just like the rest of the people. He's not going to save by overpowering, but by serving; He will not conscript followers and force them into His army, but will draw them to Himself, by His servanthood to them. Rather than punish His enemies until they dare not lift a finger, He will submit to their punishment and scorn.

Most of all, He will save by sacrifice — by offering Himself to God on the cross for the sins of the world. His blood will be shed, like those lambs on the altar; and His holy, precious blood will be enough to atone for the sins of all. That is why He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This fulfills the prophets. This fulfills the Christ whom God foretells throughout the Old Testament, the Savior who would come with a mighty hand — and be stricken, smitten and afflicted for our iniquity. But sinners don't go by the Word; they go by appearances. The fruit of sin is pleasant to the eyes. The sin looks attractive. A Messiah ought to look like a powerful warrior. He should have a palace and throne, not a manger and cross. Because people go by appearances, many will miss the Savior — they'll reject Him intentionally, or just pass Him off as nothing special. But others **will** hear His Word. Hearing His Word, they will believe.

Despite appearances, they will look upon the Face in the crowd, or the One pierced on the cross, and say, "Behold, He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

II. Oh Christ, Thou Lamb of God

Already this Advent, we have heard the Sanctus, as Palm Sunday crowds shouted out, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" When we sing the Sanctus, we joyfully declare the truth that God has become man in order to save. Last Sunday we looked at the Kyrie, because John the Baptist prepared the way of the LORD; and we rejoiced that God became man to have mercy. We also sing with John the Baptist a hymn called the Agnus Dei, Latin for "Lamb of God: "O Jesus Christ, true Lamb of God, You take the sin of the world away; O Jesus Christ, true Lamb of God, Have mercy on us, Lord, we pray. O Jesus Christ, true Lamb of God, You take the sin of the world away; Have mercy on us, Jesus Christ, And grant us peace, O Lord, we pray."

"Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." John voices the words because Jesus is fully, body-and-blood present then and there. He is humble and meek-hardly outstanding, but He is there to save. He is on His way to the cross, and His Baptism is an important stop along the way. He is present to be baptized with sinners, to wash their sins off of them and onto Him; and He will carry that loathsome load to the cross and die with them there. Today, we pray, "O Jesus Christ, true Lamb of God, You take the sin of the world away, have mercy on us Lord we pray."

We don't sing this only because of past memories, but because of His present Presence. We pray these words because the Son-of-God-become-flesh-to-have-mercy is here. Here. He is just as fully, body-and-blood present with you as when He stood before John on the banks of the Jordan. Although He has conquered sin and death and risen victorious from the grave, and although He sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty and rules all things, He still comes to you humbly. He still comes to you to serve. He is present with you today when His Word is proclaimed. He is the Word made flesh; so when the Word is here, He is here. He is present at the font, in those waters of Holy Baptism; there, when your sins were washed away, they were washed onto Him and He suffered for them at the cross. He is here in bread and wine, giving you His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.

These are humble, common things — words and water, bread and wine. They are unremarkable elements that you can find in any supermarket. Of course, his appearance was pretty unremarkable on the banks of the Jordan; yet He was there. And you have His promise that He is just as here with you, by His Word and Sacraments. Therein lies the danger. Plagued by that sinful nature, many will run to seek God where He cannot be found. They will follow charismatic leaders who voice popular messages but ignore the Gospel; but Jesus is not there. They will put down the Word of God and seek to find Jesus in their feelings or experiences, claiming that this is the Holy Spirit's will; but Jesus never promises to be found there either. They will point to churches judged "successful" in worldly terms like growth in membership, number of programs or emotional appeal; but if the Word is not preached and the Sacraments not administered, it is all for nothing.

As Christians, we walk by faith — not by sight. We believe in the Word, not appearances. Therefore, we rejoice in what Jesus promises: He is with us, fully present, where He promises to be: Word, Baptism and Communion. Such means may look humble and

unremarkable, but it is here that the Lord utters the most miraculous truth: You are forgiven for all of your sins.

That is why we sing the Agnus Dei. We sing this, recognizing that the Lord comes to us humbly. The Son of God, through whom all things were created, comes here to serve. He cloaks His eternal glory in these means of grace to minister to you. It doesn't look glorious, but it is. And this, dear Christians, explains much about your life. It is sometimes taught that, as a Christian, you should expect an extraordinary life. Miracles should be happening, glorious proofs of God's love for you. You should enjoy prosperity, good health and recognition if you are a Christian. Therefore, if your life seems routine and unremarkable, there must be something wrong. But there isn't anything wrong at all.

As the Lord works in unremarkable — looking ways for your salvation, so He works for your other needs in unremarkable — looking ways as well. Rather than heal you of disease or injury outright in a glorious display of power, He uses doctors and nurses to perform that work. Rather than drop groceries out of heaven to your doorstep, He provides funds through your employment and food through the store. Such an ordinary life does not mean that God is absent; this is how He works, behind the scenes, to provide for you.

As the Lord Jesus stood unrecognized at the Jordan River, so you may live a life unrecognized, too. As He suffered temptation, trial and affliction; so will you — not because Jesus has abandoned you, but because you are His disciple. You are the sheep of the Lamb of God who has taken away your sins and who takes away the sin of the world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.