

Behold the Lamb of God

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning and happy Sunday.

I'm Tonya. I'm part of the Oikos in the Oaks and Women Reading Women groups. Today's scripture reading is from the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 29 to 34 is printed in your liturgy.

A reading from the Gospel according to John. 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.

[1 : 07] 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. Thank you, Tonya.

Good morning. Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would use this ordinary means of grace, the opening up of your word and the preaching of what your word says, to shape us into the people that you want us to be.

A people who are so convinced that Jesus truly is the greatest gift, the best news in history. And a people who therefore go out into the world to share his love, to serve others, to empty ourselves in ways that our Savior has emptied himself for us.

So would you do that by your Spirit this morning and be honored, Lord, in the preaching and in the listening of your word. In Jesus' name, amen. Merry Christmas and happy last Sunday of the year, which means here at Christ Church that we are officially in the Gospels now.

[2 : 43] Jonathan started us off in John chapter 1 on Christmas Eve, and that's what we're going to be in all the way till two weeks after Easter, which is when my sabbatical begins.

Not that I'm counting, but that's what we're going to be doing. We're in John chapter 1. Jonathan kicked us off from the beginning, and today we jump right into the middle. And, you know, of course we're going to talk about who Jesus is today, but what I want to talk about first is John the Baptist. I want to talk about who Jesus is through the lens of John the Baptist. Before we, you know, rush past John to get to Jesus, I want to linger here for a moment, because John the Baptist is absolutely fascinating.

If you've ever spent time just considering who this figure is in all of Scripture. Personally, I've admired John the Baptist ever since high school, when one of my youth mentors opened up the Bible with me, and he showed me this passage.

It was John chapter 3, verse 30, where John the Baptist speaks of Jesus, and he says, he must become greater, and I must become less. Some translations say, he must increase, and I must decrease.

[3 : 47] I even had a t-shirt that said that. I love that passage so much in high school, in college. It's really been an inspirational and aspirational passage of Scripture for me ever since.

I love John the Baptist for saying this. And I plan to spend the rest of my life trying to figure out what this looks like in my life. He must increase, and I must decrease.

Whatever it looks like to, you know, live and minister like John the Baptist, to give Christ more and more of the center stage of my life, and to increasingly remove myself from the spotlight.

John the Baptist was an expert. He was an expert at making much of Christ. He was Jesus' like ultimate forerunner, his hype man. And we have a ton to learn from this final prophet of God, whose words we're going to be looking at this morning.

Now, at first glance, John is not really the kind of person most of us would choose to imitate. He's strange. He's intense. He lives in the wilderness.

[4 : 47] His diet is not something that most of us look forward to. Locusts and wild honey. He dresses in camel's hair. He's got no career ladder, no platform, no safety net. And yet, what do we know?

We know that people flock to this guy. Crowds leave their cities to join him in the desert. Religious leaders take notice and join the crowds. And even kings feel threatened by this peripheral voice screaming out from the wilderness.

Because there's just something about this guy that draws people in and commands their attention. It's not that he's polished or attractive. He's not very relatable or winsome.

No, it's simply because he's clear. He's clear. He's clear about his convictions. He's clear about who he is. John the Baptist knows exactly who he is and what he's been placed on this planet to do.

Again, he's Jesus' ultimate forerunner. His ultimate hype man. The final prophet of God preparing the way for the Messiah. And what makes all of this even more striking is also where John the Baptist comes from.

[5 : 49] Remember, he wasn't always an outsider in the wilderness. He's the son of a former high priest. He was born into the religious and cultural heart of Israel.

So he was no stranger in the temple. He was no stranger to the sacrifices, to the whole religious establishment and system. Perhaps it was even said of him that he's going to one day become the next high priest just like his dad.

And yet we meet him here. He's walked away from all of that. He's left the center for the margins. He's traded priestly robes for camel's hair. He's traded the security of the religious establishment for the vulnerability of the wilderness.

And not only does he leave all that, but he leaves loud. He leaves quite loud and with an inherently offensive message. Repent. Repent, he says. And not just to the tax collectors and the pagans, but to the Pharisees as well, to the Levites and to the priests, to the commoners and kings alike.

No one gets a pass with him. No one's righteousness meets the mark. No one apart from repentance. No one apart from sensing their need for a fuller cleansing than what the temple system could offer.

[6 : 51] No one apart from repentance and cleansing was ready for the coming of the Lord. No one was ready for the Messiah. This John the Baptist figure we're looking at this morning, he is being a major disruptor here.

After 400 years. Remember, this is after 400 years of silence from God. He's now acting like the new Elijah in this camel outfit. He's calling all of Israel away from the temple and to be cleansed and baptized in the Jordan River once again as their forefathers had been when they crossed the Jordan into the land.

And so now he's not just saying repent, but he's also saying something new is about to happen. God is doing a new work, forming a new people, forming even a new kingdom. God is doing a new work, forming a new life, forming a new life, forming a new life, forming a new life.

You must repent. You must be cleansed of your sins, he says. He's telling them everything they think is off. Everything you think needs an adjustment that demands a change in really the whole of your life is what he's telling people.

And again, what's crazy is that people actually listen to him. They make the trip out of the city into the wilderness and they receive his baptism. Again, not because he's got some killer argument or a feel-good message, quite the contrary.

[8 : 05] Nor because he's got some amazing, you know, influencer lifestyle that people are hoping to imitate. No. It's simply because he's clear. He's clear about who he is, what he's called to do.

And some of these folks in the crowd, they aren't even convinced of what he's saying, but they still make the trip out to go listen to him. And it's kind of like when George Whitefield used to preach in the revival era and the famous Scottish philosopher David Hume, well-known skeptic, he was

asked, Mr. Hume, why do you go to listen to George Whitefield's revival preaching when you don't even believe what he says?

And Hume said, I don't believe what he says, but he believes what he says. And that was compelling to Hume. And John the Baptist had everyone's attention because of the clarity and conviction of which he preached and he ministered.

Clarity and conviction that manifested themselves in courage and confidence and a unique kind of freedom. And if we're honest with ourselves, I think there's something about people like John that draws us all in, isn't there?

Think of Gandhi, think of Mother Teresa, whose lives, like John's, we don't exactly envy or desire to emulate. And yet, at the same time, these kinds of people still stand out to us and we honor them and we admire them.

[9 : 27] Why? Because regardless of what you think about Gandhi or Mother Teresa or John the Baptist, whether or not we think they made good life decisions, whether or not we want their lifestyle, one thing is obvious to us, the clarity of their conviction.

The people who most stand out to us, the people that are most worthy of our respect and admiration, aren't they usually the people who seem most undivided? Like not pulled in ten different directions, not trying to be everything to everyone, people with a clear center, anchor, and compass.

And we're drawn to people of such clarity and conviction because so many of us feel like that's the opposite of our own lives, right? Don't we live in a culture that tells us that we can be anything, do anything, optimize everything?

So we try to. And yet we are exhausted, pulled in a million different directions. We always wake up already behind. We're constantly measuring our worth by our output and our productivity.

We carry a quiet fear that if we stop performing, we'll fall behind or disappear into irrelevance and worthlessness in these empires we're trying to fit into, these kingdoms whose rules we're trying to live by and succeed in.

[10 : 42] And you know, some of us here, you know, we're in Berkeley, we're in the Bay Area, most of us maybe are quite good at playing the game, quite good at fitting in, playing by the rules. We figured out how to work the system, how to fit in these empires, in these kingdoms.

But the thing is, while we grow, we might be growing in our capabilities, are we not also growing in our captivity to these empires? We may be productive, but are we at peace?

We may be successful, but aren't we also unsettled? Unsettled. And it's not for, you know, lack of data, options, and information that we struggle with exhaustion. No, we lack wisdom.

We lack guidance. We lack orientation. So when we see someone like John the Baptist, someone unhurried, undivided, unafraid, someone who isn't scrambling to secure his identity, someone who isn't managing an image or trying to be impressive, but rather someone simply operating out of who he's utterly convinced that he's supposed to be, someone or something in us, when we recognize John the Baptist, something in us recognizes what we're missing.

Something in us, doesn't it long for that kind of freedom and boldness and clarity that we see in this guy? See, John shows us another way. He shows us a better way.

[12 : 01] He says, in effect, my life makes sense because it's not about me. And that's not resignation. That's not self-hatred. That's actually liberation. That's freedom.

John the Baptist is so abundantly clear about who he is and who he is not. I am not the Christ, he says. I am not the light of the world. I'm just here to bear witness, prepare the way.

He must become greater. I must become less. That was it for him. It was that simple. It was that clear. John's clarity came from his vision, his vision of who he was in reference to who Jesus was.

And from that clarity came incredible freedom, incredible boldness. John was free because he didn't have to hold center stage. He didn't have to hold the spotlight. No, his job was to shine the spotlight on the only worthy object of the spotlight.

And this is where we talk about Jesus. As John lifts up his eyes in this text and raises his voice here in verse 29, what does he command his hearers? He doesn't say try harder. Try harder to be worthy of the spotlight.

[13 : 07] He tells them to repent of their own self-centered navel gazing, to pay attention to where the spotlight most rightfully belonged. He says, look. Or in the Greek, behold. He commands them, behold.

Look. Turn your gaze. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. That's what he's crying out from the wilderness. And again, this is where we really pay attention to Jesus and who he is through the eyes of John the Baptist.

From the very beginning of our passage, John is telling people to look away from him and look on to Christ. Even though he's no slouch himself, remember, he's the final prophet. He's the final voice from God after 400 years of silence, right?

But it is absolutely clear in his mind who he is in light of who the Messiah is. Look at verse 30. Like, sure, he comes after me, this Messiah figure, but he surpasses me, John says.

He was actually always before me. He's the preeminent one. Verse 31. The whole reason, John says, I came baptizing was to point to him, to reveal him to all of Israel. My water baptism was just preparation for the main event, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

[14:15] Really, the whole point of my life, John is saying, is Jesus and to make him known. So let's look at, I want to look at three things that John the Baptist sees in Jesus that gives him such clarity, such purpose, such peace about not being the center of his own life.

Okay? And what John sees are these three things. He sees a lamb, a dove, and a son. A lamb, a dove, and a son. So first the lamb.

Verse 29. The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Now, John may not have understood the fullness of what would one day happen to Jesus and of what he just said about Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

He may not have known how the cross would unfold, what it would cost, how deep the mystery would go, but he knew this much, that the deepest problem in the world isn't merely injustice. It isn't merely broken systems and structures.

It's not a lack of law-abiding orderliness. And neither is it a lack of kindness or compassion and empathy. No, the deepest problem in the world he understood to be sin.

[15:29] Humans insisting that we must become greater and God must become less. And John knew that sin could not be solved by better rules, better intentions, better people.

So when he sees Jesus coming toward him, he doesn't say, behold, a great teacher. He doesn't say, behold, a moral example. No, he says, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The word lamb here, it would have landed with enormous weight.

A lamb is not a rabbi. A lamb is not a prophet. A lamb is not a coach or a consultant. A lamb is a substitute. A lamb stands in the place of another.

I love how John Stott puts this. He says, for the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man.

Man asserts himself as God and puts himself where only God deserves to be. God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be.

[16:30] And so John here is saying, this is the one who will carry what we cannot carry. This is the one who will bear what we cannot bear. And that is why John is so free here.

He's such a non-anxious presence here. That's why he's not scrambling for approval or for control. Because he knows his sin will be dealt with, not just managed, not just minimized, not ignored, but taken away by the Lamb of God.

That's where his faith is. That's where his hope is. And this is so crucial for us to internalize if we are to live with the clarity, the courage, the freedom, and the purposefulness of John the Baptist.

It's so essential. See, most of us, most of us honestly don't think our biggest problem is our sin. We think it's stress. We think it's burnout. We think it's insecurity, lack of clarity, a busy schedule, a broken world, past traumas.

And these are all things that are real. But these are also kind of sometimes the only things that we often share with the people in our community group, right? When they ask us how they can be praying for us.

[17:36] These are the things we talk to our therapists about. These are the things that we look for, hacks and fixes for. And don't get me wrong, that's completely fine. But beneath, I think we miss what's oftentimes beneath.

We miss what's deeper. What actually exhausts us is not just how much we have to do and how many things we need to fix all around us. But what if the deeper problem is our insistence that we have to bear the full weight of fixing ourselves by ourselves?

That we have to justify ourselves, prove we're enough, absolve our own guilt, get ahead of our shame? It's no wonder we're exhausted. Don't you see, this too is sin. See, sin isn't just the bad things we do. It's not just breaking rules. No, actually more fundamentally, sin is our insistence upon taking our own lives into our own hands and carrying what we were never meant to carry.

But the gospel says you were never meant to carry that. That's why we need a lamb. Not advice, not self-help, not self-improvement.

[18 : 47] We need a substitute. Someone to carry for us and in our place the load that was too heavy for our backs to bear. Someone who steps in our place. Someone who carries what we cannot carry.

Someone who frees us not by demanding more from us, but by giving himself for us. So in John the Baptist, when he says, behold the Lamb of God, he's saying, look away from yourself.

Behold, he says. Look away from yourself. Look away from your striving. Look away from your failure. And look to him. Because when you see him clearly, you finally see yourself clearly.

And that's where freedom begins. But here's the thing. If all Jesus ever came to do was to forgive our sins, that would be incredible. But it also would not be enough.

Because forgiveness alone doesn't change us. It clears the record, but it doesn't give us a new heart. And that's why John doesn't stop at calling Jesus the Lamb of God. He goes on. Verse 32.

Then John gave this testimony.

[19 : 45] 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 baptized 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.

Now, in these two verses, there are a ton of hyperlinks that we could click on and go deeper down into. But the word I want to focus on is the word here, remain. That word, remain.

It's doing enormous theological work here. See, you know, throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit comes and goes. It would come and go upon the judges, on kings, on prophets.

But here, finally here, you know, the Spirit never permanently rested on anyone until here with Jesus. So this is not just another anointed servant.

This is not another prophet temporarily empowered for a specific task. Jesus doesn't just have the Spirit for a moment. He is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 49] And that changes everything. Because if the Spirit rests fully and permanently on Jesus, then Jesus is not only the Lamb who takes away sin, but He is the source of all new life itself.

And see, this is where the gospel goes actually deeper than the forgiveness of our sins.

Forgiveness isn't the whole of the good news. Forgiveness deals with our past, but the Spirit addresses our present and our future.

Forgiveness says your debt is canceled, but the Spirit says your life is being made new and will one day be finally glorified and consummate. That's why John says Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Not visit occasionally, but baptize. Overwhelm. Cover you completely. This is not just moral improvement. This is new creation. This is God saying, I'm not just going to forgive you and leave you the same.

No, I'm going to come and live within you. I'm going to give you a new heart, new desires, even new power to do what you never expected, never thought you could be able to do. And that's why John is so captivated.

[21 : 50] That's why he can step back without fear because he knows what Jesus brings is not just pardon, but power. And this is such an important reality for the Christian life because, you know, I think, I think for a lot of us, we can tend to think of the Christian life as, I said sorry to God.

He forgave me. Now, let me really try hard to keep clean. And hopefully, my gratitude will empower me to live a clean life from now on. And so many of us, you know, are trying to live the Christian life just based on sheer willpower.

Like, like my forgiveness was up to God, but now my righteousness and my obedience and my cleanliness going forward, all that's up to me. But then, of course, what happens?

Before we know it, we've soiled our clothes. We, we, we, and now we're left wondering, is this it? Is this the Christian life? Just trying to be thankful for the past and then trying to do better in the future on my own?

Like, sure, Jesus forgave me of my sins. He's the Lamb of God. But what about this, this porn addiction that's still in my life? What about this resentment and this inability to forgive that I still carry?

[22 : 56] What about my lingering insecurities, my preoccupation with my job or with my looks or with my income? For many of us, our understanding of the gospel has stopped at God's provision of a Lamb.

But we have yet to discover the beauty of God's provision of a dove, the Holy Spirit, for us. See, Jesus doesn't just forgive us. He, he fills us.

He fills us with the Spirit that permanently came to dwell within and upon him. If we are united to Christ by faith, the same Spirit who rested on Christ now dwells in us.

And in fact, we wouldn't even have placed our faith in Jesus. We wouldn't even have been united to him apart from his Spirit coming upon us, drawing us near to him in the first place.

And yet, how many of us actively seek the Spirit's ongoing work in our lives? Or do we not believe that he who began a good work in us will be faithful to bring it to completion, that he intends to complete us by his Spirit?

[24 : 01] God is just as much at work in our growth and in our formation as he was in our conversion and in our forgiveness. And that means that we are never left alone to fight sin.

We are not left to manufacture our own righteousness. We are not left to carry the weight of holiness by ourselves. No, Christianity is not self-improvement. It's Spirit-empowered transformation in Christ and by his Spirit.

And when you know that the Spirit of God is at work in you, shaping you, leading you, sustaining you, you no longer need, you no longer need to cling to control. You no longer need to build your own righteousness or be the center of your own world.

And that's why John, again, here, he's so free. He's so excited about Jesus. He's not striving to prove anything. He's living from a place of deep alignment with what God is doing.

His baptism, John's water baptism, it was just to help people see their need for cleansing and a purer righteousness. But the people's repentance and righteousness were never up to John the Baptist.

[25 : 05] It was never even up to them. But always up to the one whom the dove came upon, the one who baptizes us, not just with water, but with the Spirit. Now, to wrap all this up, notice the last verse in verse 34, where John doesn't just stop, you know, he doesn't stop with calling Jesus the Lamb.

He doesn't just stop with calling Jesus the Spirit-bearer, the Spirit-giver. He goes one step further. He says, I have seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one, okay?

Now, I debated whether or not to include this in the sermon, but here we go, all right? In your liturgies, in your blue pew Bibles, it says, I have seen and I testify that this is God's chosen one, okay?

And that's in line with the very earliest manuscript that we have of John chapter one. The earliest manuscript we have, it says, chosen one of God. But in other translations, and in actually the majority of the other transcripts, actually what John says is, I have seen and I testify that this is God's son.

So scholars debate, which is it? Should we go with the earliest manuscript? That's a really good principle to go by, go by the earliest manuscript. But the majority of the other manuscripts say, it's the son of God. Should we go by that instead?

[26 : 26] What should we do? What should we do? And I bring this up not to confuse you or to force you to make a choice, but I want you to know that these are very much related things.

God's chosen one and God's son. They actually hover around the same meaning. If John the Baptist really did say chosen one, it would have been hard for people not to also have had Jesus' sonship in mind.

And if he really did say God's son here, it also would have been hard for people not to think of Jesus' chosenness as well. But ultimately, I bring this up because I do want to accent the sonship that's implied here when it talks about God's chosen one, maybe God's select son.

When John is calling Jesus not just the lamb, not just the dove bearer, the dove giver, but also the chosen select son of God. What he's saying is, this is not just a poetic flourish, okay?

This is a declaration of his identity. He's saying that Jesus, he shares the life of God himself. The son is the one who lives in perfect relationship with the father, the one who knows who he is, the one who is secure, loved, and sent.

[27 : 39] John is saying this isn't just a prophet, not just a servant, not even just the Messiah in a political sense. This is God's own son. The one who comes from the father, who knows the father, who's known the father from eternity, and who reveals the father to us.

And this changes everything. Because if Jesus is the son, then what he offers is not just forgiveness, it's not just power, but it's sonship, it's belonging, it's family.

And this is where it all comes together. Maybe it's especially important as we enter this new year. Maybe some of you are thinking about New Year's resolutions or New Year's intentions. See, the deepest human question is not simply, what should I do?

It's who am I? That's really what we should be asking every year. Who am I? Who am I becoming? And, you know, every one of us answers that question in some way. Some of us answer it with work, with success, with morality.

Some of us have that answered to us by our failures, or some of us need the approval of others to give us that answer. But the thing is, all of those identities, they're all fragile.

[28 : 44] They can all be taken from us. They can be lost. They can be shaken. But when John says Jesus is the chosen son of God, he's saying something revolutionary. In Jesus, God is not just fixing a problem.

He's creating a family. Jesus is the son by nature. And through him, through our union with him, we become sons and daughters by grace through faith. That's why this matters so much.

Because if Jesus is the son, then that means that if you are united with him, you are not just defined by your performance. You are not defined by your past. You are not defined by your productivity. You are defined by your belonging in the family of God as a child of God. And this is incredible news. Like, think about it. In a world that's constantly telling us to define ourselves by curating our identities, by building our brands, by performing the gospel, the gospel offers a different way, a better way.

This is why John can step back and say, he must increase and I can decrease. It's not self-loathing. It's freedom. When you know that you are beloved child of God, when you are freed from having to be the center, when you don't need to prove yourself, when you don't need to grasp to find your own meaning, when you don't need to pay or perform your way into a family, you already belong.

[30 : 01] And that's the gospel. If all your hope is in Christ, the lamb has taken your sins, dealt with the biggest burden of your life. The spirit is upon you like a dove, empowering you to live in the liberating, life-giving way of Christ, and you are a child of our Father in heaven, and you are secure in His love, you can rest.

It's not a passive rest. It's a courageous rest. Because when your identity is secure, you are finally free to live boldly, to love generously, and to serve without fear.

So this is what John saw. And this is what he was beckoning us to see when he cried, look, behold, the lamb who takes away the sin of the world, the spirit who empowers our new lives, and the son, the son who brings us home.

So that when you see him, when you really see him, you can begin to live differently. Not driven by fear, not crushed by expectation, not scrambling for worth, but grounded, freed, alive.

And the invitation of this passage is simple, but it's profound. It's just look at him. Behold the lamb. Behold the spirit giver, the spirit bearer, the son.

[31 : 15] Behold the son who brings you home. Let him define you. See, John was clear because his life was centered. And his life was centered because his eyes were fixed on Jesus.

Because when your life is oriented around Christ, everything else, it just falls into place. You know who you are. You know what you're here for. You also know what you don't have to be.

And you are liberated to live in joyful, self-forgetful service toward others and toward your Savior, with your whole life proclaiming the ironically good news that he must become greater, he can become greater, and I can become less.

So let's live that way going into 2026. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, would you give us such a sight, such a vision of your son, Jesus, the lamb who was slain for our sins, the dove who is with us in your Holy Spirit, and the son of God, our older brother who brings us home.

Would you give us such a vision of him that it makes complete sense for the whole of our lives to proclaim that he must become greater and we must become less.

[32 : 34] Oh, Lord, make your son the center of our lives. And bring with that the clarity, the purposefulness, the meaning and the freedom that we all long for, that we all crave.

We thank you that we don't have to bear our own burdens, craft our own identities. We thank you that we don't have to save ourselves or the world, but that you have sent forth your son to do all of that for us.

So, Lord, help us adore him. Help us to behold him with eyes wide open. In Jesus' name. Amen.