

Behold the Lamb

Isaiah 49:1-7 & John 1:29-42

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
January 15, 2017 — 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany
Pastor Tom Thews

Isaiah 49:1-7 (NIV)

¹ Listen to me, you islands; hear this, you distant nations: Before I was born the LORD called me; from my birth he has made mention of my name. ² He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me into a polished arrow and concealed me in his quiver. ³ He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”

⁴ But I said, “I have labored to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing. Yet what is due me is in the LORD’s hand, and my reward is with my God.”

⁵ And now the LORD says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength— ⁶ he says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”

⁷ This is what the LORD says— the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel— to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to the servant of rulers: “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

John 1:29-42 (NIV)

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”

³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. ⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

Behold the Lamb

Last Sunday, based on the lectionary, I had to choose whether to deal with Epiphany and the coming of the wise men, or with Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. Epiphany seemed more appropriate with the season as a way to close out the telling of the Christmas story.

Today we want to look at another aspect of Jesus' encounter with John the Baptist. We need to understand that John the Baptist had a real impact on the people in the area around Jerusalem. It is estimated by some scholars that as many as three hundred thousand people came out to be baptized by John.

John was somewhat eccentric, to be sure. He dressed in a garment made of camel's hair and girded himself with a leather belt. He survived in the wilderness on a diet of locusts and wild honey, and devoting himself to warning his generation of God's wrath that is yet to come. But undoubtedly that was part of his appeal. He was so completely different from the temple priests in Jerusalem who dressed in fine linens. John was not an establishment figure. Thus his call for a different way of living carried great appeal, especially to those for whom life was a struggle.

According to John's Gospel, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him to be baptized he uttered those remarkable words: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!"

Such a proclamation, even before Jesus had begun His ministry, is unique to the Gospel of John. Jesus to this point has performed no miracles, called no disciples, raised no one from the dead. He is still fresh from the carpenter shop. He has made no enemies, issued no controversial teachings, nor ruffled any royal feathers. Any comparison to the Paschal Lamb sacrificed for the sins of the people is certainly premature. It would be some time before Jesus would be warning His disciples that He must suffer and die. Yet here we find an allusion to that event in the first chapter of John's Gospel.

Most of us are aware that the writer of the Gospel of John, in contrast to the writers of the other three Gospels (the Synoptic Gospels as they are called) was not so much interested in writing history as he was in writing theology. He wanted us to know not only that Jesus came into the world, but also what that great fact means. He uses tremendous imagery in this first chapter of his Gospel— "the Word became flesh," and "the light shines in darkness." But no image carries greater power than this one: "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

When John asks us to "behold the Lamb" we have a pre-figuring of that dramatic scene in Revelation when millions of angels and the twenty-four elders bow down before the only being who is worthy to break the seven seals and open the sacred scroll. Together they sing, "Worthy is the Lamb to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing (Revelation 5:12)." Here we have a stunning portrayal of the majesty of the Christ.

YOU AND I DESPERATELY NEED AN APPRECIATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THAT MAJESTY IN OUR OWN LIVES.

In this day when nothing is holy, we need, more than ever before, a knowledge of the One whose very essence was holiness.

Do you remember that somewhat amusing scene in Matthew 14 when the dependably impetuous Simon Peter tries to imitate the Master and walk on the water? That scene is so instructive. Peter starts to walk out on the water to come to Jesus, but makes the mistake of taking his eyes off of Jesus and looking around at the high waves that are breaking about him. As a consequence he becomes terrified and begins to sink.

That can happen to us. If we take our eyes off Jesus and keep our gaze fixed upon our problems, our frustrations, our limitations, our poverty of either money or other resources, we will never make any headway in coping with life. How life affects us is a matter of focus. You and I have within ourselves the resources for achieving amazing things if, if we keep our focus on Christ and do not allow our problems to distract and overwhelm us.

You may know the story of a young Hungarian athlete in the 1952 Olympics who won a gold medal with his ability to shoot a pistol. His right hand and eye coordination were so perfect that he simply could not miss the bull's eye.

Six months after those Olympics were over that young man lost his right arm. Such a tragedy would have overwhelmed many of us. It did not overwhelm this young man. Four years later at the Melbourne Olympics he was back and he did it again. Another gold medal. This time he shot with his left hand. How much time and effort do you suppose he devoted to mastering this skill a second time?

We have in us the ability to turn tragedies into triumphs — or, in Robert Schuller's famous phrase, to turn "scars into stars." One of the keys to that, however, is to have a God who is big enough to handle any problem we may have and to keep our attention fixed on Him rather than upon the circumstances.

R.A. Torrey once put it like this, "If you make but little of Christ, Christ will make little of you."

Torrey, as usual, is saying something important to us here. We need a Christ who is Master of wind and the waves. We need a Christ to whom both physical illness and emotional pain are manageable crises. We need a Christ who can make us think in terms of being victors rather than victims.

"Behold the Lamb..." says John and we need to do that. We need to look beyond our present difficulties to the One who can deliver us. We need to behold the majesty of Christ. But there is more: "... who takes away the sins of the world."

WE ARE SUMMONED TO CONTEMPLATE HIS MAJESTY. NOW WE ARE CHALLENGED TO CONSIDER HIS MERCY.

The majestic Christ “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross,” that you and I might be redeemed from the power of sin. Someone has said that in creation God shows us His hand, but on Golgotha God gives us His heart.

There is something about the cross that has changed the world forever. It is not that the cross changed God. The cross came about in the first place because “God so loved the world...” Maybe it was the complete outpouring of love there that made such a difference.

A young soldier was utterly humiliated by his senior officer. The officer had gone beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior in disciplining the young soldier and knew it, so he said nothing as the younger man said through clenched teeth, “I’ll make you regret this if it is the last thing I ever do.”

A few days later their company was under heavy fire and the officer was wounded and cut off from his troops. Through the haze of the battlefield he saw a figure coming to his rescue. It was the young soldier whom he had treated so badly. At the risk of his own life, the young soldier dragged the officer to safety. The officer said, apologetically, “Son, I owe you my life.”

The young man laughed and said, “I told you that I would make you regret humiliating me if it was the last thing I ever did.” That is God’s kind of revenge.

“Behold the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world...” Something happened on Calvary that bridged the gap between a holy God and unholy humanity. We see Christ in His majesty, but also in His mercy.

In a cathedral in Copenhagen, Denmark there is a magnificent statue of Jesus by the noted sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen. When Thorvaldsen first completed the sculpture he gazed upon the finished product with great satisfaction. It was a sculpture of Christ with face looking upward and arms extended upward. It was a statue of a majestic, conquering Christ.

Later that night, however, after the sculptor had left his fine new work in clay to dry and harden, something unexpected happened. Sea mist seeped into the studio in the night. The clay did not harden as quickly as anticipated. The upraised arms and head of the sculpture began to droop. The majestic Christ with arms lifted up and head thrown back was transformed into a Christ with head bent forward and arms stretched downward as if in a pose of gentle invitation.

At first Thorvaldsen was bitterly disappointed. But as he studied the transformed sculpture, he came to see a dimension of Christ that had not been real to him before. It was the Christ who is a gentle, merciful Savior. Thorvaldsen inscribed on the base of the completed statue, “Come Unto Me,” and that picture of the Lamb of God in His mercy has inspired millions.

There is one thing more to be said, however. We have considered Christ’s majesty and His mercy.

NOW WE NEED TO CONSIDER THE MEANING OF HIS MINISTRY FOR OUR LIVES.

Notice that John says, “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sins of the World.” He does not say the sins of the Church, or the sins of middle-class Americans. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” There is enough saving power in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the entire world. If only the world knew. If only our next door neighbor knew.

The world needs to know — our friends and neighbors need to know — that they have won something far bigger than a state lottery. They need to know that their name has already been selected to receive the greatest prize ever awarded to anybody — an eternal victory over sin and death. To receive it, all they have to do is to claim their prize. An eternal love relationship with God through Jesus Christ is theirs — and ours — simply for the asking.

So, what does all this say about our lives? We are those who are called to tell the story. This is the most important thing in the world that we can ever do! In the United States only 34-36% of the people belong to a church. Only 17-19 people out of 100 attend on any given Sunday. The vast majority of people in this nation do not have a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, nor for the most part know what being a Christian is. Most don’t even know what it is that we do in church. Following in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, as John tells us in chapter 3, verse 17, we are not sent out to condemn the world, but that we might tell all who we meet the saving message of the great love that was poured out for them on Calvary’s tree.

We are those who are called to help others to look beyond the enormity of their problems to the One who is big enough to overcome any problem. We are to finish the work begun by our Lord 2,000 years ago — the work of reconciling the world unto God.

Leonardo da Vinci had started a work on canvas in his studio. He chose a subject, sketched its outer lines, shaded here and lightened there. About half way through his work, however, he halted his sketching. He turned to a student of his and said, “I want you to finish the work that I have started.”

The student protested. He surely was not worthy of such an honor. Da Vinci reassured him, “Will not my example inspire you to do your best? And besides I am right here beside you if you should need any help.” That is Christ’s message to us.

“Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” See Him in His majesty. See Him in His mercy. See Him in His ministry to the world, a ministry He calls you and me to complete. May Jesus example inspire us and His presence empower us until all the world knows that the victory has been won.

