

John 1:29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” 32 And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

John 1:35 The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” 37 The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. 38 When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” 39 He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. 40 One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. 41 He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). 42 He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

A MESSY FAITH

A professor of worship instructed his seminary student on performing a baptism. He said, “During baptism, splash the water around, get everything good and soaked. Let the congregation experience the baptism in a physical way.”

When the student became a pastor, he put that advice into practice at his first church. And this resulted in the first anonymous note of his career. It said, “Spill water on our carpet again, and there will be real trouble.”

Unfortunately there are many in the church who are ... how shall we put it ... compulsive. Everything must be just so. No spilled water on the carpet, even if it happens during baptism.

We need to remember that the struggle for faith has always been messy. For example, think of how the Israelites worshipped God. God told them,

“Build a great temple where my name shall dwell and bring animals into the temple, small animals like doves and large animals like bulls ... and slaughter them there. Take their blood and pour it over the sides of the altar.”

That doesn't sound like a neat and tidy faith to me. I'm glad we don't do that any more. Can you imagine learning how to bleed an animal as a part of your seminary education?

THE LAMB OF GOD

But, have you ever wondered why we don't do that any more?

Christians don't do that any more because we believe that Jesus made a greater sacrifice for us on the cross. That was what John the Baptist meant when he pointed at Jesus and said, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Jesus is our Passover lamb. His blood was spilled for us. The gospel of John uses this image of Jesus throughout.

For example, in John's passion narrative Jesus is condemned to death by Pilate at noon on the Passover preparation day. The very hour when priests began to slaughter Passover lambs in the temple, Jesus is condemned to death.

Of course we also see this image of Christ in our sacrament of the Lord's Supper. "This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you." It's a very John the Baptist moment. We point to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

This message stands at the center of the Christian faith. But it is also a very difficult message to hear. The language of sacrifice is familiar, but it is also jarring. It certainly doesn't fit our idea of what a Messiah should do.

We're not comfortable with the idea of a Messiah who dies in such a horrible way. How can a sacrifice like this bring about salvation?

Those who have dared to follow Jesus have struggled with this question from the very beginning. And we still struggle.

THE SUFFERING GOD

I like what theologian Shirley Guthrie said about this. He wrote,

"All cheap and easy talk about a God of sovereign power who is in control of a world in which there is so much poverty, suffering and injustice is obscene.

All self confident talk about a powerful church that has the mandate to transform society with this or that conservative or liberal ... agenda ... is increasingly

absurd in a disintegrating church that cannot solve its own problems, much less the problems of the world.

The only gospel that makes sense and can help in ... our 'godless and godforsaken' world is the good news of a God who loves enough to suffer with and for a suffering humanity. And the only believable church is one that is willing to bear witness to such a God by its willingness to do the same thing."

Too often in the church we are in the business of pointing to ourselves instead of pointing to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

We are too concerned about turning the church into a nice, neat place where the music is majestic, the preaching is powerful, the education program is first rate and the huge building is filled with good looking young people who are successful and have 2.3 children per couple.

But, we can have all those things and not be a faithful witness to Jesus as we find him in Scripture. The story of Jesus is the story of how redemption comes through suffering. And Jesus tells us that in a small way that story will be replicated in our own life if we dare to follow him.

Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me." The apostle Paul said that he had been "crucified with Christ."

POINTING TO JESUS FIRST

I wonder what a church would look like if it decided to take this command seriously.

Well, first it would mean that we would point away from ourselves in order to point toward Jesus.

John the Baptist said over and over again that he was just the messenger. He wasn't the Messiah. He wasn't even a prophet. He was just the voice crying in the wilderness.

Jesus outranked him. They needed to listen to Jesus instead of him. John had to decrease so that Jesus could increase. (John 3:30)

I think the church is called to the same kind of ministry. We must decrease so that Jesus may increase. We must sacrifice what we want in order to serve God's kingdom.

This is not a natural or an easy thing to do. Most leaders want to blow their own horn and talk about what they have done. Christian leaders are called to point away from themselves and toward Jesus.

THE COURAGE TO FOLLOW

The second thing a church would do if it is willing to bear the cross of Christ would be a willingness to move in a new direction. “We’ve always done it that way” is not in the Bible. Instead we are called to follow where Jesus leads.

Those first disciples, who left John in order to follow Jesus, set out on a journey of faith.

They didn’t know where they were going. The only way they could see the Kingdom of God was to first courageously come and follow Jesus.

The same is true for us. Like Father Abraham we’re still on the way to that place God is going to show us. We haven’t arrived at our destination.

Like those first disciples, we’re not entirely sure where Jesus lives and what Jesus wants us to do.

All we know is that Jesus wants us to follow him, to come and see for ourselves the shape our ministry together may take in the future. Like those first disciples we will have to give up some things and embrace others.

Like Peter, Jesus will give us a new name. God in Christ will set the agenda for lives. God in Christ will lead us where we probably would not have chosen to go on our own.

The Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world. The Lamb of God takes away our sins.

A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

But, this is not the theology of an easy optimism. This is a theology for the hard times and hard places of life. This is a theology for those times when people suffer and where things don’t always work like we think they should.

This past week has been a momentous one for our country. The shootings in Tucson remind us of the fragility of life and the evil that crouches at everyone’s door.

Certainly the anxiety of a moment like this can cause us to say things and do things that are not helpful. We want to place blame. We want to explain what cannot be explained.

I have seen it all before. When a family gets the bad news they sometimes pull apart instead of pulling together.

But, sometimes our moments of suffering are changed by the grace of God into a time of redemption. Sometimes when the worst happens we realize that there is something more important than what I want.

We are called in our brokenness to higher ground. We are called to point away from ourselves to a greater salvation.

Someone asked me recently,
“Why did Jesus have to die? Why did God allow this to happen to his own son?”

But, the real question is this, “Why did we crucify Jesus?”

God sent his Son into the world, and what did we do? We killed him.

John the Baptist knew from the very beginning. God would not allow such evil to stand. God took the worst that human beings could do and turned it into an act of eternal salvation.

The Lamb of God took away the sin of the world. And that changed everything, forever.

Exactly how did this happen?

Theologians have been debating and thinking about this for centuries. The Lamb of God theology is not nice and neat. It is messy and frightening.

But, often our lives are messy and frightening too.

When our blood is shed, when our body is broken, when we are crucified by life, there is something profoundly comforting about the fact that God in Christ understands our pain and redeems us from it.

COME AND SEE

In our lesson for today two of John the Baptist’s disciples begin to follow Jesus. And Jesus asks them a penetrating question, “What are you looking for?” The disciples reply, “Teacher, we want to see where you are staying.”

The Greek indicates more than a desire to locate Jesus’ home. These disciples wanted personal knowledge of the Lamb of God.

Jesus replied, “Come and see.”

I think that Jesus gives the same invitation today. You have also heard that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Come and see

for yourself. Take him at his word. Live the life that he commands and you will know the truth that sets you free.

THE SHRINE

A man traveled to Hannibal Missouri to visit the boyhood home of Mark Twain. He said that the house was a trim whitewashed house with green shutters that seemed out of place in the middle of downtown. It cost two dollars to walk around the site.

This visitor found the house to be a disappointment. It was supposed to be a faithful reproduction of the original but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. And he doubted that young Samuel Clemens' bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor or that his sister's bedroom had a plywood partition in it.

Visitors were not actually allowed to go into the house. Instead, visitors are allowed to look through the window as a recorded message tells about each room. As the man proceeded from window to window, he asked another tourist what he thought of the house.

The man replied, "Oh I think its great. I come here whenever I come to Hannibal. I must have visited this place 20 or 30 times by now."

They talked a bit more and the man asked the fellow tourist. So, would you say that the house is like Twain described it in his books? The stranger replied, "I don't know. I never read one of his books."

That story is hard to believe.

Surely no one would want to visit such a bad shrine and ignore such great books. And yet that seems to be the approach of many would be followers of Jesus. They visit the shrine. They call the name of Jesus with a sense of awe and reverence.

But, they do not hear and apply the teachings of Jesus. They do not come and see what Jesus has to offer.

Jesus bids us come and see. Jesus invites us to abide in Him, to stay with Him and make His teachings a part of our story.

Anything less than a personal commitment is to lose sight of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Anything less is to visit an empty shrine instead of becoming a part of a church founded on the Spirit of the living God.

THE HOMELESS SHELTER

A minister who attended seminary with me was in charge of one of the homeless shelters in downtown Atlanta. In that town there was a reporter from a Christian radio station who had a reputation for being ... well, let's put it kindly ... less than gracious.

Anyway he interviewed my friend about the night shelter she ran. She described the ministry in a straightforward way. "We take homeless people and provide food and lodging."

But, this talk show host was suspicious. He didn't hear anything in her description about evangelism, the aggressive in your face kind of evangelism that his radio promoted.

So, he asked,
"What has this to do with the ministry of Jesus Christ?"

Taken aback by his aggressive approach, she tried again, "Well, we try to show the compassion of Christ through our ministry."

This did not satisfy the reporter. He said in a louder tone, "You didn't hear my question. What has this to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ?"

Bless her heart she tried once again to get through to this character. "Well, we try to take care of not only their physical needs but also their spiritual needs. We are concerned for them as human beings in the name of Christ."

The talk show host was not convinced. Louder than ever he fairly shouted,

"You're not listening to my question. I want to know where is Jesus Christ in all that?"

If that had been me I would have raised my voice and read the better part of Matthew 25 to this joker, especially the part that says when we help those who have great needs, those who are hungry or thirsty and so forth ... it is as if we have done it to Jesus himself.

But, I'm afraid I would have come off sounding too self-righteous and angry, much like the interviewer. What my friend said was much better.

She thought for a moment and said,

"You just have to be there to know what I'm talking about. You would just have to come and see for yourself."

That's the key. We have to come and see for ourselves. We have to go where the ministry of Christ is occurring and be a part of it.

CHANGED LIVES

We've already noted that when Andrew brought Simon to meet Jesus, a strange thing happened. Simon was given a new name.

Jesus said that he would be called Peter or Cephas, which means rock. And this name change marked the beginning of a journey that would change his life forever.

I think it's interesting to note that in John 1:39 the time of day is noted. John finishes the paragraph by noting that it was 4 o'clock in the afternoon when Jesus named Peter.

I wonder if John notes that little detail because he was the other disciple who followed Jesus that day.

He could tell you the very hour of the day, the very stone that marked the place on the road where they met Jesus.

At four o'clock in the afternoon on a spring afternoon in Galilee, life became a new thing for John.

The same thing can happen to us. The Lamb of God still has the power to change our name ... and our lives.

I wonder. What name would Jesus give us? What would he have us do and be?

Today he invites us all to come and see.

Amen.