

Sermon, January 7, 2024

John 1:29-34
"The Lamb of God"

This morning we find ourselves, again, listening to the words of John the Baptist, and, as I mentioned last week, we find statements indicating that he is secondary in importance to Jesus. In this reading he sees Jesus coming towards him and declares, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Searching through the Bible we find that the image of a lamb is both important and prophetic, especially as it is related to sacrifice.

First, in the Book of Genesis, when Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac, they arrive in the land of Moriah where the killing is to take place, and Isaac, who is unaware of what Abraham has been told to do, asks, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is a lamb for a burnt offering?", to which Abraham replies, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son". You can see how Christians would later see this as a prophetic for-telling of the Father's sacrifice of his Son on the cross.

We then move to the Book of Exodus where we find a story that is very important in terms of the theology of the Gospel of John. Following nine different plagues upon Egypt meant to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites go from their many years of bondage, Moses gives Pharaoh one last warning, saying that death will come upon all the firstborn of Egypt if the Israelites are not given their freedom. But Pharaoh's heart is hardened, and he does not heed the warning. So, God then instructs that lambs are to be sacrificed by the Israelites with their blood placed upon the two doorposts and the lintel of the Jew's houses, so that when God passes through the land the firstborn of each Jewish family will be spared. This, of course, will be the basis of the very central Jewish observance called Passover, that will also be symbolically important in the Gospel of John.

But first we go to another prophetic passage in the Book of Isaiah that speaks of the Suffering Servant and find a verse that reads, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter". You can see how this can be interpreted in reference to Jesus, who did describe himself as a servant, who did not open his mouth in his own defense, and who suffered greatly on the cross.

Then we can see how this imagery so strongly impacted the mind of the author of the Gospel of John. In the 19th chapter where Pilate is condemning Jesus to death, and he is led to the cross, we read - "Now it was the day of the Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon". In the Jewish tradition of the time, on the day of Preparation, the Passover lamb was slaughtered at noon.

But further evidence of the importance of this symbolism is found in the Book of Revelation, which was also written by the author of John's Gospel, and in which the imagery of a lamb in reference to Jesus is found 28 times. One verse in particular echoes last week's reading in the prologue to John, where John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the light. In the 21st chapter of Revelation where John is writing about the New Jerusalem, he says, "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and the lamp is the Lamb". In other words, the light of God's glory, shines through, and is revealed to us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

John is not the only New Testament writer to see the connection. In 5:7 of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "For the paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed". But what is most important is the reason for the sacrifice. As John the Baptist states, he "takes away the sin of the world". In the story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis we see that their lack of trust and belief in God leads to their being cast out of the Garden of Eden. This metaphorically speaks to how our own lack of trust and belief leads to the existential condition we call sin - a state of separation from the author of life, our God. But then, just as the blood of lambs led to the liberation of the Israelites from their physical bondage, the blood of the Suffering Servant and sacrificial Lamb called Jesus Christ reveals our liberation from the spiritual bondage to sin and death. Our broken relationship with the Creator is restored, which we accept in faith, leading to New Life and greater spiritual Freedom.

Now, in today's reading we also find another important symbol- the image of a dove, which reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is the dove descending from heaven and remaining on Jesus that leads John the Baptist to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. I will have more to say about that next week. Amen.

Let us pray: God of grace and love, we lift our hearts unto you, and express our gratitude for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ who is the Lamb of God who sacrificed on our behalf. We acknowledge the sinfulness within us that can stand as a barrier between us and you, but you have revealed to us that in your gracious love, and in the imagery of the sacrificial Lamb, you have struck down that barrier, giving to us a greater sense of freedom. Even though we may continue to act in sinful ways, you still look upon us with a loving heart and with a grace that we accept through faith - a gift of your Holy Spirit. Help us, Lord, to live our lives grounded in that faith that we may please you in all that we say and do. Amen.