

Psalm 77 (Longest Night)

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[0:00] Good morning, church. Our sermon text this morning is John chapter 1, verses 19 through 34. Let me ask you to turn there with me. That's page 886 in the Pew Bible.

This Advent season, we've been looking at the life and message of John the Baptist, which isn't your typical Christmas sermon series, I admit. But John the Baptist has a lot to say about getting ready for Jesus' arrival.

Prepare for the coming King. That was John's message. And after all, that's what Advent is all about, isn't it? Preparing for the coming King.

We remember Jesus' first coming in grace. We look ahead to His second coming in glory. That's what we're doing this month. So let's pick up our series in the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verse 19.

And before we read that, let me pray for us. Father, as we have just sung, tidings of comfort and joy.

[1:07] Oh, how we long to hear a word of comfort that will produce much joy. God, we confess that we are often not a comforted people, but a very disturbed people.

Lord, we are often not a joyful people, but we are a distressed people. So God, now as we draw near to You in Your Word, we pray that You would reveal to us now, through Your written Word, a fresh sight of Jesus, Your incarnate Word.

Lord, help us by Your Spirit to behold Him, and in beholding Him to love Him, and in loving Him to follow Him, and in following Him to know this comfort and joy.

Do this for our good and for Your glory, Father, we pray. For it is in Jesus' name we ask it. Amen. Amen. John chapter 1, verse 19 through 34.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask Him, Who are You? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ.

[2:28] And they asked Him, What then? Are you Elijah? He said, I am not. Are you the prophet? And He answered, No. So they said to Him, Who are you?

We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? He 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 they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked Him, Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet? But John answered them, I baptize with water.

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.

These things took place in Bethany, across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

[3:27] This is He of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because He was before me. I myself did not know Him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that He might be revealed to Israel.

And John bore witness. I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on Him. I myself did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God. Well, there's a lot to look at during the Christmas season, isn't there?

I wonder what you're looking for. Maybe you're still looking for some good sales on Christmas gifts. 20% off Star Wars at Target, just in case you're wondering. Maybe you're excited to look in your mailbox for Christmas cards from friends and family.

Maybe you just keep looking at your calendar, counting down the days until Christmas vacation. One of the things we like to do as a family is drive around our neighborhood and look at all the lights and the lawn ornaments our neighbors have put up.

[4:42] I think the prize still goes to, for the second year in a row, the inflatable Darth Vader wearing a Santa hat just a few doors down. You've got to love how you can stick a Santa hat on anything, and suddenly it becomes a Christmas decoration, right?

Santa hat on Angry Cat. Christmas decoration, done. But first, on a serious note, amidst all that fun and distracting stuff, what really has your attention this Christmas season?

What do the eyes of your heart keep coming back to, keep looking at, as it were? What are you really beholding or focusing on? Maybe if we were to have a good heart-to-heart, you'd say it's finances.

It's hard not to think about finances during the Christmas season, right? Maybe a relationship that's going well, or maybe not going well. Maybe a loved one who's sick, or maybe a health issue of your own.

Maybe what keeps drawing your attention is a big decision on the horizon. Where to go to college, where to find work. Something probably is there, capturing your attention and drawing the gaze of your mind and your heart.

[6:01] You know, but amidst all these things that capture our gaze, here in the middle of our passage comes this word, behold.

Now, that's not a word we use much, is it? Behold. It's not like you've opened your fridge late at night and said, Behold.

Leftovers for dinner, right? Behold. But it's a great word. I think we need to revive it. Behold. Look.

Take notice. Set your gaze right here. This is it. For the last two weeks, we've looked at John the Baptist's ministry, his ministry of baptism.

We've looked at his message, his message of repentance and how that's good news. But you know, this morning, we get down to it. We get to the heart of what John was all about. Look, John says.

[7:05] Behold. Amidst all the distractions, especially for us at Christmastime, the gifts, the lights, the gift sales, amidst all the cares and concerns that this time of year brings, the hopes, the fears, the disappointments, the stress.

This is what we really have to see. Here's the answer to what you've been looking for. This is what you really have to behold. Now, I wonder when you look at Jesus, what do you see?

Perhaps you see many things. See a great teacher. See a great teacher with some pretty good principles that only if you could put them into practice, things might be a little different.

Maybe you see a religious founder, someone to admire for his spiritual bravery. John the Baptist, too, had a lot of things to say about Jesus, didn't he?

I mean, just look at the paragraph. He's the one who ranks before me because he was before me. He is the one on whom the Spirit of God remains. Not like those other figures in the Old Testament on whom the Spirit of God would come and then leave and then come and then leave.

[8:25] No, the Spirit of God remains on him. He is the one who will usher in the new age of God's redemption. He will baptize us, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

We will be awash in the very presence of God because of this one. And at the end of our text, he's the Son of God, the King, the Messiah, the one we've been waiting for.

So much to say and to know about Jesus. But look, fix your gaze on this. Here's what I really want you to see.

Behold, John says, pointing at Jesus, the Lamb. Now, in the first century, there were some Jewish writers and some Jewish religious groups that weren't very mainstream.

But we have some of their writings still in existence. And they would talk and they would write symbolically about a lamb-like figure who would come at the end of the age as a warrior to execute God's judgment on the world.

[9:37] A sort of apocalyptic warrior lamb. Sounds like a good Netflix series, doesn't it? But is that what John wants us to behold here in Jesus?

The apocalyptic warrior lamb. Of course, John did speak of Jesus as the mighty one who would come with the Holy Spirit in fire. John wasn't afraid to talk about God's rightful king being the rightful judge who will set the world to rights.

But, I think the answer is a little more obvious. Because John was the son of a priest, wasn't he? Zechariah.

Remember that story from the Gospel of Luke? So, John, as a young man, would have grown up very personally familiar with a different kind of lamb.

With lambs that were sacrificed every day in the temple, day in and day out. And John would have been steeped, like every other Jew of his time, in the stories of the Old Testament.

[10:43] Stories of the lamb that God provided for Abraham in Genesis 22. And stories about the lambs that Moses prescribed in the law in Leviticus, for example.

The whole range of offerings and sacrifices. But most of all, John, like every other Jew of his day, would have been steeped and shaped by the story of the Passover.

By the story of the Exodus. Do you remember the story of the Passover? When God's judgment came down upon everyone in Egypt. Both Egyptian and Israelite alike.

And the only thing that kept the Israelite family safe was a lamb. Instead of God's judgment taking the firstborn, they were to sacrifice a lamb instead and put its blood on the doorposts.

And as God's judgment came, it would literally pass them over. Because a sacrifice had been made in their place. And here is John the Baptist with rich symbolism, standing in the wilderness, identifying with the voice of Isaiah 40.

[12:00] I'm a voice crying out in the wilderness. That's a quote from Isaiah 40. And what was Isaiah 40 all about? That whole section of Isaiah is about a new exodus. Here is John heralding the new exodus that Isaiah looked forward to.

And here was John saying, in light of that new exodus that's coming, that we all need to be cleansed. And that this baptism that he had come with was just something, was just a sign of something greater to come. Knowing that in that same section of Isaiah, in Isaiah 53, there was a suffering servant who would die a sacrificial death that somehow, mysteriously, would set the people free.

And now seeing Jesus, John says, behold, the Lamb. The perfect sacrifice for our sins. So why don't we do this morning what John's telling us to do?

Why don't we behold this Lamb? We're going to focus on verse 29. And I want us to notice three things that we behold about this Lamb in verse 29.

First, we see something about his source. Jesus, we're told, is the Lamb of God. That is, God himself provides this Lamb.

[13:20] You know, outside of the Bible, nearly every other example of sacrifice is a human attempt to win over the gods. I just read the Iliad for the first time last month.

Has anyone here read the Iliad? It's really long. It's great, though. But it's wonderful. You have these Greek warriors just sacrificing stuff all the time. Why?

Because the gods are so unreliable. They're fickle. And they're selfish. And they have lots of sex with each other. It's crazy. That's how sacrifices worked in most of the ancient world.

You take something that was of value, that belonged to you, a nice fat animal, a big cup of wine, and you would sacrifice it, and you would pour it out in hopes that the aroma of that going up would please somehow, someday, whatever God it was you were hoping to win favor with.

But in the Bible, it's completely different. Here, in the Bible, we have not a human attempt to win over some fickle, temperamental deity.

[14:25] No, here we have the sacrifice that we need coming down as a gift from God himself. That the initiative to put things right comes not from our side, but from God's side.

And the provision comes not from our side, but from God's side. And the atonement comes, the reconciliation comes, not from our side, but from God's side.

This is God's doing. It's his gift to us. And perhaps the deepest mystery of all that the gospel of John will unfold is that this Lamb of God is God.

God incarnate in our flesh. He ranks before me because he was before me, John says. Now, on one level, that's not true.

John the Baptist was older than Jesus. And he showed up on the scene before Jesus. And yet, John says, he was before me. The opening verses of John's gospel express the Trinitarian reality of God with such simplicity and profundity they will probably never be bettered.

[15:47] In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. You see, friends, when God gives his Son the Word to be the Lamb, it is God himself coming down to rescue us.

Behold the Lamb of God. Now, what should we make of all this? Well, when we behold the source of the Lamb that God himself provided Jesus as our sacrifice that ought to be humbling at the very least.

After all, how great must our sin be if it took nothing less than the self-giving sacrifice of God's own Son to reconcile us?

How terrible must our condition be if God himself had to die for us? You know, if you take your car to the shop and they give you a bill for 50 bucks, then you know it's no big deal, right?

An oil change, maybe a new belt, no problem. In, out, done. But if you go in and they hand you an estimate for \$5,000, then you know something has gone horribly wrong.

[17:02] Your car's not even worth \$5,000, right? The transmission must be blown. The engine must be totally seized up. Something has gone drastically wrong. And friends, spiritually, the same is true.

If you and I could offer some sort of good work to God or make some sort of sacrifice on our end at our initiative to make things right, then the debt of sin might be uncomfortable, but it wouldn't be unbearable.

We could handle it. We could manage it on our own. If we could scrap up the spiritual capital to make things right, well, maybe things aren't that bad. But if the only way to get right with God is through the sacrifice of His infinitely worthy Son, then our sin must be more tremendously deep than we can imagine.

And so it is. For why else would God give His own Son? Things are really that bad.

You see, the essence of sin is basically putting ourselves in the place of God, is it not? We decide that we can run our lives our own way without much reference to God as our Creator or our rightful Lord, and when we do that, we're essentially telling God that we are wiser and more powerful and more compassionate and more just than He is, that we know best, and that we ought to be the rightful lords of our lives and the rightful lords of creation.

[18:34] Now, of course, if you happen to show up at work one day and you tell one of your colleagues at work that they're a fool and you can run things better than them, there might not be much of a price to pay, right?

In fact, you might even get a chance to prove yourself right. Okay, you want to do it? You do it. All right, I will do a better job. Thank you very much. But if you tell your manager that they're a fool and you can run things better, well, the results probably won't be so positive, right?

Try that one out, medical students with your professor when you're doing a round. But how much more serious would it be if you walk into the CEO's office, berate him as a fool, and show him how you unilaterally reinvested the company's resources into what you ultimately think is best because he is so incompetent to do so.

Well, for that offense, the penalty would most likely be termination. But think, is that not what each of us does with God every day?

We might not come right out and say it, but with every unilateral, God-ignoring decision, we functionally call God a fool and set up ourselves as the rightful lords of creation.

[19:52] And if to do such a thing in the workplace spells the end of our working life, then surely to do such a thing in the spiritual realm spells the end of our spiritual life.

The wages of sin truly and justly is death. But behold, John the Baptist says, in the face of this debt that we cannot repay, under this penalty that we cannot satisfy, behold, he says, the Lamb of God.

In grace, the very one that we offended, the very one that we spurned and dishonored and hated, God himself, he provides the Lamb. He provides the way back in.

And that brings us to the second thing we behold about this Lamb. If first we behold his source, that he's the Lamb of God, then second here we behold his accomplishment. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away our sin.

But how does that work? How does he bring about such an accomplishment? Well, again, think of the Passover. You see, the Passover Lamb was sacrificed as a substitute.

[21:17] God's terrible judgment meant the death of the firstborn. But in place of the firstborn, there would be a Lamb who would stand in its place and die.

God's judgment would fall on the Lamb instead of the child and in so doing, God would prove himself just and merciful, just because the penalty of death still comes down and merciful because the penalty is borne away by another.

But of course, an actual, literal, bleeding Lamb could never really serve as a proper substitute for a human being, right? I mean, we kind of get that. All those sacrifices in the Old Testament, the Passover, the daily sacrifices in the Temple, the annual Day of Atonement, all that could never really take away sin, right?

This is what the writer to Hebrews says. Look, if it had really worked, they would have stopped doing it because it would have worked, but they had to keep doing it because it didn't really get to the root of the problem.

All these sacrifices were just pointers to a greater sacrifice. After all, what good is an animal when the real lawbreaker is a human being? You know, as much as you want to try, you can't pay off your credit card debt with a goat or a few dozen eggs.

[22:40] I mean, you can go down to Bank of America with a grocery bag full of animal products and they are not going to release you from the debt that you accrued. And friends, what makes us think we could pay our spiritual debt in the same way?

Wouldn't justice ultimately require a human to pay the proper penalty for human sin? But then again, would even a human be enough?

After all, this is an offense against God, is it not? This sin which we have done. And that means that this penalty we are under is infinite because it's an infinite God whom we've offended.

And who could pay such an infinite penalty besides the infinite God himself? So you see this dilemma we're in when it comes to the reality of our sin. A human must pay it and yet only God can only God can pay it.

We need a substitute that's both fully human and at the same time fully God. And where on earth are we going to find such a substitute like that? Search the history of religion, friends.

[24:00] look and look and you will not find the one that you need. But then the words of John ring out.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh fully human and fully God. He's the one who can do it.

Do you see now why Christianity is so unique? It is unlike every other religion. Deep down every other religion or worldview says one of two things basically. Either it says God or ultimate reality is so holy that you have to earn your way up to Him through your own sacrifice or your own good works or your own sincere devotion, whatever it is.

Or it says God is loving. He doesn't require justice. He just accepts everyone and everything. But only Christianity comes along and says no, God is holy and loving.

So holy that He requires a payment for sin. So loving that He makes the payment for us in our place. Behold the Lamb who takes away our sin.

[25:20] Let's go to the third thing that we behold about this Lamb. Third, we see not just His source, not just His accomplishment, but we see His scope. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Now the world in John's gospel is a bit of a technical term. It's John's way of talking about not just the sort of big round thing that we're standing on or just all the people out there, but it's John's way of talking about human society arranged without any reference to God.

It's His way of talking about human society arranged in hostile rebellion against God. It's a negative term, the world, for John. And it is for this world, this sinful, fallen world, that Jesus came.

Friends, here's the good news, that the atoning work of the Lamb is not merely for the religious and the morally upright. It's not for the deserving.

It's for the undeserving. It's for the world. When Jesus was born in a manger, when He lived a perfect human life in our midst, when He died on a cross, when He was raised on the third day in glory, when He ascended to the Father, all of that was done not for the sake of just a special couple of people who happened to have all their ducks in a row and all their cards right.

[26:57] No. It was for lost and hopeless and guilty and flawed and moral failures like you and me. It was for the world. And it was so effectual.

It was so powerful. It was so competent what He did that the sins of the world were taken away. There's no sin of yours so great, so heinous, that His blood, His sacrificial death cannot cleanse.

There's no habitual failure too repeated that it cannot be taken away by Christ, the Lamb of God. All who receive Him, all who believe in His name, John says, their sins will be taken away.

They'll be reconciled to God and made His sons and daughters. the curse. The curse is lifted. The guilt is done away. Friends, if you've put your trust in Jesus, your sins have been taken away.

Let me end with three points of application. First, to you, if you're spiritually seeking or if you're new to Christianity. As you behold Jesus this morning, what do you see?

[28:21] What are you looking at when you look at Jesus? Do you see merely a good teacher, a profound spiritual guide, or are you beginning to behold Jesus as He really is? Are you starting to see that there's something unique about Him?

That He's the Son of God and the one and only Lamb of God? Friend, you need to know that Christianity isn't ultimately about new rules to follow or new rituals to perform.

It's ultimately about uniting your life to the crucified and risen Jesus through faith and living in an ongoing relationship with Him. So what holds you back from believing in Christ?

Why would you not take hold of this Lamb of God who's come in grace to take away your sin and reconcile you to God? Let me encourage you to talk to someone about your questions, your doubts, your fears.

If you came with a friend this morning, I'm sure they'd be more than happy to share with you their own story, their own questions, their own doubts, their own fears that they had as they were coming to understand who Jesus is, as they were beginning to place their trust in Him.

[29:30] In fact, maybe you're ready to do that this morning yourself. And if you're wondering how to start, how do I start in a relationship with Christ? There are some prayers in the bulletin to help you get started. Feel free to come up front after the service.

We'd be happy to talk with you and pray with you. Talk to someone about what you're going through. Let others help you in this journey that you're on. It's not something you're meant to do on your own.

Second point of application for those who are trusting in Christ already, as you behold Christ taking away your sin, friends, let that increase your desire to be done with all the remaining sin in your life.

Don't hold fast to the very thing that Christ died to take away. Be done with it. Be done with sin. Put it behind you. He's taken it all away by His grace.

Now live into that freedom and that life that He's purchased for you. Behold the Lamb of God. Let love for Him increase and let your love for sin wither and die.

[30 : 42] Do you want to know freedom from your besetting sins? Keep beholding the Lamb who was slain for you. Keep taking in the wonder of His achievement for you.

Let that stir in your heart a passion, a love for Him, a desire for Him, a desire for the things of God and the kingdom of God that will cause the things of your old life to pale so much in comparison.

Third thing, perhaps this Christmas season you, something that you hold very dear has been taken away from you. But friend, no matter what losses you've experienced, remember, amidst all of that, this core reality that He's taken away your sins.

Even if you feel like God has taken away something very precious to you, He's taken away your sins. behold the Lamb of God. See how deeply He loves you.

See how much hope He has granted you. You're free from sin. No matter your present circumstances, you have reason to be thankful. You have reason even to rejoice.

[32 : 04] You're reconciled to God. The curse has been lifted. Your guilt is gone. The Holy Spirit lives inside of you. You will one day reign with Him forever. forever. So friends, no matter what has caught your attention this season, no matter where you're tempted to look amidst the joys and distractions and sorrows and disappointments, let's fix our gaze on Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And in beholding Him, may we testify with John that this is indeed the Son of God, the Savior, the King. Let's pray. Amen. Oh Lord, we confess that in our own strength, in our own vision, we don't know You.

Lord, so often in this passage, John confesses that in and of himself, he didn't recognize in Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb. God, that is true of us too.

In our own selves, we don't see it. We don't recognize it. So we need You, God. We need You to come. And we need You to open the eyes of our hearts so that we might see Him.

Lord, as we come to the Lord's table, I pray that this would be a means that You use to help us to see and taste and to behold again the mighty Lamb of God.

[33 : 39] who's taken away our sins. Amen. Well, I wonder if those who are helping to serve communion would come up. this is one of the great means that God has given us to do exactly what we've been talking about this morning, to behold the Lamb of God.

That Jesus, on Passover, gathered with His friends, with His disciples, and He took that Passover meal that was about God liberating them, and He gave them its real interpretation. He said, this is what Passover is really all about.

It's about a lamb who's going to be broken, and it's about blood that's going to be poured out. It's about my body that's going to be broken, and it's about my blood that's going to be poured out for you and for your sins. And then He told His followers to keep doing this act over and over and over and over again.

Why? Because we're very forgetful people, aren't we? It's like we have a hole and we leak all the time. Jesus said, here it is.

Take this, eat it, drink it, and be filled with the remembrance of what I've done for you. So friend, if you're here this morning and you're a Christian, if you've turned from sin, if you've turned from trying to be your own Lord and trying to be your own Savior and trying to make your own way with your life, if you've given up on that pursuit and you've trusted in Christ as your hope, as your treasure, as your Savior, if that's true of you, then this table is for you.

[35 : 11] Take this time, to repent of your sins again and receive this provision from God and remember the Lamb who was slain for you. If you can say yes to that and you haven't been baptized, let me encourage you to think about baptism.

As we take up the Lord's Supper, this is a way of identifying with Jesus and with His people. And if you haven't been baptized, that's your next step, to identify publicly with Christ in baptism.

Let me read a couple words. Jesus says this. He says, Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 11.

He says, For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread. When He had given thanks, He broke it and said, This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way also He took the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

[36:17] So you see, friends, this is a table for believers to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. If you're here and you're not a believer, then let me encourage you to just pass the plates by as it comes.

We're going to pass out the bread first. It's going to go around and then we're going to eat together and then we're going to pass out the cup and we're going to drink together. And if you haven't placed your faith in Christ, then just pass the plate by and instead, use this time, use the prayers in the bulletin to do some spiritual seeking, some self-assessment.

Where are you with God? Instead of taking this bread and taking this cup, take Christ as yours this morning. Let me invite those who are downstairs to come on up.

If you're downstairs, you can come on up to the lobby and we'll serve you there. Jonathan, would you pray for the bread for us? Thanks. Dear Lord God, you knew that in our human weaknesses and sinful preoccupations that we would neglect to remember our Savior.

and by your grace, you have given us this act and this... ..