The Lamb of God

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[0:00] Let's pray as we stand. Father in heaven, we thank you for the life of John the Baptist. We thank you for the word that he spoke, and we thank you for the response of many who heard him.

We pray that we also might have a humble heart before your word. We pray that we might know the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world as we hear this word.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Please be seated. Well, I'm thinking that it's very appropriate that there was a mistake made on that booklet that Ruth made because after Eve took that fruit, everything's been upside down ever since.
And that's what we're about here. We're hearing about John announcing this new life, the new change that God brings of making things right.
And John the Baptist is an incredibly significant person. And we should know, just starting out, we're going to talk about John the Baptist. I need to let you know that John was not a Baptist.
[1:10] He had no denominational affiliation as far as I know, even though I've heard some sermons that might lead you to believe that. He wasn't an Anglican either. But he was an amazing person.

He was born to an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. And John, before he was born, his father, or when he was born, his father gave a prophecy.
I want to read it to you. He said, Now, if you get a prophecy like this, you're going to live a very interesting life.
For that prophecy to be fulfilled in your life means that you will be somebody that will make a huge difference in the world. And he did live an interesting life.
He lived in the desert, wearing camel hair clothes with a leather belt and eating wild honey and grasshoppers as well. He lived in the desert.
[2:22] And then when he publicly began to teach in the desert, he preached a message that was very, very hard-hitting. He preached about national repentance, that everyone needed to turn to God and begin to listen to him again, to prepare for his coming.

And he also preached against the established order, who he accused of not preparing people for the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.
Now, to get a sense of what it meant for him to come on the scene, think of John the Baptist at our federal leadership debates. What would it be like for John the Baptist to have been there?
Well, let me tell you, he would be the most exciting person on the panel. And he would rock the boat as well. The press would have something to write about afterwards.
Well, you have that image in your mind, which is actually kind of hard to think through. You have that image, and that is what it was like for John the Baptist to come to Israel. He turned things upside down.
[3:30] He quickly became famous. Crowds flocked to him from Jerusalem, which was about 25 kilometers away, about as far as here to Tawasson.

So you people who are driving from there, don't complain. They had to walk. And they came just to hear John the Baptist preach. In fact, the whole countryside around there heard them as well.
And we know what his sermon content was as well. We know what his main point was. Matthew tells us it was, repent. Turn away from sin and to God.
Why? Because the kingdom of God is near. So his message was, get ready for God. He is close.
And these sermons that he had were interactive, which we might think about doing here.
What happened as a result, we know from the Gospels, is that people afterwards confessed their sins publicly. We won't do that today.

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[4:29] And then John baptized these people in the Jordan River. And that was an extraordinary practice at the time. Because there was such a thing as baptism.

If you were going to be a Gentile converting to Judaism, you went through a process. And it involved cleaning yourself, ceremonially showing that you were ready to be cleansed and to come into the people of God.
But also there was a monastic community that did it daily. They washed themselves to show that they were ready for God to come in some way. But I want you to notice what it is about that baptism that's different.
They were baptizing themselves. This was completely different. Here, somebody else is doing the baptizing. People are submitting to the baptism of another person.
A very significant thing. Because what that was saying was that you do not have the capacity to become righteous. To become ready for God. You need something or somebody outside of yourself to cleanse you.
[5:40] To make you ready for God to come. To forgive your sins. And so baptism by another person was a sign that that needed to happen. That you needed a righteousness that wasn't your own.

Now word got back to head office about this practice. And so the religious leaders from Jerusalem sent their emissaries down to hear John the Baptist.
This guy they had heard about was preaching to huge numbers. And they were actually baptizing many members of very good standing of the temple and the synagogue. So he was inferring that these people were sinners and needed God's forgiveness.
And they wanted to know, by what authority are you doing this? This is something completely outside the box. This is not right. And so they ask him in verse 19, Who are you?
Maybe they should have said, who do you think you are? Is what they're saying. But I think that we should realize that when they're asking questions, They do know that he is a significant person.
[6:44] That he is somebody of great stature. And he asked them, and he responds in verse 20 by saying, He confessed, he did not deny, he confessed, I am not the Christ.

It's a strange way it's written in the Bible here. But what John the evangelist is affirming here, Is that this is a confession. In all these questions that John has to answer, He points to Jesus Christ.
And that's what John is all about. He is a sign. He is like an arrow pointing to another person. And then they ask another question. Okay, are you Elijah in verse 21?
And they were thinking of Malachi, Where God promised that Elijah would be sent before the day of the Lord. Again, John says, no, I am not.
And then finally they say, are you the prophet? And what they're thinking of is the person that Moses promised That would come and speak the very words of God. Are you that person?
[7:48] No. Well, they're not getting very far. It's not a good interview. So they get impatient in verse 22. They said, who are you? Let's have an answer. What do you have to say about yourself?

People are asking. Well, he could have said, John could have said, I'm an important person. You know, I've had this prophecy.
God's called me to do this. This is who I am. But he doesn't say that. He says in verse 23, I am a voice. It's a strange thing to say, isn't it?
I am a voice. And it is a voice that is crying in the wilderness makes straight the way of the Lord in verse 23. So again, he is pointing to the Lord Jesus.
And he's saying he's a voice, not an important person. I am a person who is speaking the words of God. And the important thing is not who I am and my abilities. It is that God's word is coming to you through me.
[8:48] And then he says, well, then why are you baptizing if you are neither the Elijah nor the prophet in verse 25?

Since he's in a voice and not an important person, why can you be doing this new kind of act? And here's where you see what John's all about again. He answers them, I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.
So you see here again, he's pointing to Jesus. And he's saying that his baptism is the sign of a person. And it's a person that even though John may be a great person, he is a person who is, I am not worthy to do the most menial task that slaves do to untie his sandals.

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And, you know, the amazing thing here is that Jesus told us, he will tell us later on in the Gospels, that John is the greatest prophet who has ever lived. He is the greatest prophet.
And these guys who are questioning him know that there is greatness about him as well. And yet he is saying that I, that this person is, who I'm pointing to, is standing among you.
[10:09] He's right in front of you. And you do not know him. So the first thought that must have been in the questioner's mind would be, who is this person who we don't recognize? Who is this person that's far greater than John, who has had such a huge impact on our nation?

How could it be that we can't recognize someone right in front of us who is greater than John? Well, that's a wonderful verse because it describes the world that we are in.
Up in verse 10, if you just go up the page a little ways, actually to the left a little bit, on that same page it says in verse 10, Jesus was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not.
You see what John is saying here? He's describing our world. We live in a world that does not know Jesus. And each of us here has somebody significant in our life that does not know Jesus.
He is there in our life. He is there in front of them. He is there in the words of Scripture. And yet, many people that we know do not recognize Jesus.
[11:21] And it's something that causes you and me sadness. It causes us frustration as well. We don't know why it is that there is not a response. And we want them to know that he is God, that he is Lord, that he has come as a light to shine in the darkness.

He stands among them and among us. And so that's why it's the normal part of the Christian life for us to pray for those, those loved ones and friends and neighbors, to see Jesus as he really is. Because most are in that situation of these questioners. Jesus in front of them, but not knowing him or recognizing him. Now I know a lot of you here in the congregation saw the Narnia film yesterday. St. John's rented out a theater and watched it. I understand that the audience was very well behaved yesterday as well. I'm sorry I couldn't make it. The interesting thing about this film is that it's controversial.
Who would have thought it? It's good for sales for a film to be controversial. But it's controversial because there may be Christian themes in this movie. And the actors have been interviewed and they've said, you know, just to calm people down a little bit, he said, you know, you don't have to take away any spiritual message from this film.
[12:41] You can just enjoy it as a film. You don't have to recognize what's going on here. And a very talented writer of children's fantasy, Philip Pullman, who is also an agnostic, actually an atheist, attacked the stories.

And one of his criticisms was that there is not a trace of Christian love in these books. Now that's a strange thing for an intelligent man to say if you've read these books, isn't it?
I mean, the center of the movie that you saw yesterday is that Aslan the Lion chooses to die in Edmund the traitor's place so that he can live.
And he does that incredibly loving act when Edmund is his enemy. How can you miss that love? It is an extraordinary act of self-sacrificing love.
Well, Pullman grew up in his grandfather's home who was a clergyman. He heard the Bible and decided to reject it. And it was because he didn't want God to have authority in our lives, to have somebody that you would have to be accountable to.
[13:50] And that's why he speaks in one of his children's books about the republic of God rather than the kingdom of God. We're all sort of equals in this way. And he said this in a recent interview which was very honest about his beliefs.

He said, I'm caught between the words atheist and agnostic. I've got no evidence whatsoever for believing in a God but I know that all the things I do know are very small compared with the things I don't know.
So maybe there is a God out there. All I know is that if there is he hasn't shown himself on earth. It's very revealing, isn't it?
He has not seen Jesus. It's exactly what John's Gospel says. Jesus was in the world yet the world did not know him. He's an example of what Leslie Newbigin said.
Human wisdom is incapable of arriving at the knowledge of God, of Jesus. Because all human wisdom is in the grip of the sin of the world.

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[14:55] You see, this is why John comes and this is why Jesus comes after. Because human wisdom is in the grip of the sin of the world. And he's a great example of it.

Philip Pullman. And he's very honest about it. The fundamental problem is human sin. It is rebellion against God and his words. And that's why John's ministry is important.
It is the voice of God. God's word calling people to a baptism of repentance, of turning to God for the forgiveness of sins so that they can receive Jesus, so that they can know him.
It is a voice that releases people to know the love of God in their lives. And the voice of God is very clear at the end of this passage. In fact, it's very shocking there as well.
Look at verse 29. When Jesus is physically walking towards him, John says, Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.
[15:55] Now, this is a phrase that we've all heard. We hear it in the communion service. But we need to understand how shocking it is. Everything in John's life and ministry was leading up to this moment.

It's the fulfillment of the prophecy when it was said that John would give God's people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins because of the tender mercy of our God.
The Lamb of God is about salvation through the forgiveness of sins. And the way it's done is that God sends a lamb. And several things would have come to mind to those who heard John say this.
Because at the heart of the Jewish religion was the Passover lamb as Moses was about to lead people out of Egypt. You know, that God commanded that a lamb be killed and the blood put on the door frame so that the angel of death would spare the firstborn son in that home.
Well, the next day, the firstborn sons were dead in homes all over Egypt except for those homes with the lamb's blood that was killed on those homes.
[17:05] And in those homes, parents wakened and realized that the lamb had died for their son. Theirs were the only homes that had life in them.

And not only that, but every year, these people who were there saw the lambs that were slaughtered at the temple to temporarily deal with the guilt of the sin of worshippers.
They would also thought of the scapegoat where the priest placed his hands on the head of the animal and put symbolically the guilt of the people on it and then sent the goat out into the wilderness to proclaim the removal of the guilt of the people.
And that's what the idea of taking away the sin of the world. So it's a shocking thing that Jesus says that Jesus is the lamb of God.
John is saying that person is that lamb and it comes from God. It doesn't come from the priest. It doesn't come from you and I. It comes right from God. And he will not only deal with the sins of the Israelites.
[18:09] He comes to take away the sin of the world. It is universal. It is powerful and far-reaching. He is God's sacrifice who is born to die to permanently take away our sins and reconcile us to God.

It's an amazing concept. And John Calvin says how important this is. He says it's the chief blessing that we have. It's the most important blessing because Jesus takes God's wrath against sin on himself and he makes us, he reckons us, to be holy and righteous.
And from that source, all other blessings flow. And it's quite true, isn't it? He is talking about the fact that all the great blessings are peace with God, the gift of prayer in our life, the gift of true and certain hope that is before us, the gift of knowing God's love in a powerful way in our life, the gift of knowing that we have the hope of heaven and a new life of serving God released to know him.
All these come because Jesus is the Lamb who takes our sins away. And the amazing thing about that little phrase as well is that it is in the present tense, a continuing presence in the original language.
He is the Lamb of God that takes away, He continues to take away your sin and our sin. So at Christmas time it's especially good to know that the Lamb of God means that He is the gift that keeps on taking.
[19:46] He is the gift that keeps on taking. And every day He is taking away the sin that we have. Every day there is this assurance that you are in a healed relationship with God, that you are released from the grip of sin.

that the burden of guilt is lifted from you. Forgiveness is about a new life of being able to follow God, to love Him and naturally to please Him.

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This is a gift because naturally we are like the questioners who see Jesus in front of them but do not know Him. That's the gift of the Lamb that keeps on taking.
Well, I want to close by saying that in this Advent season there are two things very related that we take out of this. The first is to remember that it is the voice of God that John is that prepares people to receive that Lamb who is Jesus because by ourselves we don't know Him.
By ourselves we cannot be released from sin but God's Word allows us to know the Lamb of God. It's God's Word that caused people to repent and want to turn and be ready for that Lamb to come into their life and that's why the reading of God's Word is so important and I noticed that we have the daily Bible reading guide very good timing in your bulletins as well so please take that out.
[21:09] It's a very good and easy way to hear God's voice and to listen to it and remember that the reason that Jesus comes is because we have failed to hear God's Word.

Well, here what happens because of the Lamb of God is He restores things so that we can hear His Word and obey it. And the second thing and to remember also that this was a death for the sin of the whole world that no one is beyond that voice and we should know about it.
And so related to that is the second point is that we as a church and you and I individually are actually called to be about John's ministry. It's a thing that might seem a bit daunting to say.
John was this great prophet the greatest of all the prophets. But Jesus said this. He's going to say this later on in His ministry. He said, Truly I say to you among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.
Jesus said that. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than He. Well, that's you and I.
[22:18] What is Jesus saying there? He is saying that we have the gift of the voice of God in Holy Scriptures. We have the gospel which John did not have. And we have this gospel that transforms us.

We have known His voice. And our job is to continue being transformed by that gospel but also to bring it to other people. To be the voice of God by sharing with people the gospel in whatever way we can.
To be about God's business. To know that we are greater than John the Baptist in the sense that we have a message that will transform. That will bring peace with God.
That will bring the forgiveness of sins. So, may we by the grace of the Holy Spirit remember to be God's voice. By being faithful to His word.
By proclaiming the good news that the Lamb of God has come to take away the sin of the world. Amen. Amen.

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