

Behold, the Lamb of God

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[0 : 00] Amen. Please pray with me. Our Lord, we ask that you would reveal yourself to us through your word in this last Sunday of preparation for your coming.

Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Our text this morning as we hear from the living God in his word is John chapter 1 verses 19 through 29.

And if my voice does not sound like my voice this morning, it's because I've been battling the same cold many of you are battling over the last few days. So do your best not to think about it.

And if I end up in a period of coughing somewhere in the middle of the sermon, just bear with it for a minute. It's not my voice you're supposed to hear this morning anyway.

It's John's voice that you're supposed to hear. And really that is what this text is all about. It's about John the Baptist saying who he's not in order to then say who Jesus is.

[1 : 17] So my goal this morning is to focus on who Jesus is according to John the Baptist. It's fitting to do that on this fourth Sunday of Advent.

Advent. The last of the four weeks in which we anticipate the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope that among other things, that Advent helps you to be ready for Christmas.

And I mean to be really ready for Christmas. I find it more difficult every year to enter into Christmas in the way I want to.

Do you find that to be the case as well? Running around to buy gifts, managing preparations for meals and parties, navigating family dynamics with people in town, or maybe preparing to travel yourself somewhere far away.

And in the midst of it all, wherever you look, you're barraged with this secular version of Christmas that makes it so easy for us to lose sight of Jesus. So this morning, we're looking at Jesus in a way that I hope will stay with you in these last days of Advent, and that I hope will help to sharpen your focus in the season of Christmas that's coming.

[2 : 42] It will be a busy week ahead. But for now, let your plans and your worries go for a little while, and listen to this voice crying out in the wilderness.

We're in John 1, verses 19 to 29. John, as you may know, is a gospel without passages we traditionally think of as Christmas texts.

There is no birth narrative in John. Instead, in verses 1 to 18 of chapter 1, you find John's famous prologue, certainly appropriate for this season, in which John gives us Christmas in one verse.

Verse 14, And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And we have seen His glory, glory, as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

So in John's gospel, then, the first person we encounter, first character of the story, who says something about who Jesus is, isn't Gabriel, or Mary, or the shepherds, or the wise men, or any of that.

[3 : 57] It's John the Baptist. Now, John the Baptist is a different person from the John who wrote the gospel of John, just in case that's not clear to you.

John the Baptist is an intriguing figure. We know a bit more about him from other gospel accounts. He sort of reminded people of Old Testament prophets.

He dressed unusually. Matthew tells us he wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate unusually. Matthew says he ate locusts and wild honey.

He's not your typical guy. Luke says he went around proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and that as he did so, he quoted constantly from the prophet Isaiah.

John the Baptist was an intriguing figure. He's still an intriguing figure. He's a connection for us between the Old Testament and the New.

[5 : 01] But in his own day, a lot of people were trying to figure out just who he might be. So in verse 19 of John 1, that is exactly the question they come to ask.

Who are you? Ask the visitors from Jerusalem. They had some options already in mind, all of which John states clearly he was not.

So there in verse 20, he starts with the big one, I am not the Christ, he says. He knew they were wondering about that one. Christ is, of course, the word that means the Messiah, the anointed one, the king of David's household who would come to rule over all and defeat injustice.

John says clearly, I'm not him. Well, if that's not who he is, maybe he's Elijah. After all, the Lord had said in Malachi chapter 4, verse 5, that Elijah the prophet would come before the great and awesome day of the Lord.

And Elijah was somewhat unique, you might know. In 2 Corinthians 2, you can read about how Elijah didn't even die a normal death. Instead, he was taken up into heaven directly, the text says.

[6 : 21] So there were some Jews of the day who expected Elijah literally to return. John says, I'm not Elijah.

Okay then, maybe the prophet. Now they're going all the way back to Moses. To Moses' words in Deuteronomy 18, beginning in verse 15, where he said to the people of Israel, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you.

It is to him you shall listen. The Jews also awaited the fulfillment of that promise. But John says, I'm not the prophet either. Well then, who are you, John?

What do you say about yourself? They ask at the end of verse 22. John does have an answer. And it's an interesting answer.

He says, in effect, I'm nobody. I'm not any particular person at all. The point isn't who I am.

[7 : 30] The point is what I'm doing. I'm a voice, he said. So the source of the voice isn't the point. The point is the voice itself.

And John has a very specific voice in mind here. He says he's the voice. Spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. Verse 23, John said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.

As the prophet Isaiah said. Now that's a quote from Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40 verse 3, to be exact. You don't need to turn there, but I would like to read for you a little more of the context of Isaiah 40.

Because I think at this time of year, the words will be familiar to many of you. At least to those of you who make it a habit to listen to Handel's Messiah year after year. Which all of you really should do year after year, I think.

Isaiah 40, reading from verse 1, Comfort. Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned.

[8 : 51] A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

And all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it. The Lord is coming in Isaiah 40.

That's Lord spelled in all capital letters in Isaiah. Because it's referring to Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, the God who is the creator and ruler of the world.

The glory of that Lord will be revealed. And Isaiah says there will be a voice that clears the way for the entrance of the Lord. John is that voice.

John is that voice clearing the way for the Lord. And so you put this together and you cannot miss the point that the Lord whose way John is preparing is Jesus Christ.

[10 : 07] Simply put, the man coming after John is more than anyone had dreamed. He's the Lord. the God of the Old Testament.

Now man as well as God. Now naturally, that point's not yet registered with John's interrogators. How could it? They don't know this yet. So they're still pushing John again for an answer in verse 25. And then in verses 26 and 27, John gives this cryptic response to their repeated question.

I baptize with water, he says. But among you stands one you do not know. Even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.

Now this morning is not the time to go into the full meaning of the baptism of John, but if you glance down at verse 31, it's there. John says, that for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.

[11 : 20] In fact, verse 33 says, John was sent to baptize with water, preparing for the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. For now though, only notice this, that they ask why he's baptizing.

And John answers simply by saying, that the one I'm preparing for is so superior to me that I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes.

The untying the sandals was a servant's job in those days. John couldn't even be the servant of the one coming after him.

Even that role would be too far above him to presume. Suffice it to say that John's baptism isn't about John. It's about Jesus.

And the point at the moment is that Jesus is infinitely superior. Which makes sense, right? If Jesus is the Lord in capital letters of Isaiah 40, it makes sense.

[12 : 30] You see, it's crucial that John established that Jesus is the Lord God of Isaiah 40. It's crucial that John established that Jesus is infinitely superior to him. And if you read ahead to verse 30, you see that John also establishes that Jesus is of superior rank because he was before John.

Which is interesting because John appeared on the scene before Jesus. John means to say, I think, that by virtue of his pre-existence, Jesus takes absolute precedence.

And it's crucial that John establish all of that because without it, verse 29 is nonsense. It was the next day, it says in verse 29, when John saw Jesus coming toward him.

It's Jesus' first appearance in this Gospel, but he's a grown man at this point. And when he sees him, John says, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Those are familiar words to us. I wonder if we've lost sight of their depth. This is the high point of John's testimony.

[13 : 55] His explicit positive declaration. And I think that in order for that statement to make any sense, he had to establish that Jesus is the Lord, the infinitely superior and pre-existing One because no ordinary human being could be the Lamb that takes away the sin of the world.

I want to carefully consider that statement in verse 29 with you, especially those first few words.

Behold, the Lamb of God. First of all, that word, behold, it's a command, not a suggestion.

John doesn't say, this is interesting over here, come have a look. No. It's behold. Look intently.

Perceive this reality. Fix your gaze. Bear witness. Consider what this means. Stare at this reality as the truth of the glory of God comes to bear on your soul.

[15 : 11] Behold, behold, behold, the Lamb. Why a Lamb? What were lambs for in the history of the people of God?

Let me suggest for you three nuances that John may have in mind here. I think it's likely all three of them are in view. In fact, there may even be more than this.

But you could just ask me about that later. First, of the three, I think, are in view in calling Jesus the Lamb. First, we could go all the way back to Exodus chapter 12 with Israel enslaved in Egypt the first Passover.

Moses called the elders of Israel and said to them, go and select lambs for yourselves and kill the Passover lamb. at the very heart of the religion of Israel was the ritual slaying of a lamb whose blood smeared on the doorpost would deliver the household from the destroying evil.

And every year the people of God were to slaughter the Passover lambs, remembering their deliverance from slavery by the hand of the Lord. By Jesus' time, the slaying of the Paschal lamb had acquired a sacrificial significance and we know that Jesus himself associated his death with the Passover.

[16 : 42] In fact, if you know John's Gospel really well, you know that in the end of John the death of Jesus takes place on the afternoon when the Passover lambs were being killed in the temple.

So I think one thing John means to say here is that Jesus is the final Passover lamb. that once again the people of God are delivered by the hand of God.

Only this time they are delivered from sin. Which brings us to the second nuance of Jesus being called the lamb.

Lambs, as you know, were also used throughout the sacrificial system of Israel. I think John means to say that Jesus is not just the final Passover lamb, he is also the final sacrifice for sin.

Because this is of course exactly what John says in the rest of verse 29. This is the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. In the very first letter John wrote, he put it this way in 1 John 3 verse 5, you know that Jesus appeared to take away sins and in him there is no sin.

[18:00] John states this is the reason why the word became flesh. To take away sin. And John mentions that in Jesus there is not sin because of texts like Leviticus 4.

The text of the law that explains the requirement that the lambs that were offered for sin had to be spotless. Listen to Leviticus. If he that is the sinner brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering he shall bring a female lamb without blemish and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering.

Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar and the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed and he shall be forgiven.

Such was the sacrificial system required by the law but though that system was required Hebrews in the New Testament a book written to people steeped in the Old Testament scriptures tells us clearly in chapter 10 of verse 4 what every faithful Jew would have known that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to actually finally totally take away sins the whole system pointed to what would happen someday in a final sacrifice for sin and John means to say I think that it's here the lamb for the final sacrifice is here it's happening now and that really is then the connection to what I think is the third nuance intended by calling Jesus the lamb the third reference is once again to the prophet

Isaiah who had spoken of these matters in just the way we have been now in Isaiah 53 speaking of a coming figure known as the servant of the Lord who would deliver his people the servant who would be despised and rejected by men wounded for our transgressions crushed for our iniquities the one on whom the Lord has laid the iniquity of us all the prophet Isaiah says that one is like a lamb Isaiah says in verse 7 of chapter 53 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter at the end he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors yet he bore the sin of many Isaiah says John says behold the lamb the final

[21:10] Passover lamb the spotless sinless lamb for the final sacrifice the lamb who is the servant of Yahweh come to deliver his people isn't it striking that here at the very start of the gospel is a statement that tells us how it will end with the death of the lamb for the sin of the world to say that Jesus was the lamb meant that Jesus would die in the way a lamb dies he would be slaughtered as a sacrifice for sin that's why he came that's why the word became flesh and now it is good news for the whole world for as John the gospel writer will say in chapter 3 verse 36 whoever believes in the son has eternal life whoever does not obey the son shall not see life but the wrath of

God remains on him this is what John means that every person in the world Jew or Gentile will be saved if they believe in Jesus the lamb of God and follow him if one believes and obeys the son his or her sin is taken away by the lamb behold the lamb who takes away the sin of the world but there are still two little words there in that verse 29 that so far I haven't mentioned did you notice that Jesus isn't just the lamb he is John the Baptist proclaims the lamb of God of God now you know this verse so well because we sing it three times every time we celebrate holy communion here at St. John's and we'll do it again in just a few minutes and it's so familiar to us that it surprised me this week to learn that John 1 is the only place in the New Testament where the exact wording the Lamb of God occurs from the lips of John the Baptist both here and in verse 36 Jesus is called the Lamb in plenty of other places in the New Testament but never anywhere else is he called the Lamb of God just by John the Baptist Jesus is the Lamb of God that little English word of is a tricky one just ask any beginning Greek student it can mean so many things but here in this context I think there's only one good option that Jesus the final Passover

Lamb who will die as a sacrifice for all of our sins is the Lamb who comes from God this is the good news of Christmas I've pointed out that the sacrificial text of the Old Testament are in view here but please see that something something is radically different in Leviticus the sinner himself brings his own lamb for a sacrifice no longer because Jesus is the lamb provided by God himself for us the movement is entirely from God to us you see this all through the Christmas narratives when the angel comes to Joseph to tell him about the baby that Mary will bear though she be a virgin the angel speaks these words she will bear a son and you shall call his name

Jesus for he will save his people from their sins Jesus is the savior the deliverer the one who comes from God as the lamb of God to save us from sin he is the lamb of God he is our Passover lamb with his blood on our door posts we shall not die he is the perfect sacrifice for our sin and we need bring no other he is the servant of the Lord who bears our iniquity sent by God himself Jesus the lamb of God is our lamb but I want to be careful now in closing I want to be careful to avoid leaving

the impression that the sacrifice of the lamb is somehow the end of the story

[26 : 28] I don't want to lose sight of the fact that Jesus the lamb of God remains the Lord God of Isaiah I don't want to lose sight of the fact that Jesus the lamb sent from God is God himself and death cannot defeat him that the lamb sacrificed for us would also be raised for us and that as the resurrected lamb he is the Lord of all and for all eternity it is none other than the lamb that we will worship the same John who wrote the gospel we've studied this morning also provides the stirring glimpse of heaven in Revelation chapter 5 then I looked John says and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands saying with the loud voice worthy is the lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing and

I heard every creature John says every creature above and on and under the earth every creature saying to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever behold the lamb of God Christmas is six days away and I don't know how much you have on your plate between now and then probably a lot my prayer for you and for me this morning is that we are really ready for Christmas that in the midst of our gift giving and our feasting and our gathering with friends and family all of which I love too that woven through all of that through all that we do in these last days of

Advent and into the Christmas season that our hearts and our minds remain clearly focused that is tempting as it will be to make Christmas somehow about us that instead we would be like John who would point to Jesus and utter the same command both for ourselves and for others to behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit Amen