

SERMON: Lamb of God

TEXT: John 1:29-42

Alpha and Omega. Son of God; Son of Man. Messiah, Anointed One. King of the Jews. Light of the World. Living water. Bread of Life. The Resurrection and the Life. The door. The True Vine. The way, the truth and the life. The Good Shepherd. Lord and Savior. The Word made flesh. Rabbi; Teacher; Healer; Master; Brother; Friend. Christ. Judge. Redeemer. Wonderful Counselor; Mighty God; Everlasting Father; Prince of Peace. Emmanuel.

The Bible has so many names and images for Jesus. But one that we don't use – or even think about very often – is the Lamb of God. It lacks a little something, I guess. To us it's not a very powerful image. We tend to think of little lambs as frail and helpless, warm and woolly. Instead of looking at them with awe, we just want to say, awww.

But the lamb was a powerful image for the Jews of that time. In the temple where the Jews worshipped, lambs (along with other animals) were brought as an offering. They were slaughtered on the altar, and their blood was poured over all sides of the altar. Such sacrifices were offered to God as a way of paying for one's

sins. If you brought a lamb to worship and killed it on the altar, your sins would be forgiven.

In today's scripture lesson, Jesus is just embarking on his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. John the Baptizer is announcing his arrival and introducing him around town, if you will. And instead of proclaiming, "Behold, the Son of God" or "Behold, the King of the Jews," or "Behold, the Messiah", John identified Jesus with the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus, as the Lamb of God, was the one who would be sacrificed, the one whose blood would be shed. Jesus would be the *sacrificial* lamb. John makes this clear at the outset.

But it's interesting that no one seems to pick up on the significance of it – not those who were being called as his first disciples and not those of us who are disciples today. They are curious, for sure, and several of them follow to find out more. But no one seems to be stopped in their tracks by the announcement that a human being will become the sacrifice to pay for their sins.

The term Lamb of God also refers to the Passover Lamb, which makes it even more powerful. It was the last of the ten plagues placed upon the Egyptians

to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves. The plague would kill all the firstborn babies in the land – humans and animals alike. And the only thing that would save the Hebrew babies would be for each family to paint over the doorway of the house with the blood of a sacrificed lamb. If they did this, God would “pass over” their homes, not touching them with the most destructive of all the plagues. Just as the blood of the Passover Lamb saved and freed the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus, as the Lamb of God, saves and frees us. His blood paid for our sins. He sacrificed his own life to give us abundant and eternal life.

And not only are we **not** stopped in our tracks with that realization, we’d rather not realize it at all.

An elderly woman I knew in Iowa hated what she referred to as the “blood” hymns. Hymns like, “Power in the Blood” and “Are you washed in the Blood?” She saw no need for such graphic and gory detail; it was unpleasant and distasteful; she didn’t want to think about it, much less sing about it!

We are not much different. Even though we see it on TV and in the movies all the time, we often would rather not think about blood in church. I even feel a

little awkward just using the word, *blood*. Furthermore, I think it's true that we'd rather not even think about sacrifice in the church.

Baptist minister Tony Campolo once preached that Americans are more committed to the Declaration of Independence than we are to the Bible. "The Declaration of Independence," he said, "guarantees you 'the pursuit of happiness.' And Jesus says, 'If anyone would be my disciple, let him take up a cross and follow me.' There is a difference between the two!" The point he was making was that we are raising a generation of kids without values. "We give [children] everything except the one thing they need! We do not give them the opportunity to sacrificially give to other people."

Campolo used his own family's experience as an example. He described a network of 75 schools he founded in Haiti to educate poor children who have been given up by their families to work as slaves. It costs \$200 a month to support such a school. Campolo talked to his wife and children about sponsoring one school, saying that they could do it if each member was willing to make sacrifices, to go without a new bike, for instance. It was a hard sell, as Campolo's son Bart wanted a new bike. He described the conversation: "I'd say, fine. Fine. We'll buy you a

new bike. Then we'll write to the kids in Haiti and say, close down your school for a month. *Bart* wants a new *bike*."

Sounds to me like Bart didn't have much choice. But Campolo said that Bart found he could live without the new bike. And, more importantly, he knew what he was accomplishing by living without it. Years later, the family visited Haiti to meet the people they had helped. "The scene was joyful chaos. The kids hugged his children. They sang. They played games and celebrated all day long. At the end of the day, on the way to the airport, Bart said, 'There isn't anything we could have done with that money that would have made me happier than I am right now.'"

Seldom do we realize that the happiness we pursue is often found through self-sacrifice.

Perhaps that's why we're uncomfortable with the sacrifice Jesus made – because it means that some sacrifice will be required, or at least expected of us. It's interesting, we'll make sacrifices for our children, for our family; we'll even make sacrifices for our country, but we hesitate and even bristle when we're asked

to make sacrifices for our church or as a demonstration of our faith in Christ. Why is that?

Tomorrow is MLK Day, a day to honor the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. This federal holiday has been on the calendar since 1986, but it is only in the last few years that I realized it is meant to be a day of service – “a day on, not a day off.” In fact, MLK Day is the only federal holiday designated as a National Day of Service to encourage all Americans to volunteer to improve their communities.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., sacrificed himself for his values, his country, his race, and his Lord. He knew his life was in danger, but he took the risk because he had a vision of a “Beloved Community,” where people of all races could live and work together in freedom and equality. Sadly, we have made little progress toward his vision, or toward Christ’s vision of bringing the kingdom of God to earth.

So, may we be inspired to make sacrifices ourselves, of our time, talent, and treasure, taking up the cause of MLK and so many other heroes of the faith. May we make sacrifices in honor of the Lamb of God... to the glory of God! AMEN.