

The Lamb of God...Takes Away the Sin of the World

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[0 : 00] We believe, O God, that you enabled John the Apostle to accurately record the words of John the Baptist, which Chemo has just read for us.

Will you now help us understand these words? And more than understand, will you help us live in the reality to which these words point?

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. On the Sunday, the members of this church voted to call me to this ministry.

I made the claim that I can think of no more challenging time in history to be a disciple of Jesus than the one in which we are now living. I can think of more frightening times, like the last half of the first century, where to confess Jesus in the way we have been doing in our worship this morning would mean that you could be crucified.

But I can think of no more challenging time in history to be a disciple of Jesus than the one we are now living. And I made the claim that I can think of no more challenging place to be a disciple of Jesus than in the place we are now living.

[1 : 21] I can think of more dangerous places, other cities of the world, where to name the name of Jesus means certain torture or death. But I can think of no more challenging place to be a disciple of Jesus than the one in the church.

On that Sunday, when you members of the church then formally called me to this ministry, I suggested that in this challenging place, at this challenging time, the most important discipline of discipleship is to keep asking the question, who is Jesus?

We are a community following Jesus, we say, with a heart for the city and beyond. Okay, who is he? Who is this Jesus we seek to follow?

Every new change, every new turning point, every new development in our lives poses this question anew. Or, more accurately, in every new circumstance, at every new turning point, Jesus himself poses the question in the form, who do you say that I am?

In this challenging time and place, who do you say that I am? Our answer is going to determine the quality and limit of our dreaming of what ministries can be done in his name in the city.

[2 : 47] I want to begin our fall series of sermons by turning to John the Baptist. Why? Well, it seemed like a good thing to do for a Baptist church.

To turn to the great Baptist and ask him, who do you think Jesus is? But why him? Why ask him? Why?

John the Baptist was a close relative of Jesus, likely a cousin. John the Baptist grew up with Jesus, and he would have heard all the amazing things that people were saying about Jesus.

But I want to begin by turning to John the Baptist, because of all the people who ever lived, he was granted the greatest privilege anyone could ever have.

To John the Baptist was granted the privilege of being the first person to formally introduce Jesus to the world.

[3 : 50] To prepare him for this privilege, God led him out into the wilderness, away from the city, away from all the noise and glitz and hype, out where he could think more clearly, out where he could see and hear more clearly.

And in the wilderness, John the Baptist came to the conviction that his cousin could somehow meet the horrendous needs of the city. As he told the religious leaders who came to interrogate him, although he was the prophet foretold by Isaiah, he was not worthy to even stoop down and untie the sandals of Jesus.

Now, as John set out to introduce his cousin to the world, how was he to adequately express? How was he to adequately articulate what he came to understand?

How are we? How are we to introduce Jesus to this city? What words and phrases should we use? What titles or names can possibly do justice to Jesus?

As Isaac Watts once sang, Join all the glorious names of wisdom, love and power that ever mortals knew, that angels ever bore.

[5 : 09] All are too poor to speak his worth, too poor to set my Savior forth. John the Baptist sees in Jesus one who has existed from all eternity.

Although Jesus is born six months after John, Jesus existed long before John was a dream in Elizabeth's womb. Verse 30, After me comes a man who has a higher rank than I, for he existed before me.

And John the Baptist sees in his cousin Jesus the only begotten Son of God. John sees in Jesus the one who comes from the Father's heart.

And the one who in word and deed reveals the nature and character of that heart. Verse 34, I have seen and bore witness that this is the Son of God.

And John the Baptist sees in his cousin one who himself comes to baptize. Not in water, but in the Holy Spirit.

[6 : 15] Verse 33, This is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit, John says. This is the one who fills and infuses human life with the very life of God.

And John the Baptist sees in Jesus his cousin, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Look, says John, verse 29, Look, that was the characteristic posture of John the Baptist. always pointing away from himself to Jesus. It's the characteristic posture of all Christian witness and preaching. Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Will you repeat those words with me? The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Again, please. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This title has, for centuries, played a powerful role in the worship life of God's people as it did for us this morning. Leon Morris of Australia was right when he said, There is something about the expression which does not require explanation before it appeals to the depth of the heart.

[7 : 32] In the words themselves, there lurks a luminous quality. Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

No one ever used that title before John. It's a strange way to refer to a human being. Look, Lamb. What does John want us to know about Jesus?

What was in John's mind when he employed this term? What pictures came into his imagination as he thought in these ways? You can see that there are four terms in the title.

They are Lamb takes away sin world. Lamb takes away sin world. I invite you to reflect on them with me in reverse order.

World sin takes away lamb. World sin takes away lamb. True, is it not?

[8 : 37] World sin takes away the lamb at the cross. And then in the brilliant move of the gospel, the lamb takes away the sin of the world.

First term, world. The lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. world. The Greek word for world is the word cosmos. In using it, John the Baptist is announcing the universal work of Jesus as lamb. His concern is not only the sin of Israel, not only the sin of the church, his concern is the sin of Rome and Greece and Egypt and Iraq and India and Afghanistan and China and the US and Canada.

He comes to deal with the whole world. He comes to do a truly cosmic work. And in using this term world, John the Baptist is announcing grace.

Amazing grace for in the Bible and especially in the fourth gospel, cosmos refers to the whole human order which exists in enmity against God.

[9 : 48] Let me say that again. Cosmos refers to the whole human order which exists in enmity against God. In the Bible, cosmos refers to human society organizing itself without God.

Jesus, the Lamb, comes for that world, for the real world, for our world, for a world which ignores God and even resists his kingdom. Mercy. Which leads us to the second term, sin.

The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. Note that the Baptist uses the singular and not the plural. Although it is true that the Lamb takes away sins, what especially gripped John is the fact that the Lamb is going to take away sin itself.

Specific acts of sin like gossip, stealing, rape, murder, are only symptoms of sin with a capital S. In his very helpful book, which I commend to you, Keith Miller in his book Sin, overcoming the ultimate

deadly addiction.

This book sold for a while, but it wasn't selling well enough, so the publisher changed the title to Spirituality for the Fast Lane. Thereby missing the very point of the book.

[11 : 10] In Sin, the ultimate deadly addiction, Keith Miller says that sin is this basic, all-encompassing, self-centeredness. The need to control in order to get what we want, an attitude that colors every relationship and emasculates the one with God.

Sin is about our apparent inability to say no to our need to control people, places, and things in order to implement our own self-centered desires. We may believe in God and love Him a great deal, but at the essential level, we are in control or we are struggling to be in control.

Ouch. Miller goes on to say that this self-absorption we call sin is the same elusive dynamic at work in traditional chemical addiction.

He writes, Sin is the driving dynamic that leads addicts to fasten upon an addictive chemical or behavior that promises to fulfill their self-centered and often grandiose dreams and to blot out the feelings that threaten to overwhelm them.

Sin is the universal addiction to self. Sin is the universal addiction to self that develops when individuals put themselves in the center of their personal world in a way that leads to abuse others and self.

[12 : 31] Infection is another word we could use. Deadly infection. How we got it and whether or not we are born with it is beyond the scope of this text, but the fact is it is there and it has a hold on everyone on the face of this globe.

Now here's the tricky thing about this infection. Its chief symptom is denial. Again I quote Keith Miller. Denial is the chief characteristic of sin as it is of traditional addiction.

Neither addicts nor sinners can see the extent to which their addiction is ruining their lives or relationships. This makes both chronic addicts and self-absorbed sinners hard to treat.

For both are honestly unaware of how the sin affects them. Am I speaking to anybody besides myself this morning? Now, religious sinners are sometimes the hardest to treat.

Because religious sinners have developed all kinds of ways to mute this. We use nicer sounding euphemisms like mistakes, lapse, issues, oversight, struggle, dysfunction.

[13 : 45] And as a result, miss the joy of the gospel. The sin of the world is this deeply rooted need to be our own gods, resulting in alienation from others and the true God, resulting bondage to drives and desires beneath our dignity, all culminating in death.

Which leads us to the third term. Takes away. sin of the world.

In what sense? Obviously, sin is still in the world after the lamb came. So what is this Baptist announcing? The verb he uses has two meanings. One is to take up and carry and the other is to carry off.

Take up and carry and carry off. John the Baptist looks at Jesus of Nazareth and sees in him someone who will take up the sin of the world, carry it as his own, and then carry it off.

In what sense? How? When? We come then to the fourth and most important word in the title, Lamb of God.

[15 : 05] what was in John's mind when he used this term? The problem is there are many possibilities. Did he have in mind the so-called apocalyptic lamb?

For many people in John's day, the lamb, especially a many-horned lamb, is the symbol of power and conquest. In the context of the final judgment, for instance, there appears in Jewish apocalyptic the figure of a conquering lamb who will destroy evil in the world.

Is the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the champion of God who comes to fight with sin and overcome it with superior force? If John had this in his mind, it would certainly explain the ferocity of John's early preaching.

Matthew remembers John preaching this way. The axe is already laid at the root of the tree. His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clean the threshing floor to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Does John have this warrior lamb in his mind? Or did John have in his mind the lamb that was led to the slaughter of Isaiah 53?

[16 : 22] Isaiah 53, many people say, is the fifth gospel. I agree. Listen. Surely our griefs he himself bore, our sorrows he carried. He was pierced through for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquity. All we like sheep had gone astray, but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him. And then right in the middle of the Isaiah poem we read, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, like a sheep that is silent before its shears.

Is John saying, look, there he is, there is the lamb of the servant song of Isaiah, who's voluntarily taking upon himself the judgment for the world's sin? Or did John have in mind the Passover lamb? Israel of God, Israel of old, was held in bondage in Egypt. And God told Moses that as a final act of judgment against the oppressors, the angel of death would go through the land and take all the firstborn.

God told Moses to instruct the people of Israel to find an unblemished lamb. They were to kill this lamb, and then with a hyssop branch, they were to put the blood of the lamb on the door post so that when the angel of death came, God told Moses, when the angel of death came, I will pass over you and no plague will befall you.

[17:45] John the Baptist sees Jesus of Nazareth coming toward him. It's suggested that at that very moment they're passed by flocks of lambs being taken up to Jerusalem to be sacrificed as Passover lambs.

John sees those lambs, those lambs who recall the lamb by which Israel was freed from slavery and death and points to Jesus saying, there, there is the one and only lamb who can finally deliver. Is that what he means? Or, did John have in mind the scapegoat of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement?

On that highest of holy days, the priest was to take two goats. One goat was to be slaughtered as a sin offering and then he was to take the other goat and over this goat he was to confess all the sins of the children of Israel.

The priest was to lay his hands on this goat symbolizing a transfer of his sin and the sin of the people of Israel onto this goat and then the goat was sent into the wilderness carrying away Israel's sin as the text puts it.

[18:59] It is argued that in that moment on the cross when Jesus dies and cries out that he is all alone he was in fact all alone in the wilderness of isolation from God carrying the world's sin.

In that moment one New Testament scholar says Jesus becomes the embodiment of the scapegoat who bears the human infection into the oblivion of nothingness.

Jesus not only uses his suffering to atone for sin and thus to satisfy God's justice he also inaugurates the abolition of sin without which God's kingdom cannot come.

Now even though the scapegoat is after all a goat and not a lamb is that what the Baptist had in mind when he pointed to Jesus or did he have in mind the so-called daily sacrifices every morning every evening an unblemished lamb was all offered on the altar in Jerusalem temple the priest were instructed to lay their hands on this lamb symbolizing the transfer of the sin of people to the lamb it was thought that as the lamb died upon the altar the lamb was suffering the punishment for the people's sin thus covering it over and no longer making it a problem between God and humanity this act was repeated every day even when the people were starving or at war or under siege now in addition to these daily sacrifices there were a host of other prescribed sacrifices and a particular interest to us so-called guilt offering although it usually involved a ram on certain occasions a lamb was used we even have the expression the lamb of the guilt offering the lamb is offered up as a way to take the guilt of the people away now interestingly

John the Baptist father Zachariah was a priest which meant that John grew up in this whole sacrificial system he knew what the system was all about so could we paraphrase John's claim this way every morning and every evening day after day year after year priests like my father offer lamb after lamb but are we free of our guilt are we any more secure in our relationship with God look there is the lamb who does free us from guilt there is the lamb who restores fellowship with him lay your hands on him and your guilt will be taken away now is this not the way the rest of the new testament reads the title at the cross the sin of the world is transferred to Jesus the apostle Paul puts it so boldly 2nd Corinthians 5:21 he who knew no sin became sin for us the lamb without blemish takes upon himself the sin of the world shedding his blood reconciling the world to

[22:04] God is that what John had in his mind or did he have in mind the lamb that was provided in the Abraham and Isaac story recorded in Genesis 22 God had commanded to take Abraham commanded Abraham sorry to take his son Isaac up to Mount Moriah Abraham obeys this strange command up the mountain he goes knife in hand Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice as they reach the top of the mountain the question that had been haunting Isaac and likely Abraham all the

way up finally emerges Isaac says behold the fire and the wood father but where's the lamb for the burnt offering good question Abraham replies listen God will provide himself the lamb my son

God will provide himself the lamb my son God God man and God God God God stop him and over in the thicket he sees a ram as a substitute is this story of Abraham and Isaac in John's mind look The lamb of God, God's lamb, the lamb that God provides.

New Testament scholar Alan Richardson points out that Jewish thought increasingly came to hold. That the covenant relationship with God was founded upon Abraham's offering of Isaac.

John is asserting that the new relationship with God and humanity, the new covenant with God and humanity, is based upon the fulfillment of this promise in Christ.

The promise that God made to Abraham, that God would provide the lamb that would make attainment for universal sin. Jesus is the lamb of sacrifice promised by God to Abraham, the father of many nations, and thus he is the God-given universal sin bearer.

[24 : 25] Is the Baptist saying, look, God's own lamb. No one need ever offer any other lambs or goats or rams again. No one need ever offer anyone's child again.

God himself has offered himself the lamb. My son. Well, which of these lambs does John have in his mind?

Or is this a case of John the Apostle's habit of using a term with many nuances and meaning all of them at the same time?

Is it not a case of seeing in Jesus a composite of all possible meanings of lamb? I think so. He is the conquering lamb who breaks the back of evil.

He is the suffering lamb who exchanges places with sinful humanity. He is the Passover lamb who delivers from slavery and death.

[25 : 33] He is the scapegoat who bears the world's infection into the wilderness, inaugurating the eradication of sin and making room for the kingdom. He is the lamb provided to Abraham whose blood steals the new and everlasting covenant between God and humanity.

And he is the one great final sacrifice who fulfills all that other sacrifices point to. Which is why when God's lamb dies on the cross, he can cry out, it is finished.

It is. Something final, something ultimate, something cosmic, is finished. Look. Now, the implications of all of this are many and profound.

Let me emphasize just two as I close. First, it is safe to be in the presence of Jesus.

It's safe. We can dare to come forward in our sin for everything that needs to be done about sin has been done. Everything.

[26 : 45] Do you believe that? Everything. There's now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, says the Apostle Paul. It is safe to come out of hiding.

It's safe to be in the presence of Jesus. Second implication. It is possible to change. The power of the great infection has been overcome.

The stranglehold of the addiction has been broken. We do not have to be what we have become because of sin. The deeply rooted patterns that sin have made in our lives can now be uprooted.

We can change. Finally, we can change. We do not have to yield to sin anymore. We do, and we will, but there's no longer any inherent necessity because something has been done to sin.

And we have been baptized into that something. This is not perfectionism. This is hope. We can change.

[27 : 54] Now, sometimes it feels like an uphill battle, but the good news is it's no longer our battle. The Lamb of God makes it His battle, and He invites us to enter into His victory.

Our part? Yield to the victory. Be honest. Come clean. Come as we are, and throw ourselves on Jesus.

Got junk? He'll take it. He'll take it. Got junk in the shack? In the secret places of the heart?

He'll take it. Look. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That's who Jesus is. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.

[29 : 03] Let us pray. Let us pray. No wonder the choirs of heaven sing, Worthy is the Lamb. You are worthy of all our praise, all our gratitude, all our trust.

You are clearly here this morning, and if I'm reading the situation correctly, I hear you saying to each of us, do you believe that I am who my cousin says I am?

If you do, lay your sin on me. Lay it on me. come clean.

Come clean. Be honest. Be bold. Lay it on me. And believe that it is now mine.

And I will carry it off. Okay. And believe first I was Shiite in you.
[30 : 29] That met in you. agrade your heart. That my wife'll bring you and are... I'll find you today.
And I'm gonna be ready for