

+ Epiphany 2 + Sermon preached at Saint Paul Ev. Lutheran Church (WELS)  
Tomah WI on January 19 & 22, 2017. Pastor Curt S. Backhaus.

***Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!***

John 1:29-41 | EHV

*The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I was talking about when I said, 'The one coming after me outranks me because he existed before me.' I myself did not know who he was, but I came baptizing with water so that he would be revealed to Israel."*

*John also testified, "I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from heaven and remain on him. I myself did not recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'The one on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I saw this myself and have testified that this is the Son of God."*

*The next day, John was standing there again with two of his disciples. When John saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*

*When Jesus turned around and saw them following him, he asked, "What are you looking for?"*

*They said to him, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"*

*He told them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying. They stayed with him that day. It was about the tenth hour.*

*Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his own brother Simon and say to him, "We have found the Messiah!" (which is translated "the Christ").*

You will recall that last week we met up with John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan River. He was preaching a baptism of repentance and welcoming a whole bunch of people --one after another--- into the kingdom of heaven.

But then the most amazing thing happened. In this one particular washing with water, the heavens broke open, the Holy Spirit descended on this Jesus of Nazareth in the form of a dove, and God the Father declared, "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased!"

And today, John just can't stop talking about it. He's like your best friend sharing some new experience or insight. "I myself did not realize who he was... I didn't recognize him... But then! "The dove descended... And I saw this myself..." Quick! "Look! There he is! "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

So, here's an Epiphany puzzle for you to solve today. When it finally comes time for the Forerunner to fulfill his destiny and reveal the Christ to the world, why does he point to Jesus and say, "Lamb of God" instead of "Son of God"?

I guess that depends. Do you want the bad news or the good news? Which do you need to hear?

John has a well-earned reputation for being rough on his listeners. Remember? "You brood of vipers! Who told you to flee from the coming wrath..? The ax is already at the root of the trees! Start producing fruit in keeping with repentance or you're going to be cut down and thrown into the fire...! Shape up! He's coming soon --with vengeance and divine retribution! And he's got his winnowing fork in his hand!"

And there is certainly a time and place for that doom and gloom message, "Look! The Son of God who comes in judgment of the sins of the world!?" In fact, it's exactly what we need to hear if our consciences have been dulled by willful, repeated and intentional sinning. Or if our hearts are hardened with smug self-righteousness. Jesus is none other than the eternal Son of God. Very soon he is coming back in all his glory to judge the living and the dead. And you better be ready.

So, stop hating! Stop hurting! Quit looking the other way when you see someone in need! Share! Be good! Do good! Love your neighbor! Quit lusting, enticing, compromising! Stop overindulging! Quit gossiping, lying, coveting...

But what if you can't? What if all your best intentions have left you with is an even bigger load of guilt? All those regrets. Those skeletons in your past. The habits that you'd like to break but still haven't conquered. Those situations where you know better, but you find yourself slipping up time and again...

Then learn this. Our problem isn't so much our sins (in the plural), it's our sin (in the singular), namely our sinfulness. We tend to be preoccupied with our sins –what we think, what we say, what we do that is contrary to God's Law. We agonize, at least sometimes, on whether this is a sin or if that's a sin, usually when we are trying to justify our actions or just plain get away with something.

But our sins are only symptoms; our sin is the condition. If all you focus on is your sins and if you keep thinking that you'll just get better or get over sinning or get rid of your sins by working harder, praying harder, believing harder, sacrificing more, striving more, then you're not engaging the disease. You're just trying to battle an outbreak here or there. You're struggling to manage your symptoms. But what you really need is something, someone to take care of your underlying condition, the core and root cause of all that's really wrong.

What we really need is a cure for what ails us; without it we'll certainly quit in despair or curse God and die in one final act of defiance. Either way, we'd be hopelessly lost, eternally damned.

What a joy then to hear John preach today! To listen. To take his good news to heart! "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus doesn't come to destroy us and this wicked world by purging sin away. He comes to take sin away. He comes to take our sin, our sinfulness on himself.

Think about it: He feared, loved, and trusted God the Father above all things. Then he became the idolater. He lived and spoke the Name of God in truth and purity. Then he became the blasphemer. He worshipped perfectly, honoring God's Word, gladly hearing and following it. Then he became the Sabbath breaker. He was obedient to his parents and rendered to Caesar what is Caesar's. Then he became the rebel, the disobedient one. He never laid hands on another human being except in healing and blessing. Then he became the murderer. He was chaste and pure in thought, word, and deed. Then he became the adulterer. He never cheated. He was never greedy. Never robbed anyone of anything. Then he became the thief. He spoke the truth with every breath. Then he became the liar. He was content to live by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God. Then he became the restless coveter.

He became what I am. What you are. Your stand-in. Your substitute. Your salvation. The cure for what would certainly damn you by becoming your sin, bearing it like the Lamb of God he is. And taking it all away. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, purifies us from all sin."

He's not just the redeemer of the redeemable or the Savior of the salvageable. Not just for some, some religious or some sensible few, but for all. "He is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sin but for the sin of the world!"

And what is so amazing is that Jesus continues to be that for us and do that for us in his powerful, eternal life-giving and life-renewing gospel as he keeps pointing us away from our sin, our pride, our self-imposed piety and to himself again and again as the one sure, certain hope we have for peace with God and heaven.

Look, the Lamb of God we meet up with in the Word: "Though your sins were like scarlet, they are now as white as snow... for I have forgiven your wickedness and remember your sins no more..."

The Lamb of God who comes to us at the font, pouring out forgiveness and his Spirit, "cleansing us with water and the Word, purifying us with Spirit and with fire."

The Lamb of God who nourishes our souls with that same forgiveness time and again here at the altar: "Here, taste and see that the Lord is good! The Lamb of God! That one perfect, all atoning sacrifice, this body that was given and this blood that was shed for you, for your forgiveness!"

The Lamb of God who saves others, too, as we witness and point to him –like John showing his 2 disciples the Messiah... Like Andrew going to find his brother, Simon Peter. Like Phillip seeking out Nathaniel.... Like you, too.

Point them to Jesus: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Amen.