

## The Lamb of God

[John 1:29-34](#)

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When John spoke this phrase, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," it had to be a startling announcement. Have you ever heard a startling announcement that made you take notice that something special was happening. In 1983 just after my ordination in the Presbyterian Church, I was asked to lead a communion service in a convalescent home. My daughter, Tamara, was four years old at that time. She loved to be with people, and they loved to be with her. So I took her with me to the service. As we were singing some of the old hymns, the people were reacting in various ways: there were those who were paying very close attention, totally ambulatory and paying careful notice of what was happening. There were those who were in wheelchairs, who were semiconscious and others who had just fallen asleep and were enjoying the peace of the moment. Tamara loved to dance to the singing. So there she was dancing in her little Victorian lace dress, which was wonderful. When I got up to speak the homily for the communion, she kept dancing. I was having a hard time getting people to pay attention to what I was saying, so I eased over to her and took her by the hand and tried to get her to sit down. But she would not be deterred, she kept dancing, she had been so moved. There was some conflict beginning to rise about who was really going to win this struggle, and one of the older ladies in the back in a wheelchair who had been, well, from my perspective, sound asleep the whole time, suddenly awoke as if startled and said, "Oh shut up and let the little girl dance."

I know what some of you are thinking. It can be startling--things said that we do not anticipate. Behold, King James English, pay careful attention. Look into this person. Watch carefully. Stop your life and see. Linger and reflect on this, take a long, intentional intimate look. Simmer and soak in his presence, come close and contemplate, draw near and dwell with him, approach, encounter and engage, walk with him, sit at his feet, observe and listen to what he has to say, examine, explore, and abide in his presence. Behold!

Even if you weren't in agreement about the results, when Mel Gibson produced and directed his movie, "The Passion of the Christ," it was the result of years, consistent months of reflection and attention paid to the time of Jesus' life, especially those last hours of his passion. He beheld Jesus as tightly and as closely as he could, and he wanted to give us every attention to detail to the Lamb of God.

In his book about the Rembrandt painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," Henri Nouwen tells the story of a seemingly insignificant encounter he had one day, and he noticed the poster of the painting upon the door. He was seated there, and he had just come back from a trip. He was tired and feeling rather lonely and he said, "I saw a man there in a great red cloak tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling before him. I could not take my eyes away; I felt drawn by the intimacy of the moment. But most of all, it was those hands, the old man's hands as they touched the boy's shoulders, that reached me in a place that I had never been reached before. I felt a sense of belonging, a place where I could call home." Because he was moved by that moment and caught off guard, startled by the impact, he had to spend more time in front of that painting and so on a trip to Russia he went to St. Petersburg and was able to have four hours seated in a wonderful, red velvet chair, just looking at the painting.

Behold, see, look at what is there and let it change your life. Notice that the statement is startling because it is not behold the Son of God, it is not behold the Word made flesh, it is not behold the King of Israel, or not behold the Messiah. It is not behold the great warrior who will make everything right or the judge who will make justice in all the world. It is the behold the Lamb of God. That had to have sounded strange to the ears of the Israeli people: the messiah is the lamb. The lion of Judea is the lamb.

It's the weak person, the meek person. It is not the one who is the predator, but it is the prey. It is not the victor but the victim. What kind of God is this? It's as though Jesus is a living oxymoron: the Lamb of God. How could this be in our world where we still have many people who believe in the cosmic impact of the Darwinian principle, survival of the fittest. An eternal Word that is woundable and accessible and vulnerable. A God who is not godlike, a God who dies rather than kills, a God who forgives rather than condemns, a God who heals rather than wounds, a God who serves rather than controls, a God who is humble rather than arrogant, a God who sacrifices rather than making other people sacrifice to him.

As C.S. Lewis so adequately represented it in the "Lion and the Witch and the Wardrobe," Aslan, the lion, lays down his life to save others. John picks up this theme in the Revelation, the Apocalypse, where he sees in heaven the Lamb that's on the throne with the eternal God. The people around the throne are singing the wonderful worship anthem, "You are worthy for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God, saints from every tribe, language, people and nation. You have made these diverse people to be a kingdom and priests serving our God and they together will reign on the earth. Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing." And so every creature in heaven, on earth and under the earth will sing to the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb the blessing, honor, glory and might forever and ever.

The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. The sin is lifted up and taken away. How it is possible for the Lamb of God to lift all the sins of the world and float them into nothingness. It was because he voluntarily gave himself to be the focus of the violence of sin. He willingly put himself on the block to be attacked. Isaiah 53 clearly describes the moment. There is no majesty that we should pay special attention to him. There's nothing attractive about his appearance. Despised and rejected, he is a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity. We didn't think he was all that important. He carried our diseases, and he bore our infirmities. We considered him afflicted and struck down by God. God's against him. He was wounded for our mistakes and crushed by our sins. Upon him was punishment that made us whole.

The Lamb of God brings us into the freedom of being at one with the God who loves us. And that atonement is because Jesus

willingly died. We killed him. We were there. We were a part of the crowd. We were a part of those who denied and betrayed and deserted him. We were the ones in the crowd who said, "Crucify him." We were a part of the military, the government, and the religious who washed their hands of him and said he must die. Jesus takes away our sin because he willingly submits himself to all our cruelty. Jesus carries away our sin because he refuses to participate in it. He does not condemn the sinner, but he pronounces forgiveness. He does not return evil for evil; he lays down his life even for his enemies. He confronts evil and the satanic. He exorcises demons. He washes the feet of those who will desert and betray him. He is willing to serve those who are willing to hurt him.

How does he take away the sin? He takes away all the sin: the personal and communal sins, the organizational sins that gather because we develop patterns and principles and procedures that keep people from justice. The sins of money, sex, and power. He puts all those sins away. He takes the sins of omission, the things that we have not done that we should have done, away. I received a letter a week ago that is a reflection from the Moabit Sonnets by Albrecht Haushofer, who was one of the Hitler assassination conspirators who failed and was taken into custody and shot in 1945. The sonnets are a reflection of his own guilt. "I bear lightly that of which the court has called me guilty: the planning and the caring. Criminal I would have been had I not planned as my own duty for the peoples' morals. Yet I am guilty otherwise than you think. I should have recognized my duty sooner. More sharply named disaster as disaster, I withheld my judgment too long. In my heart I do accuse myself for long I deceived my own conscience. I lied to myself and I lied to others, early on I knew the whole range of misery. I gave warning not loud enough or clear enough. Yes, I am guilty."

Some of us just stand by and watch bad things happen. It is important to realize that the mass we inherit historically from the ancient church begins with the Kyrie Eleison, "Lord, have mercy upon us," a prayer recognizing our sin and asking God to intervene. And ends with the Agnes Dei, "Lamb of God, take away the sins of the world and have mercy upon us." J.S. Bach in his B Minor Mass weaves together the beginning and ending themes. So you know that the cry for mercy at the beginning is met by the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world at the end.

How does Jesus take away the sin? Jesus allows us to confess, to tell the truth about the things we are doing that are not right. The direction that comes from Jesus is a model that we should not return evil for evil. We should pray for our enemies, we should love our neighbor, we should sacrifice ourselves and not sacrifice others. Jesus shows how the sins of the world can be taken away. Jesus made the sacrifice once for all, and we celebrate that today in the Lord's Supper. We are not like some of our Christian brothers and sisters who believe that the sacrifice goes on day after day, but we believe that the sacrifice was done once for all, and we remember that today. We see that the Lord himself is present in a real way to invite us to the table. The sacrifice is finished, and we have the privilege of living into that finished sacrifice as we partake of the Lord's supper.

What is our response today as we share in the supper? John the Baptist understood it. It wasn't long before he was in prison and facing death himself. When he said the Lamb of God, he must have had a growing awareness that he too must be a lamb led to the slaughter. That's one of the hard things about following Jesus. When we follow a lamb, we become a lamb. And that can frighten us. But when we are dwelling in the love of the Lamb, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are moved to the point of freedom to be able to give our lives up voluntarily.

Rodney Stark in his great book, "The Rise of Christianity," describes one of the reasons the church grew so fast in the early years after the apostolic church. During the great plagues, the pagans had no way to deal with these disasters, so they ran away. "Get me out of here, I don't want to deal with those who are sick." With their friends and family lying in the streets and dying in homes, they left town. But Christians, who knew the Lamb of God, knew Jesus would stay, pray, and care for these people. So they would stay and nurture some of them back to health even if it cost them their own lives. And people quickly recognized the power of sacrifice to love.

Sometimes we participate in taking away sins unintentionally. In 1971, I went with a men's ministry to a prison where we held communion for the prisoners. We sang hymns and celebrated the Lord's Supper. And as we went out and those heavy doors closed behind us, I was the last one to leave. There in the dark on that moonlit night, reaching into my pocket, I realized I didn't have my keys -- they were locked in the car. Fear came rolling over my life. I thought, "I am out here alone, what am I going to do?" The coyotes are moving in more closely. And it was as if the Lord had spoken to me clearly, "You're right next to a prison and they have specialists for breaking and entering here." So, I thought, why not, I'll go up to the door and I'll knock, "Do you have anybody in here because they have been breaking into cars?" They said, "How many would you like?" And sure enough within in a matter of a few minutes, I was in my car, thanking the criminal for breaking into it. I reflect on that and realize it was a redemptive moment, taking away the man's sins because he had something constructive to do.

Desmond Tutu in his wonderful book, "No Future Without Forgiveness," about the results of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa after Apartheid, tells many stories about the need for the people to tell the truth even about the most atrocious and ugly incidents. To face the beast in the eye. He tells the story of Beth Savage, who was badly injured when a grenade was thrown into a country club where she was meeting with a few other people to plan on how they could participate in bringing justice in the inequities of apartheid. Several people were killed, and she was so badly injured she had to have open heart surgery and was in the intensive care unit for months. Her children when she got home had to bathe, clothe and feed her. Her parents were so dismayed by this because they had raised their daughter to really care about justice and equity and, look what happened to her. Sacrifice because of the discord. Her father died of a broken heart. But, she says this, in telling the truth to the commission, "It's not important to me but I've said this to many people, what I'd really like is to meet the man face to face who threw that grenade, in an attitude of forgiveness and hope that he could forgive me, too. And Bishop Tutu said it was amazing how many people who had been victims had responded with forgiving magnanimity. To be able to say because of Jesus Christ, I want to meet my abuser and forgive him.

How does the Lamb of God take away the sin of the world? Through forgiveness, not returning evil for evil. There may be a person or group in your life that you need to forgive today. You need to take some time and think about Jesus and find a way to forgive, even if

they have done terrible things. May God give you the freedom to follow the Lamb of God, to become a part of the Lamb's ministry of forgiveness. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Amen.