

Second Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): "The Lamb of God & Lambs of God"

John 1:29-42

January 18-19, 2020

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

*[[John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)*

A pastor named Gerhard Frost was teaching a Confirmation class made up of Navajo Christian youth. They were talking about how we track time and how A.D. stands for *anno Domini*, "in the year of our Lord." Pastor Frost asked the class, "What's so special about Jesus that we measure our time from the years when he lived as a man on earth?" There was a long, thoughtful, maybe slightly awkward silence, and then one boy courageously offered his best guess: "No more lambs killed?"<sup>1</sup>

The Navajo raise sheep. Each of those young people had personal experience shepherding sheep. They knew the pain of losing a lamb, either because it nibbled itself lost and was never seen again, or because disease, exposure or a predator took its life. For Navajo confirmands, hearing that Jesus is the Lamb of God was especially powerful.

We know the lingo. Before we receive Holy Communion we almost always sing some form of the *Agnus Dei*, Latin for the Lamb of God. "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world. Grant us peace."

Why **does** John refer to Jesus as a lamb, though?

Well, Bible scholars say it'll be helpful for us to think of the Paschal lamb sacrificed for the Passover meal. After all, in St. John's Gospel the Last Supper **isn't** a seder, **isn't** a Passover meal. In this 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel Jesus dies on the cross on the Day of Preparation, as the lambs destined to become the Passover meal are ritually slaughtered in the Temple. *The Message* paraphrase of the beginning of today's Gospel is:

*...John saw Jesus coming toward him and yelled out, "Here he is, God's Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world." (John 1:29)*

Passover refers to the Angel of Death's **passing over** the homes of Israelite slaves in Egypt so that their firstborn males would not die. The Angel knew to skip those houses, spare those families because of lamb's blood splashed on the doorposts and lintel, in obedience to God's command. It's interesting that hyssop was used to paint the lamb's blood on the doorway. In St. John's account of the Passion, hyssop is also used as a stick to raise the wine-soaked sponge to Jesus' mouth as He hangs on the cross....

Then again, all of that can seem very historic but not terribly relevant to our faith lives. That's why I love Twila Paris' "Lamb of God" that we'll sing as our hymn of the day. It's really a love song to the Lamb, who is also the Good Shepherd:

I was so lost I should have died,  
but you have brought me to your side  
to be led by your staff and rod  
and to be called a lamb of God.

Here's the "lamb of God" (with a small "l") that our Women in the ELCA brought me back from a convention in Seattle, so long ago that I believe Edith Derres was one of the participants. Ever since the little lamb has sat on the arm of the couch in my study, reminding me and hopefully everyone who sits with me that **we** are lambs of God, members of a holy flock led by a Good Shepherd.

O Lamb of God, sweet Lamb of God,  
I love the holy Lamb of God.  
Oh, wash me in your precious blood,  
my Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God.

In the Easter season we sing, "This is the feast of victory for our God! For the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign, alleluia!" That's an echo of the Book of Revelation, in which we read these words of John the Divine:

*I saw no temple in the [heavenly] city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light.... (Rev. 21:22-24a)*

That's a wonderful reprise of the Lord's commission through the prophet Isaiah, part of our first lesson this weekend:

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth  
(Isaiah 49:6)*

There's our Epiphany imagery: not just light shining forth from the Star of Bethlehem, but light pouring forth from God's people, illuminating the world. We are called to bear witness to the Light of the World, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who asks us, like he asked John's disciples, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38), who invites us as He invited them, "Come and see" (John 1:39), and then commissions **us** to ask **others**, "What are you looking for?" and to invite them also to "Come and see."

We can acknowledge our sin because we have a Savior. He has done everything necessary to liberate us from our slavery to sin. We are free to live in the Promised Land of forgiveness and to expend our lives in grateful, joy-filled service to the "sweet Lamb of God." Reflecting on his Navajo friend who questioningly answered, "No more lambs killed," Pastor Frost wrote:

"Jesus was the last lamb; there will be no more sacrifices, no more lambs killed. I am grateful for that shepherd's eye as I seek anew to "behold the Lamb of God."<sup>2</sup>

Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Paul Ofstedal, ed. *Daily Readings from Spiritual Classics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990), p. 390.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

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