

Second Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): “The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sins of the World”

John 1:29-42

January 14-15, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This is the “lamb of God” who sits on the armchair in my study. It was a gift many years ago from our church friends who attended the annual convention of the Women of the ELCA -- in Seattle, I think. Edith Derres, Louise Moenke, Barbara Tillson, were probably all included. Maybe Nancy Marvits, and others I’m not remembering, because it was so long ago. This little lamb is sturdier than it looks, thankfully, because it’s been well-loved. When a parishioner or a prospective bride or groom sits in the chair on whose arm it perches, it often gets pushed off and lands on the floor. And when children visit, it’s touched and hugged and played with. I love this little lamb of God. I usually think of it as **us**, lambs in the Good Shepherd’s flock. But today’s Gospel reminds us that our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is Himself the Lamb of God.

What does it mean to **you** that Jesus is the Lamb of God?

John the Baptist gives us this shorthand:

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”
(John 1:29b)

‘Should sound familiar, it’s what we sing every weekend at worship, before we receive Holy Communion. John’s words have become the *Agnus Dei*, Latin for “Lamb of God.” There are a couple different ways we can try to explain how the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world.

One is Temple worship in Jesus’ time. Lambs were one of the animals sacrificed on the altar, as the Temple priest prayed for the intention of the person who purchased the lamb. ‘Could be an expression of thanks for a blessing, could be a plea for forgiveness of sins. Before we know

it, it'll be Ash Wed., and we'll hear again David's heartfelt cry for forgiveness of **his** sins, in Psalm 51. Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

Generous in love—God, give grace! Huge in mercy—wipe out my bad record. Scrub away my guilt, soak out my sins in your laundry. I know how bad I've been; my sins are staring me down. (Psalm 51:1-3)

Another "take" on Jesus as "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*" comes from the Passover story. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. God saw their misery and called Moses to meet with Pharaoh and demand the people's freedom. Pharaoh refused and refused, despite a whole parade of plagues sent to make the Egyptians miserable and to force Pharaoh's hand. The final plague is the death of the firstborn male in every household. God directs Moses to command the people to prepare a lamb for their last meal in the land of slavery. They are to spread **the lamb's blood** on the doorposts and lintels of their home, to cue the angel of death to pass over that household and leave it untouched.

For the Jewish people, Passover is a celebration of God's "mighty hand and outstretched arm" freeing them from slavery. It's not just about the historic liberation that happened way back then, though; Passover celebrates God spiritually liberating God's people **today**. In that way, it's like our celebration of Eucharist, of Holy Communion. We're not play acting what happened way back then at the Last Supper. We're receiving Jesus' gifts of His Body and Blood here and now, in the present, gifts given not just to our ancestors then, but to us today. Jesus is really present to us.

Today's Gospel is from the 4th Gospel, in which there is no institution of the Lord's Supper at the Last Supper. In the other 3 Gospels Jesus is celebrating the seder, the Passover meal, with His friends. In the 4th Gospel the seder is actually on Good Friday evening. We know this because we are told that Jesus is dying on the cross as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the

Temple. Jesus is *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,”* who liberates us from the slavery of sin, whose death is the ransom that results in the forgiveness of our sins.

In preaching on this Gospel Martin Luther is **emphatic** that the Lamb of God has taken away **all** the sins of **all** of us. He touches upon the worry of some that what they’ve done is so **awful** it doesn’t qualify for forgiveness. Or that God loves **almost** everybody, but not them.

You may say, “Who knows whether Christ also bore my sin? I have no doubt that He bore the sin of St. Peter, St. Paul, and other saints; these were pious people. Oh, that I were like St. Peter or St. Paul!” Don’t you hear what St. John says in our text: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”?... It follows that your sins must be included... Don’t you hear? There is nothing missing from the Lamb. He bears all the sins of the world since its inception; this implies that He also bears yours, and offers you grace.¹

We become members of the flock of this saving, redeeming Lamb of God in Holy Baptism. Savanna Elizabeth is baptized into Christ this Lord’s Day. After the water is poured, water joined to the Word, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” I will anoint her head with fragrant chrism, tracing the sign of the cross on her brow, saying, “Savanna Elizabeth, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” She is already loved in Heaven as well as on earth, loved beyond all telling, loved beyond our knowing. But in faith we believe that through this holy sacrament she is mystically joined to the redeeming death and life-giving resurrection of Christ. Luther called Holy Baptism a “soul bath,”² “divine and heavenly water in which God Himself is at work, cleansing us from sin, saving us from eternal death, and giving us life eternal.”³ We celebrate Savanna Elizabeth’s rebirth in Christ, her sacramental inclusion as a lamb of God in the flock of the Good Shepherd who is also [pointing to the crucifix], *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* Amen

¹Jaroslav Pelikan, ed. *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 22. (St. Louis, Concordia, 1957), p. 169.

²Ibid, p. 174.

³Ibid, p. 181.

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