

**“The Lamb of God Who Takes Away the Sins of the World”**

**John 1:29-34**

**March 24, 2019**

**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**

*Pr. Nicoletti*

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Gospel of John, chapter one, verses twenty-nine through thirty-four. Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

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

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, as we come to your word, along with the psalmist we ask you to  
teach us the way of your statutes,  
that we might keep them to the end.  
Give us understanding, that we may follow your word  
and observe it with our whole hearts.  
Incline our hearts to your testimonies,  
and not to our own selfish ends.  
Turn our eyes and attention now from frivolous things,  
and give us life through your word.  
Grant this for Jesus’ sake, we pray. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:33-34, 36-37]

In our short passage this morning, John once again crams in a lot of content. One commentator, after discussing this paragraph – just these six verses – says: “When we look back on the wealth and depth of the material contained in the intervening verses, we appreciate John’s genius at incorporating a whole Christology into one brief scene.” [Brown, 67]

In other words, the Apostle John, the author of this Gospel, fits a lot of content about who Jesus is in just this one brief passage.

We again will have to limit the scope of what we can focus on, and as we do, we will use verse twenty-nine as the lens through which we view the rest of the passage.

But as we do that we'll also need to be aware of two speakers we are hearing from at once in this text. One is John the Baptist, who is being described and quoted in this passage. The other is John the Apostle, who has written this passage. So, we have two different Johns speaking, in ways that are distinct, that are not identical, but which we will ultimately see harmonize with each other rather than clash.

So, we want to ask two questions of our text this morning, but we want to pose those questions separately to each of the Johns, and then see what we get when it all comes together.

We want to ask our text: Who is Jesus? and What will Jesus do?

And first we want to ask John the Baptist those questions, and then we want to ask John the Apostle those questions.

So: Who is Jesus? and What will Jesus do? First looking to how John the Baptist answers those questions, and then how John the Apostle answers those same questions.

So first: Who is Jesus according to John the Baptist?

And as I said, we want to begin by focusing on verse 29. John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, in verse 29: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

And most scholars and commentators have an immediate problem at this point. Because when we hear that line, we think of the Lamb of God as a meek and mild symbol of sacrifice. But John the Baptist is speaking at the beginning of Jesus's ministry. And there is no indication so far that John the Baptist expects the Messiah to be a sacrificial figure.

In fact, in chapter eleven of Matthew's gospel John the Baptist expresses some confusion over who Jesus is and what he's doing precisely because John the Baptist expected a victorious Messiah ... not a suffering Messiah.

So, if John the Baptist is focused on the victory of the Messiah and does not seem to expect a suffering Messiah, then why would he say "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"?

For many skeptical scholars the answer is easy: You just conclude that John the Apostle, the author of this Gospel, made it up. John the Apostle took his own theology of the cross and he sort of stuck it in John the Baptist's mouth.

Skeptical analysis of the Scripture often takes a route like that. But many times, it's in pressing these kinds of tensions, rather than just dismissing them as false witnesses, that we get to a deeper meaning of what the Scriptures are getting at.

So – What did John the Baptist mean when he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"?

It turns out that in first-century Judaism there was a meaning in the title “the Lamb of God” that helps us make sense of what John the Baptist likely means here.

In first-century Jewish apocalyptic literature “The Lamb of God” was an apocalyptic figure, a “warrior lamb” [Carson, 150], a “conquering lamb who will destroy evil in the world.” [Brown, 59] Now ... that might seem an odd image to us ... the idea of a conquering warrior lamb ... but it wasn’t an odd image to them. It comes up in several Jewish apocalyptic texts that were around in the first century [Dodd, 231-232; Carson, 150; Brown, 59].

One example where it comes up is the Book of Enoch, which is a non-canonical book that was well known in the first century. It’s actually quoted elsewhere in the New Testament, in the book of Jude [14-15], and it’s also cited in popular writings of the early church in the period just after the ministry of the Apostles, in the Epistle of Barnabas [4:3, 16:5-7; Ehrman, 3, 6-7]. Now, the fact that those books quote or refer to the Book of Enoch does not mean that they thought that the Book of Enoch was Scripture – it just tells us that the Book of Enoch was a familiar book in the first century among God’s people.

Chapters 89 and 90 of the Book of Enoch recap the history of God’s people with an allegory using different animals. The Israelites are the sheep, and various animals representing other groups threaten them. At one point a ram is raised up to lead the sheep, who butts against and drives back the dogs, foxes, and wild boars that threaten the sheep. But then the same ram begins to butt the other sheep. This is a description of Saul. And so, God raises up a lamb from the flock who is also a ram, and who is to take the place of the first ram who had turned on God’s people. The lamb here is the picture used for King David. [89:42-46]

The image of lambs leading God’s people comes up again in the Book of Enoch to describe the warrior leaders of Israel during the Maccabean Revolt, who are also described as lambs [90:6-9].

And then the image of the Lamb reaches its fullness when the book describes the apocalypse and the leader of God’s people, the Messiah, as a great lamb whom the Lord delights in. [90:37-38]

In the Book of Enoch, the Lamb of God and of God’s people is the leader of the sheep of Israel – and often a kingly or military leader. And it does not seem that Enoch was alone in this imagery – but as we said, other Jewish apocalyptic works used this symbolism as well. [Dodd, 231-232; Carson, 150; Brown, 59]

And so, when we consider that background in the first-century Jewish worldview, it seems likely that *this* is what John the Baptist would have had in mind when he looked at Jesus and declared “Behold, the Lamb of God.”

And to be clear – this isn’t some fringe interpretation I’m putting before you this morning – mainstream Evangelical commentators like D.A. Carson hold to this view of what John the Baptist likely had in mind as well. [Carson, 150]

When John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God, what he probably had in mind was the image of the Messianic apocalyptic warrior king that was to come.

It would seem that Jesus's first disciples heard him as meaning that as well. John the Baptist tells Andrew that Jesus is "the Lamb of God" in verse 36, which Andrew then restates as Jesus being the "Messiah" in verse 41, a role which a few verses later Nathanael will identify as the King of Israel [John 1:45, 49].

The image of the Lamb was not then to identify Jesus's meekness, but his purity [Michaels, 110] and his role as being both *a part of* and *a leader to* the flock of God's people [Dodd, 236].

John the Baptist is looking at Jesus and identifying him as the Apocalyptic Lamb that is to come.

That's who John the Baptist says Jesus is. Now, our second question is: What does John the Baptist say that Jesus will *do*?

He says this Lamb of God will take away the sin of the world.

The Messiah will remove the sin of the world, we are told – he will make an end of sin. [Dodd, 238] In the First Epistle of John that phrase "take away sins" is used in parallel with the phrase "destroy the devil's works." [Brown, 60] In other words, what we have here is a promise that this new warrior will make an end of sin in the world – he will eradicate from the world rebellion against God, and with it, all the ways that human beings harm and fail to love their neighbors.

And so, the statement "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world" parallels statements like "Behold, the infectious disease specialist of the hospital, who takes away the tuberculosis of the body." Or "Behold, the hand sanitizer of the office, that takes away the germs of the hands." ... Or "Behold, the military leader of the king, who takes away the rebellion of the kingdom."

John the Baptist points to Jesus as the warrior king who will eliminate all the sin: all the selfishness, all the rejection of God, all the ways people neglect, use, and abuse each other – he will eliminate them all from the world.

And what John the Baptist goes on to say in the following verses fits with this.

In verse thirty John the Baptist points to the pre-existence of Jesus: "After me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me." By birth, John the Baptist was older than Jesus, we know this from Luke's Gospel. So, he means more than a simple age difference.

John the Baptist is pointing back to the fact that Jesus existed even before his birth. He was not born *into* the battle with sin in this world, but he was there from the beginning, and so he is in a unique way equipped then to eliminate sin, because he is preeminent, because he is powerful, and because he is not subject to sin.

And then in verse thirty-two John the Baptist says that the way he identified the Messiah was that the Spirit of God descended on him and remained. And we've discussed this before, and

actually, our passage in First Samuel will lead us to focus on it more tonight, but in the Hebrew Scriptures the coming of the Spirit of God was often associated with battle.

So, in Judges 3 we read that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Othniel and he “went out to war, and the LORD gave [the] king of Mesopotamia into his hand.”

In Judges 6 we read that “the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon” and then we watch in chapter 7 as he goes to war against the Midianites and defeats them.

In Judges 11 we read that “the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah,” and then we watch him go to war with the Ammonites and subdue them before Israel.

In Judges 14 we read twice that “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon” Samson. The first time he tears a lion that was attacking him to pieces, and the second time he goes into battle in Ashkelon and strikes down his enemies.

And tonight, in 1 Samuel 11 we will see what Saul does when the Spirit rushes on him.

But for a Jew who knew the Hebrew Scriptures as John the Baptist did, the descent of the Spirit was often associated with being equipped for battle.

And so, Jesus, the warrior apocalyptic Lamb of God, has come to eliminate sin from the world, and he can do it because he is pure lamb of God, he is the pre-existent One over whom sin has no power, and he is empowered by the Holy Spirit to wage war against all that sets itself against God.

This is who Jesus is and what he has come to do according to John the Baptist.

And at this point ... each one of us should each stop and ask: “Where does that leave me?”

If the warrior king, the Messiah, is coming to rid the world of sin, what will happen to you?

Maybe a better question to start with is: If the Messiah were coming to remake the world into one where all selfishness and self-centeredness would be eliminated ... would you fit in in that world? Would you belong there?

Because, of course, we hear that ... and a world like that sounds appealing to us. We *want to* live in a world where people care for other people, where they love their neighbors. We’d love to live in a place where there is no hate, no selfishness, no sin. No one would argue with the appeal of such a place. But I’m not asking whether such a place sounds appealing – I’m asking whether we’d fit in.

We’ve already confessed our sins this morning together but go back over in your mind right now what you confessed. Go back and think about your conduct this week. I mean, *really* think about it. Remember the times you lost your temper because things didn’t go your way. Remember the times you put yourself before others, in big or small ways. Remember the times you acted like

you didn't hear of or know about a need someone had because you just didn't want to deal with it. Remember the times you used someone else for your own selfish ends. Remember the critical thoughts you've had. Remember the critical words you've spoken. Think about how you have related to other human beings in just the past week ... or month ... or year.

And what about how you've related to God: God, the one who made you, who gives you life and breath and being every moment. The source of every good thing you have.

How much thought have you given him this week? How much thanks? How much praise? Have you cared much about him at all?

I think we all downplay this aspect in how we evaluate our lives and our moral fitness – I know I do. If you're a Christian, you may tend to think of a handful of sinful acts you are trying to avoid, and you evaluate yourself spiritually one week to the next based on how you've done with that list. If you're not a Christian you might think to yourself "Well, I'm not very religious, but I'm a good person – and that is what is most important." [Keller, 34]

One pastor has a helpful response to these tendencies in our thinking. He says imagine a woman with an only son. And she gives sacrificially to care for him, to provide him with blessings and opportunities. She gives of herself for him in all sorts of ways. "She teaches him how she wants him to live – to always tell the truth, to work hard, and to help the poor." She makes real sacrifices so that she can send him to college. And once he has graduated, once he has received all these gifts and opportunities to equip him in life, he focuses on his own life and hardly ever speaks to her again. Not for anything she has done or any fault on her part – he's just uninterested in her. "He occasionally sends a Christmas card, but he doesn't visit her; he won't answer her phone calls or letters; he doesn't speak to her. *But* he lives just like she taught him – honestly, industriously, and charitably." The pastor then asks this question: "Would we say this [man's conduct] was acceptable?" And he answers: "Of course not! Wouldn't we say that by living a 'good life' but neglecting a relationship with the one to whom he owed everything he was doing something condemnable? In the same way, if God created us and we owe him everything and we do not live for him but we 'live a good life,' [that] is not enough." [Keller, 34]

And yet ... this is how we often relate to God. We receive his gifts. We try not to be bad people. We ignore him in our day-to-day lives.

So thinking of how you have treated those around you ... and thinking of how you have related to God ... if the Messiah king came and remade the world, if he eliminated all selfishness, if the world was turned into a place where people loved one another perfectly, if he eliminated all rebellion against God so that all in the world rightly thanked God, rightly praised God, rightly oriented their lives around their Maker ... If the Lamb of God came and took away the sin of the world ... would you really fit in in the world that he made? Would you belong there?

Imagine such a world ... and imagine yourself as you are now ... be honest ... you would stick out like a sore thumb in such a world ... wouldn't you? I know I certainly would ...

That should concern us.

But even more than that, even before we get to that, we might ask with a bit more fear and trepidation: if this Messiah, this warrior king, the Apocalyptic Lamb of God, showed up and waged war on sin and selfishness and rebellion against God ... wouldn't we be one of his rightful targets?

Not to put too fine a point on it ... but if the Apocalyptic Lamb of God was going to remove sin from the world ... doesn't it seem like he'd probably remove you too?

We should reflect on that. We should reflect on the fact that in terms of justice we deserve to be military targets of the Apocalyptic Lamb of God as he aims to eliminate all that has marred his world. We are part of the problem. In terms of what is just, in terms of what we deserve, when we hear John the Baptist say "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" ... we should be worried.

And that point is where we need to turn and ask our two questions to the Apostle: According to John the Apostle, who is Jesus and what will Jesus do?

We should note that as he gives his own answer, the Apostle John is not contradicting John the Baptist's meaning – what John the Baptist said *and what he meant* are both true.

But the Apostle John, having a fuller picture of who Jesus is, having seen more than John the Baptist had, is able to see that there was more to John the Baptist's words than even John the Baptist realized. [Carson, 150]

Because in addition to Jesus being the Apocalyptic Lamb of God who will eradicate sin from this world, the Apostle John saw there was another way that Jesus was the Lamb of God, and he likely saw this in at least two images.

The first image was seen in the connection to the Passover Lamb. In Jesus, the Apostle John sees the paschal lamb who is supplied by God. [Brown, 55]

Back in the exodus of Israel from slavery in Egypt, God called on each family among his people to sacrifice a lamb and to put its blood on the doorpost of their house. That night, God came in judgment on the land, striking down the firstborn in every household ... but not the houses that had the blood of the lamb above the door. And so, in every household in Egypt on that night, there was either a dead firstborn, or a dead lamb. In the households that trusted in the Lord, a lamb died in place of their firstborn. The Passover lamb died so that the firstborn might live.

The New Testament, the early church, and the Apostle John all drew connections between the death of Jesus on the cross and the death of the Passover lamb. And so, when the Apostle John wrote these words describing Jesus as the Lamb of God it's difficult to believe that he was not himself thinking of the sacrificial Passover lamb who died so another might live. [Carson, 150]

But in addition to that, it seems likely that the Apostle John also had Isaiah 53 in mind as he wrote these words. The Apostle John refers to Isaiah 53 elsewhere, and Isaiah is one of the books he quotes most frequently (it was quoted in our text just last Sunday morning). [Carson, 150]

In Isaiah 53 we read of the Suffering Servant of the Lord. And here Isaiah says of this Suffering Servant:

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs  
and carried our sorrows;  
yet we esteemed him stricken,  
smitten by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But he was pierced for our transgressions;  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,  
and with his wounds we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he opened not his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,

Isaiah does not go so far as to call the Suffering Servant the Lamb of God, but with the Apostle John's use of Isaiah elsewhere, it's hard to believe that the reference to the lamb at the end of that passage was not in his mind as he wrote.

Isaiah 53 provided the bridge from the Passover lamb to the idea that God would send a man, a Suffering Servant, who as the Lamb of God, would bear the griefs of his people, carry their sorrow, and receive the punishment they deserved so that they might have peace, be forgiven, and be healed.

Having witnessed the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the Apostle John knew that Jesus was not only the Apocalyptic Lamb of God, but he was also the Sacrificial Lamb of God.

And what, according to the Apostle John will this Sacrificial Lamb do?

He will take away the sin of the world. And he will do it not *only* by eradicating sin from this world as the Apocalyptic Lamb, but by bearing the penalty for the sin of his people, in his body, on the cross, so that all who call on his name, all who trust in him, might be forgiven and restored to right relationship with God.

And again, the rest of the passage backs that idea up too.

In verse thirty we are reminded that Jesus is pre-existent. We see in that reminder just a glimpse of the idea that Anselm and others will draw on to explain to us that only Jesus, the Son of God,

could pay the infinite price for our sin, because being the Eternal One, he is himself infinite and can pay our infinite spiritual debt.

We are also reminded that Jesus, upon paying that debt, did not remain in the tomb, because as we read in verse thirty-two, the Holy Spirit remained on him, and as the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 8, that same Spirit raised Jesus from the dead on the third day, so that he is alive today and continues his ministry from heaven by the Holy Spirit, until the day when he returns to reign on earth in bodily form.

And we are reminded of Christ's ministry by the Spirit in verse thirty-three, where it tells us that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. By the Holy Spirit of God Jesus applies his work on the cross to all who call on him, forgiving their sins, adopting them into the family of God with God as their Father, comforting them in their affliction, putting sin to death in their hearts, and bringing love and virtue to life in their souls.

The Apostle John points to the fact that Jesus Christ is the Sacrificial Lamb who died on the cross to pay for the sins of his people, the Lamb who paid our spiritual debt in full, who was raised on the third day, who reigns now in heaven and continues to work to draw his people to himself and to God the Father by his Holy Spirit. This is the Sacrificial Lamb of God that the Apostle John has in mind, this is the wonder of the gospel that he wants to pierce our hearts when we read those words: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

As the meaning of John the Baptist and the meaning of the Apostle John come together I think we get the fuller meaning that the Holy Spirit has for us in our text. In this passage two images come together to give us a three-dimensional image of the Lamb.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

John the Baptist points us to the Apocalyptic Lamb, who hates sin and will eradicate it from the world. The Apostle John points us to the Sacrificial Lamb, who took on himself the penalty for sin due to his people, so that they might be saved.

And in the Book of Revelation the Apostle John actually brings those two images together even more clearly.

In Revelation 5 we read of the Lamb who was slain, and of those in heaven who declare how the Lamb was slain so that by his blood he would ransom people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, so that those who have been purchased by his blood would be made into a kingdom of priests for God, so that they would reign upon the earth in his presence [5:6, 9-12]. In Revelation 7 we read that those who belong to the Lamb have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb so that they have been made white – his blood has cleansed them of the stain of sin their soul so that they can dwell with God forever. John holds out a picture here of the Sacrificial Lamb. [7:14]

But that same Lamb, he reminds us, is also the Apocalyptic Lamb of God. In Revelation 17 we read that the Lamb will come and make war on his enemies and conquer them [17:14]. And in

Revelation 6 we see how fierce his wrath towards sin is, as those who had set themselves against God cry out to the mountains and rocks, saying “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” [6:16]

*Jesus Christ is both the Lamb who was slain and the Lamb who is coming to destroy all evil and all who stand in opposition to his reign.*

And so, in the end there are only two places we end up. We are either among those who wash their souls in the blood of the Lamb who was slain and then dwell with him forever, or among those who will cry out for the rocks to crush them and hide them from the terrifying wrath of the Lamb against their sin and rebellion.

The question that each one of us needs to answer is where we will be.

Now ... with that question in mind ... this is one of those sermons where people can be in danger of taking away the opposite of what they really need to hear.

Let me just mention two harmful tendencies that the truths we have discussed *should* target: One is that of nominalism – the view that says “Well, I believe in Jesus ... and sure, I don’t pay much attention to God or try that much to live as the Bible calls me to ... but Jesus died for my sins, right? So, I don’t need to worry about that stuff ... I can go on and enjoy life the way *I* want to.”

If that is how you live your life, then you probably resonated with what we said about Jesus being the Sacrificial Lamb of God and you probably tuned out a lot of the Apocalyptic Lamb of God stuff.

But of course, the Apocalyptic Lamb of God is exactly what you need to consider. As James reminds us, even the demons believe in the existence of God, along with other theologically truth. Intellectual assent to the truths of the Bible is not the same thing as true allegiance to the Lamb and real relationship with God. You need to consider the wrath of the Lamb towards sin and ask if you have truly aligned yourself with him or if in truth you have remained his enemy.

Others of you struggle not with nominalism, but with doubting God’s grace. You doubt whether it applies to you. You doubt whether God can forgive you for what you’ve done. You doubt whether he will ever embrace you so long as you struggle with sin as you do, so long as your deeds continue to be so imperfect.

You really heard me when we focused on the Apocalyptic Lamb ... but you resonated less with the Sacrificial Lamb. You felt fear as you thought about the Apocalyptic Lamb ... but you felt little comfort from the Sacrificial lamb.

*You* need to take what the Apostle John says about the Sacrificial Lamb seriously. You need to realize that when you trust in Christ and you align yourself with him, and then you doubt whether God really forgives you – when you do that you are effectively turning to Jesus and saying “Sorry, Jesus ... but your sacrifice on the cross just isn’t good enough for me. I know you did your best, and believe me, it covers a lot of people’s sins ... but it wasn’t quite good enough

to cover *my* sins. *My* sins are more than you can handle. I'm sorry, Jesus ... but truth be told, you *failed* on the cross when it comes to me."

*Are you going to say that to Jesus? Really??* Because he knows if you're thinking it or feeling it, even if you don't *say* it.

We can empathize with the Israelite who on the eve of the exodus, while spreading the blood of a literal lamb on his doorposts, struggled with doubt and wondered "Is this enough? Is this really going to turn the angel of death away from my family tonight?"

*But we know that we have the blood of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God shed for us. Are we really going to say that it's not enough?*

We need to believe in the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross for sinners – including ourselves.

Our calling is to see in fullness both the Apocalyptic Lamb and the Sacrificial Lamb in Jesus Christ – to see both his hatred of and wrath towards sin, and his loving self-sacrifice for his people – his sacrifice made so that as we confess our sins, trust in him, and declare our allegiance to him, we might be forgiven and spared in order to enjoy eternity with him forever.

And as we believe both of those things, we should marvel at the cross, where God's love and justice meet.

We are in the season of Lent – and while we should consider the cross all around the year, this is a season where we especially focus on the cross of Christ. And so, let it be a time for us where we look at Jesus Christ our Lord, in his fullness, and stand in awe together, beholding the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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