

Behold, The Lamb of God

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[0 : 00] A reading from the Gospel according to John.

Chapter 1. The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the one I meant when I said, A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.

Then John gave this testimony. I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

I have seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one. This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

[2 : 13] You may be seated. Good evening, Christ Church, and Merry Christmas to you.

What a gift it is to be able to gather in person together this year. Some of us were at a warehouse parking lot this time last year on Telegraph Avenue, and that was sweet, but this is sweeter still.

And we are so thankful to God for vaccines, and we're thankful to be able to travel and welcome special family and friends to be with us tonight.

And if you're visiting with us, we're so glad you're here. If you're tuning in with us online, we're so glad that you have joined us as well. There was a kindergarten teacher who was observing her classroom as children drew pictures.

And the teacher would walk around to see each child's artwork, and so she approached one little girl who was working especially hard and asked her what her drawing was, and the little girl told her, I'm drawing God.

[3 : 20] But sweetie, the teacher replied, no one actually knows what God looks like. And automatically, the little girl continued drawing and said, well, they certainly will in a minute. The Gospels are each drawings of Jesus that are meant to show us what God is like.

And there are four Gospels with different angles on the one Jesus and the one story of Christmas. And in Matthew's Gospel, we see Christmas through the eyes of Joseph.

We get his dream that reveals Jesus' identity. We meet the wise kings that came from Arabia in the east, Herod and his slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem, and Joseph, Mary, and Jesus' escape as refugees to Egypt.

That's Matthew's Gospel. And Luke's Gospel, which we heard earlier, we get Christmas through the eyes of Mary. Gabriel's visit to Mary where she says yes to God. We get those beautiful songs, the Magnificat and the Benedictus.

We get the birth of John the Baptist, the shepherds, the angels. We get the Gloria in Excelsis Deo. In the Gospel of Mark, he's in such a rush that he skips right over Christmas so he can jump straight into Jesus' ministry.

[4 : 35] So I think about that as kind of the bah humbug evangelist. Didn't really stop to celebrate Christmas. But the Gospel of John, we get this cosmic Christmas.

John expands the dimensions of the story, reaching back way before Christmas morning in time and reaching forward in time way after the cradle of Christ.

And every year, we just cycle through each of the four Gospels. So tonight, we're looking at the Gospel of John, looking at John's drawing of Jesus that's meant to show us what God is like.

And John tells us that Christmas is about the God who has come, keeps coming, and will come. Christmas is about the God who has come, keeps coming, and will come.

Think for a moment about Christmas and this God who has come. John says he was coming in verse 9. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

[5 : 36] It would be a mistake to think that the first time God came into the world was when he was born into it as Jesus Christ. For long before he came into the world at Christmas in the incarnation, he was continuously coming into it.

Verse 10 tells us that he was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. John's telling us that nothing in the universe exists apart from Jesus Christ. And he's remained in the world since creation. He never left. What does this mean? What does it mean to say that Jesus is the true light that enlightens everyone?

It is to say that all beauty, all truth, all goodness comes from Jesus Christ, that any light that was in the world in any culture before the time of Christ was pouring forth from Jesus as the source of all light, for he's the one who made and sustains all things.

Now, that is a bold claim for this baby in the manger. But John doesn't stop there. He says he was coming, and then he came. In verse 11, he came to that which was his own.

[6 : 50] Now we've hit Christmas morning. Now we're at the incarnation, where he who had been coming into the world to all people at all places and all times, now came to Israel, his special covenant people.

He who had been coming incognito into a world without being recognized in his pre-incarnation history, now came in person visibly and openly in the flesh.

That's what verse 14 is all about. The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. John is telling us that this baby in the manger, who's crying in order that someone might feed him, who's crying in order that someone might change his swaddling clothes, this baby is the eternal logos. He's the eternal word and wisdom of God. We talk about the natural order and all those physical forces that hold everything together. We talk about the moral order and right and wrong, justice and injustice, what gives meaning and purpose to things and to life.

Well, what is the glue that causes all those things to cohere? The natural order, the moral order, John says, it's this baby. That without this baby in the manger, you and I and everything else would fall apart.

[8 : 12] Well, why did he come? Why did he bother taking on flesh? This baby in the manger grew up, and his cousin John would go around telling people who he is and why he came.

And John says in verse 29 that, look, this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That's a breathtaking statement. Because what is sin?

Sin is when you are at home and you go to make a sandwich and you reach down past those first three or four pieces of bread to get the good bread, right? And you make yourself a sandwich and you get those matching pieces and you leave all the rest of the bread for your family.

Sin is when you use the last of the toilet paper and you don't fill up the bathroom before you leave. These are two examples from my house just this week. John is telling us that all the accumulated guilt of thousands of years of human self-centeredness, of looking out for numero uno, of rebelling against our creator God through our greed, our malice, our deceit and envy, our slander and cruelty, this baby in the manger came to take all of that away.

And the reason this baby took on flesh was so that he could die as our God-given substitute, as the sacrificial lamb in our place who would bear our sin and shame, who would bear our curse and condemnation, who would take on himself the justice and the judgment of God instead of us.

[9 : 50] John is telling us with this cosmic Christmas that if you want to understand this one in the manger, you have to see him as the true light that gives all truth, beauty and goodness.

You have to see him as the eternal word of God that's holding all things, including you together. And you have to see him as the lamb of God who takes away all that which separates us from God. We have to see his cradle under the shadow of his cross. But John tells us that Christmas is not only about the God who has come, but it's about the God who keeps coming.

Because for many people, Christmas is just a nice story that happened long ago that's completely irrelevant for us today. But John says, he who was coming and who came is coming still.

This baby in the manger of past history is also a person of present significance. That this historic Jesus is also the contemporary Christ.

[10 : 53] And that he who came 2,000 years ago as a tiny crying newborn in a cave in Bethlehem still comes to have a relationship with me and with you.

And that's what verse 12 is all about. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Children born not of natural descent nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. This baby in the manger would soon learn to talk. And over the last two millennia, this one who's called the Word of God has been calling out the names of individual people and giving them the ability to receive him and to believe him.

And when you do that, we're told, he, the Son of God, makes you a child of God. That he, the one who was born on Christmas, makes you to be born from God, to be born from above.

You see, Christmas is not only about Jesus' birth as the Son of God, it's also about our birth into a new life as the children of God. There's a great book that I commend to you called Knowing God.

[12:14] And J.I. Packer, in this book, he talks about the difference between knowing about God and actually knowing God. And he says, what is a Christian? The richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God as Father.

But cannot this be said of every person, Christian or not, emphatically know. The idea that all are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere. Sonship to God is not a universal status upon which everyone enters by natural birth, but a supernatural gift which one receives through receiving Jesus.

The gift of sonship to God becomes ours not through being born, but through being born again. You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy father.

For in adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship. He establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of the relationship.

To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is even greater still. And how does this baby in the manger enable us to become children of God?

[13:33] John tells us in verse 33 that he came to baptize us with the Holy Spirit. This baby in the manger came not only to eradicate all the stains of our past and to bundle away into oblivion all the skeletons in our closet and to write off all of our debts to God and to give us a clean slate and a fresh start.

He did all those things. And he came not only to make us a child of God, born from above, to call God our father. He did those things as well. But John tells us he goes further.

He came to baptize us with the Holy Spirit. That is to put the Holy Spirit into you and to bring about a radical, inward spiritual regeneration to give you a new life.

That is to give you the divine, eternal, abundant life of God himself. He came so that God could be dwelling in you, transforming you, making you more and more willing and able to live as God made you to live and to come to bear the family resemblance of your father.

You see, Christmas is an invitation from this God who came, but who keeps coming. That if you're estranged from God, this Christ of Christmas came to reconcile you into a father-child relationship with God.

[15:00] And if you feel defeated by that wide gap between who you want to be and know you ought to be and who you actually are, this Christ of Christmas came to empower you with the Holy Spirit to live a whole new life.

That's why this baby in the manger came and that's why he keeps coming still. But I also want to say that Christmas is about the God who has come, who keeps coming, and finally, who will come. And I'll end with this. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus is giving this farewell discourse and he's teaching his disciples in this upper room the night before he's to be crucified and he's preparing them for what lies ahead.

And he says this to his disciples. He says, In my Father's house, there are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you, I'm going there to prepare a place for you.

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. And that is the reason he came and made his home with us is so that after this baby who came in the manger on Christmas morning grew up, he could eventually take us home to be with his father.

[16:26] We receive him when he comes to us through the Holy Spirit and then he will receive us in his final coming in power and glory. And then he will complete the salvation he has begun.

For those of us who've received and believed in him and had our sins taken away by the Lamb of God and been born from above to call God our Father and been filled with the Holy Spirit if we've already been redeemed in our souls.

On that day, the word who became flesh will deliver our flesh and our bodies from pain, from senility, from handicap, from sickness and disease and death.

And we will be liberated from all of those things which mar our flesh and our bodies and we will be vested with new and wonderful powers and a new creation where righteousness and justice reign supreme.

And my friends, that is why God came. That's why he took on flesh in the womb of Mary. It's why he took on a body as a baby vulnerable in his manger so that he could come again to heal and enliven our bodies for an abundant everlasting life at home with him in his father's house.

[17 : 50] If you're like me, this cosmic Christmas is much bigger than perhaps you dared to imagine. In fact, John tells us we don't really know what Christmas is all about if we just leave off at this cute, cuddly baby in the manger for we must see him as the true light that enlightens everyone.

We must see him as the eternal word of God that's holding all things together. we must see him as the one who came to be the Lamb of God and take away the sins of the world.

And we must trace the story from his manger all the way to our story, from his birth to our new birth, our second birth as children who call God our Father.

And we must follow that golden thread all the way until we're at home in the Father's house. So brothers and sisters, I want to invite you tonight to praise this Jesus, this Christ of Christmas, this cosmic Christ with a full and a glad heart tonight.

Let us celebrate his birth with everything that we've got. Let us live out a cosmic Christmas this year as people whose sins have been taken away, who call God our Father and we get to call ourselves his children who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who have the sure and certain hope of an eternal home to have bodies like this one who was born in his manger and then one day was raised from his tomb.

[19 : 32] In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen. Amen.