

From the Pulpit  
Salem First Presbyterian Church

## Look to the Lamb

John 1: 29-42

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Visiting a Wool Museum in Geelong, near Melbourne Australia, and having owned some sheep myself, black Welsh Mountain sheep and beautiful Romneys, I was amazed to see the quality of wool given by the Australian Merinos, (who are not the most *beautiful* sheep you'd ever see). In the museum, there was a sample of the most valuable wool ever sold at auction. It looked like angel hair, fine and golden white, as though someone had shorn a mermaid. This wool had brought more than a million dollars a bale, bought by an Italian designer to make fine suits. The lambs from which it came were nearly priceless.

Our gospel reading from John likewise speaks of a lamb beyond price, in **one of the most beautiful images for Christ in the whole of Scripture**. He speaks of **Christ as the lamb of God**. John the Baptist sees Jesus walking toward him, and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

What would the lamb signify to people in John's day? It would have brought to mind a powerful chapter in the history of the Hebrew people. You may know the story from Sunday School: the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt, and Moses tells Pharaoh, "let my people go." When Pharaoh refuses, a series of plagues are sent, but his heart remains hard. Finally, there is a plague on the firstborn children. There is a chilling scene in the classic film "The Ten Commandments," in which a mist creeps over the ground, going into each Egyptian house, and crying is heard as death touches each family. But the children of Israel are safe; God had instructed them to slaughter a lamb, and to paint a bit of its blood on the doorposts, so the angel of death would pass them by. And so to this day, on the anniversary of the Passover, Jewish families recall the lamb, sacrificed to save them.

It's a powerful image. In John's gospel, he gives a slightly different chronology to the crucifixion of Jesus from that in the other gospels, so that when **Jesus dies on the cross, it is at the very time the sacrificial Passover lambs are being put to death** in the Temple.<sup>1</sup> John was more interested in writing theology than history. He used the poetry of metaphor to link Christ with the lambs, to tell the depth of what Christ has done for us, "The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The Passover lamb. It is in one sense an image that sits awkwardly in our culture today, where many of us know someone who is not just vegetarian, but also vegan, which can present a

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<sup>1</sup> John 19: 31-36.

challenge when having them over for dinner. I remember when our children were in high school and college, you couldn't be sure from week to week whether the girls were going to be firmly vegetarian or back to wanting bacon for breakfast.

Amid that kind of cultural background, the idea of a sacrificial lamb seems a bit earthy. Yet our lives are grounded in sacrifice, in that the animals, and you could argue even the plants we eat, give their lives for our survival.

The Lamb of God. What this means for us is a bit mystical, as well. It is a kind of sacrament, the divine shown in the earthly. Christ, our Passover lamb. It means for us that by faith, even at the hour of our death, we can look to Christ who shed his blood for us. **For his sake, the angel of death will pass over us.** Though we die, we look to the lamb of God to save us in the end, inscribing our names in the Lamb's book of life.

And if we ponder it in our hearts, we will find deep comfort here. In his play, "Julius Caesar," Shakespeare wrote, "Cowards die many times before their deaths; The valiant never taste of death but once." To know that the lamb of God has shed his blood for us **can keep us from that underlying fear of death that haunts all who are mortal.** While we may still fear the unknown, we know the one who has kept us in life will keep us even in death. There is a serenity in the faces of those who know that assurance deeply.

"The lamb of God who takes away sin." For John in his day, this image would also call to mind the daily sacrifice of lambs in the Temple, to ask God's forgiveness for the sins of the people.<sup>2</sup> As people of faith, we might be making such sacrifices still, were it not for the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. The writer of the book of Hebrews says, "**Christ died 'once for all,'**" bringing an end to the need for sacrifice.

Again, we touch on the edge of mystery. I remember when I was a student intern in Washington D.C., and there was a man in our choir who sang with the Army chorus. Once he sang for us the old hymn that says it well, "what can take away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

There is good news here, as we are among those whose sin is taken away. So many of us live our lives **weighed down by the memory and burden of mistakes we've made.** A harsh, impatient word to a child, years ago; the memory of how we treated a parent when we were teenagers; the sins of our youth, perhaps the failure of a relationship we tried hard at but could never make work. There are so many old regrets that weigh us down.

But the good news is that God does not leave us in regret, Christ has come as the lamb of God,

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, commentary on John, pp. 63ff.

<sup>3</sup> Even now, in kosher cooking, meat is cured so the blood is removed. This is because the blood is considered the life, the life-blood, of the animal.

who takes away the world's sin, and our sin as well. Another image for what Christ has done is that of **the scapegoat**, a goat that was driven off into the wilderness on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, **bearing the sins of the people.**<sup>4</sup>

For all our old hurts and regrets, Christ comes to forgive. In God's eyes, because of Christ's death on the cross, it is as though your slate is wiped clean. Sin is blotted out, all is new again. God has revealed it; the challenge for each of us is this--**can we let ourselves believe it?**

Another image of the lamb from John's day is **the conquering lamb**, a symbol from the Maccabean revolts of the Jews, only a recent memory for John's generation. We don't hear much about these revolts, because they happened in the time between the Old and New Testaments. But they featured the conquering lamb.

We see the image in classic carvings, the lamb carries a banner, "agnus dei," the lamb of God, victorious over darkness and death. It is something of an odd image, as we don't think of lambs being particularly fierce. It reminds me of what they called the Portland hockey team in the 1920's; somehow the name didn't last--they were called the **fighting Rosebuds!**

A conquering lamb has something of that same feel, subverting our expectations of power, drawing on the power of love rather than the power of the sword. By seeing Jesus as the lamb, John was undercutting those who expected the Messiah to come with military and political power to free God's people from the tyranny of Rome. Ironically, Rome with all its power, symbolized by the eagle of war, went the way of all empire, falling into decline and decay. Yet the lamb who died on the cross by decree of Roman power still reigns in countless hearts across the world.

On this weekend when our nation pauses to remember the legacy of **Martin Luther King Jr.**, we might think of him as **another who followed in the way of Christ the Lamb**, choosing as Christ did a path of non-violence to try to bring about the reforms he sought.

Martin Luther King was the youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for peace, at the age of 35, only a few years before his death. Accepting that prize, he said some things that show his connection to the One who came as lamb of God.

He said, "this award...is a profound recognition that nonviolence is the answer to the crucial ...question of our time - - **the need... to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression.**"

We hear a bit more of his strong rhetoric for justice:

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<sup>4</sup> As described in Leviticus 16.

“I refuse to accept the idea that [we are] mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround us. I refuse to accept the view that [humanity] is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word...and the lion and the lamb shall lie down together.”

In the end, Martin Luther King laid down his life for his dream, following Christ the lamb of God, who gave his life that each of us might live. Like the disciples called by Jesus, **may we, too, live our lives as followers of the lamb**, called to show his love and share his way with all whose paths will cross our own this week. And may we be confident in the midst of whatever life brings; his is the victory, his the kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Let us pray: O Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, help us to know deeply in our hearts that you died to set us right with God, to bear the burdens that weigh us down. Help us look to the lamb in all of our life, and grant us your peace both now and at the last. Through Christ the lamb we pray. Amen.

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