

January 19, 2020
Sermon Manuscript

John 1:29-42 (ESV)

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.” ³³ 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.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

The Lamb of God (John 1:29-42)

Last Sunday was the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, so we looked at Matthew’s description of Jesus submitting to baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, which marked the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Well, today we move over to John’s gospel, but chronologically we’ve only advanced one day, as John the Evangelist tells us what happened the day after Jesus’ baptism (v29-34) and then the next day after that (v35-42). And by the way, because we’re gonna be dealing with a lot of different Johns in today’s sermon, I provided some explanation of the difference between them all on your bulletin insert.¹

Anyway, so on the day after Jesus is baptized, John the Baptist spots Jesus and proclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” And then the Baptist further identifies Jesus as the Messiah he’s been testifying about, saying: “This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’” ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” Now, as your insert mentions, John the Baptist was actually Jesus’ cousin,² which makes it sound a bit odd that John says he ‘did not know’ Jesus in verse 31, and then again in verse 33. But John seems to mean that before John baptized Jesus he hadn’t known Jesus’ true identity as God’s Messiah. And as John continues on, he explains how

¹ **Distinguishing Different Johns**

John the Baptist: Jesus’ cousin; the forerunner to Christ who baptized Jesus

John the Evangelist: disciples of Jesus, wrote the gospel of John, likely the unnamed disciple in verse 37 of today’s passage (from Jn 1)

Yet another John: father to Andrew & Simon Peter, mentioned in verse 42 of today’s gospel passage (from Jn 1), but referred to as ‘Jonah’ in Mt 16:17

John the Divine: writer of the Revelation

John Roberts: preaching today’s sermon ;)

² See Luke 1.

Jesus' identity as the Messiah was revealed to him in the baptism; likely speaking to his disciples and anyone who would listen, John says,

"I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ 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.' ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

Well, the second paragraph picks up on the following day, when John the Baptist is with two of his own disciples and sees Jesus walking by. So again the Baptist proclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" And once his two disciples hear this, they immediately turn aside from John and begin to follow after Jesus.

Well, what John's two encounters with Jesus have in common, of course, is that in both cases he proclaims Jesus is "the Lamb of God". And this designation for Jesus should be familiar to all of us from our Sunday liturgy as each week we sing John the Baptist's words from verse 29 three times in a row "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world".

And yet, as familiar as the phrase 'Lamb of God' might be to us, our passage from John chapter 1 actually features the *only* two instances where this phrase appears in the entire Bible. And for reasons I'll get into in a bit, there is some question as to what John the Baptist actually meant in calling Jesus "the Lamb of God". But first I'd like to take a few minutes to explore how the Church has understood Jesus to be the "Lamb of God" before we circle back to John the Baptist. ##

- Throughout Church history, the most dominant interpretation of Jesus' designation as the Lamb of God has been in sacrificial terms, which understands his crucifixion as a fulfillment of a variety of Old Testament passage where a lamb is sacrificed for the benefit of others. Although, I should note that none of these examples fits the motif of Jesus as the Lamb of God, and I'll explain why.
 - So first, there was the episode from Genesis 22 when God stunningly asks Abraham to offer a sacrifice to Him in the form of Abraham's only son, Isaac. And Abraham, the father of faith, was willing to obey to the extent that he hikes up a mountain, builds an altar, stacks some wood on top, binds his son, and even raises up his knife before the angel of the Lord calls out to Abraham and tells him not to lay a hand on the boy. The angel then turns Abraham's attention to a nearby ram caught in a thicket as a substitute for Isaac and Abraham called that place 'the Lord will provide', leading it to be said, "'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'" And although the Lord provides a ram, as opposed to a lamb, and there is no mention of sin being born away, the historical Church often saw this mountain of the Lord where it will be provided as Mount Calvary where Jesus would die for the sins of the world.³
 - But moving forward to the book of Exodus, in chapter 12 we find the Passover lamb, where in order to spare His people from the final plague against the Egyptians, God commands Israel to take male lamb without blemish, kill it, and put its blood on the doorframe so that the angel of death will passover their home. Well, the death of Jesus occurred during the annual feast of the Passover. And to drive home this

³ Frederick Bruner's commentary on John, p93.

connection the gospel of John presents Jesus as dying at the time that the passover lamb was to be slaughtered.⁴ Although, similar to the story of Abraham and Isaac, there was no connection between the Passover lamb and taking sin away.

- However, that connection is present in another lesser-known example from Exodus 29, where the Lord commands Israel to make a sacrifice to God - that is, for their sins - a sacrifice of two lambs without blemish every day: one in the morning and one in the evening. And we know that the Church Father Origen,⁵ for example, saw the connection between these perpetual lamb sacrifices and Jesus' sacrifice for sin (as the Lamb of God).
- Well, a second way Jesus has been seen as the lamb of God is for the unjust way he was treated by his own people⁶ and by worldly powers, but also for the way he responded to that.⁷
 - And the passage from Isaiah 53, which I included as our first lesson today⁸ is an example of this. In it, Isaiah prophesies about the servant of the Lord who, even since the cross, has been understood to be Jesus. And verse 5 talks about how he would be treated: that he "was pierced" and "crushed". Then verse 7 says, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted," but this verse also speaks of this servant responding with the silent, submissive demeanor of a lamb. It says, "he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." The

⁴ This differs from the other three (synoptic) Gospels, which present Jesus as still being alive at the time the lamb was to be slaughtered and to institute Holy Communion at the Last Supper, in the midst of the Passover meal. The consensus is that John the Evangelist is taking a chronological liberty with this timeline in order to prove the theological point that Jesus is the Passover lamb.

⁵ Bruner 92-93

⁶ John 1:9 The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

⁷ **Matthew 27:12-14** "But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he gave no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they testify against you?" 14 But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Mark 15:3-5 "And the chief priests accused him of many things. 4 And Pilate again asked him, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you." 5 But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

⁸ **Isaiah 53:4-12** (ESV)

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. ⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

⁹ And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

weakness here is that, in contrast to the previous references, where an actual lamb was involved, here the lamb is merely a metaphor for the servant.

- And there is a similar prophetic allusion to this in Jeremiah 11, where the Lord warns the Jeremiah that the people of his hometown want to kill him for what he had been prophesying against them. And in describing the vision God gives to him, Jeremiah says he “was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.”⁹

So while none of these Old Testament links between lambs and sacrifice are perfect or complete metaphors for Jesus’ sacrifice on their own, since all of the Holy Scripture is thought to point to Jesus or be about Jesus in some way, the Church from its very beginning has seen this collection of passages as forming a beautiful mosaic prefiguring Jesus as an unblemished, sinless “Lamb of God” whose sacrifice on the cross atoned for the sins of the world. #

But apart from the scriptural references to lambs being sacrificed or suffering, there is a third motif in scripture where Jesus is clearly identified as a lamb; not as the “lamb of God”, but as the “lamb that was slain”. And this is found throughout the Revelation of John the Divine, in seven of its twenty-two chapters, including the passage presented as our second lesson today. Revelation depicts Jesus apocalyptically as a lamb who despite having been slain is triumphantly victorious. In today’s lesson from Revelation 5¹⁰ the angels say in verse 12 that the “lamb who was slain” is {quote}, “Worthy ...to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And this depicts the present reality of Jesus’ lordship in heaven as well as the eventual revealing of his lordship to all of creation, which we await in his second coming.

And one could argue that the servant song of Isaiah 53 actually covers all three ways the Church has seen Jesus as the Lamb of God. We’ve already mentioned how it describes the way the servant is ill-treated, but responds meekly. But verse 5 says the reason he was pierced was {quote} “for our transgressions” and the reason he was crushed was “for our iniquities”; then the end of verse 10 says the servant is making an offering for guilt. This is all about sacrifice for sin.

But some parts I failed to underline are elements in this passage that emphasize how despite all that this servant lamb would bear, God would still make him victorious. The end of verse 10 says, “when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.” And in the beginning of verse 12 God says “Therefore I will divide him a

⁹ Jeremiah 11:18-19 “The Lord made it known to me and I knew; then you showed me their deeds. But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.

¹⁰ **Revelation 5:6-14 (ESV)**

⁶ And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, ¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹² saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” ¹³ And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” ¹⁴ And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong.”¹¹ And what does this prefigure if not Revelation’s triumphant “lamb who was slain”. #

So to say that the Church has found John the Baptist’s designation of Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” to be **pregnant with meaning**, would be an understatement. And yet, having said all of this, there is a *catch* about our gospel passage, and perhaps a pretty big one for me to throw in at this point in the sermon. And that catch is that despite all of the prophetic meaning that the Church has detected in the Baptist’s words here about Christ, the scriptural evidence reveals that John the Baptist likely understood very little of it.

Now, why would I say this? Well, some of you will recall that on the third Sunday of Advent that I preached on Matthew 11, where much later in Jesus’ ministry John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus who express John’s growing doubt about Jesus being the Messiah, because Jesus hasn’t failed to meet the expectations John had for the Messiah. By that time John had been imprisoned, and what became amazingly clear was that John was not prepared for the Messiah or his followers to experience the suffering they would. So, in other words, the Church’s dominant interpretation for how Jesus is the “lamb of God” as a suffering sacrificial lamb, was completely lost on John the Baptist (even) long *after* he uttered these words.

But this leads us to wonder, then, what *did* John the Baptist believe? And what about the phrase John adds to “lamb of God” in verse 29: that he “is taking away the sin of the world”? Well, evangelical New Testament Scholar D.A. Carson suggests that John the Baptist thought of Jesus as the lamb of God closer to the sense we see presented in revelation. Not as a lamb who had been slain, but as a triumphant lamb, who would be victorious over evil. You see, even though Revelation was written decades after John the Baptist had died, much of that imagery of an apocalyptic, warrior-like lamb was present in Jewish apocalyptic scriptures that were not canonized in the Hebrew Bible¹² - not in our Old Testament - but were nonetheless popular in John the Baptist’s day. And I’ve included some samples of this on your insert - I’m not going to read through them - but what you’ll find is some imagery that the book of Revelation seems to have later picked up.¹³

¹¹ It is also notable that this servant song also begins on this triumphant note at 52:13: “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted.

¹² “Extra-biblical”

¹³ **1 Enoch 89:8-11,29-31** - ⁸ Then were small lambs born of those white sheep; who began to open their eyes and to see, crying out to the sheep.⁹ The sheep, however, cried not out to them, neither did they hear what they uttered to them; but were deaf, blind, and obdurate in the greatest degrees. ¹⁰ I saw in the vision that ravens flew down upon those lambs;¹¹ That they seized one of them; and that tearing the sheep in pieces, they devoured them. ¹² I saw also, that horns grew upon those lambs; and that the ravens lighted down upon their horns. ¹³ I saw, too, that a large horn sprouted out on an animal among the sheep, and that their eyes were opened...

²⁹ And I saw a throne erected in a delectable land; ³⁰ Upon this sat the Lord of the sheep, who received all the sealed books; ³¹ which were open before him...

This first text describes this lamb who emerges as lord of the sheep, and received sealed books like we find in Revelation 5-8.

Testament of Joseph 19:8 - ⁸ And I saw in the midst of the horns a virgin wearing a many-coloured garment, and from her went forth a lamb; and on his right (was as it were a lion; and) all the beasts and all the reptiles rushed (against him), and the lamb overcame them and destroyed them.

The second text described a virgin giving birth to a lamb who would eventually give birth to a lamb who would beasts and reptiles similar to what we see in the beast and dragon in Revelation 13.

Testament of Benjamin 3:8 - ⁸ In thee shall be fulfilled the prophecy of heaven concerning the Lamb of God, and Saviour of the world, that a blameless one shall be delivered up for lawless men, and a sinless shall die for ungodly men in the blood of

So knowing that texts like these seem to have been present and read during John's day, knowing that John did not anticipate suffering for the Messiah or his followers, and finally taking into account also what John had said about the messiah before Jesus' baptism: that the messiah would baptize everyone with either the Holy Spirit or with fire,¹⁴ Carson suggests that the best reconstruction of what John the Baptist believed about the messiah is that he would come in terrible judgment and clean up the sin of Israel... thus "taking away the sin of the world".

And if we wonder how John the Baptist could say something that so much more right than he even understood, is this not what we see time and again from the prophets in Old Testament?? In fact, John the Evangelist even reports this very thing happening in chapter 11 of this gospel when Caiaphas is arguing *for* putting Jesus to death he says, "...it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish" (v50). And John the gospel writer adds the commentary that "Caiaphas did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation..." (51). ##

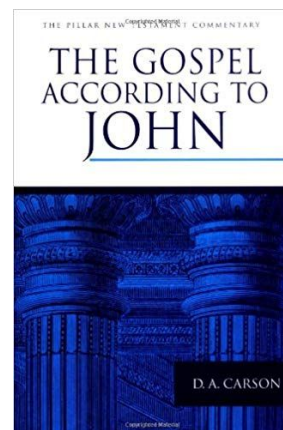
So similar to Caiaphas, it is likely that, when he proclaims Jesus as the "Lamb of God", John the Baptist was saying much more than he knew. And certainly that would've been the case for John's disciples at the time who upon hearing this proceed to go and follow Jesus. But it's fascinating that in verse 38 when Jesus turns and sees them, he asks them "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" In other words, they declare their desire to learn from Jesus whatever he will teach them. And he replies, "come and you will see" and he spends an afternoon teaching them God-knows-what.

And thus these disciples, Andrew & John and then Peter & others, begin a journey of following this Jesus. And in the subsequent days months and years they will begin to progressively learn what it means that Jesus is the Lamb of God and all the implications of that good news for them. So while they surely grasped very little about the Lamb of God on day 1, in time they would come to know him in a way that few have and to the great benefit of anyone who has read John's gospel. #

But I wonder today, if as we reflect upon our earlier days of following Jesus or how we've thought about God or the Christian life in the past - I wonder if we can't relate to the ignorance of John the Baptist and these disciples and take comfort that the Lord still received them and had grace toward them. But perhaps most graciously of all, the Lord did not allow them to stay in that place of ignorance. Rather, because they had humility about what they understood and believed - enough to be willing to follow him - he honored that humility with more and more revelation of himself and of truth that without question changed their lives.

Can we be thankful that we follow the same Lord who is equally gracious and merciful to us? The Lamb of God who takes away our sin.

Amen.



the covenant, for the salvation of the Gentiles and of Israel, and shall destroy Beliar and his servants.
And in the third text we find that exact phrase - "Lamb of God" who is described as the Savior of the world.

¹⁴ Matthew 3:11-12 - "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."