

John 1:19-23, 29-31[NIV]

¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah."

²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

... 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."

Advent. That's the season we're in, and it's the season of the Church – the four weeks that lead up to Christmas – when the Church remembers, herself, and also announces to those around, "Hey, world! There's something coming! There's something really great coming!"

Advent is the season of expectation, and this year, more than any other year in recent history anyway, it is so important that Christ's Church faithfully proclaim, "Here Comes..." *not* "Here comes Santa Claus, right down Santa Claus lane."

That's the message of the *world*, and frankly, the world makes that announcement very effectively every Christmas.

But Santa Claus is not the job of the Church. The world needs more than the jolly, warm thoughts and gifts of Santa Claus – especially this year.

The *Church's* job – the work of the people of God – is to proclaim to all who will listen, "Here comes – the Light of the World! Here comes the One – sent from God to bring light to dark places – to give us light to see by, so we don't stumble and fall and hurt ourselves and others."

"The light of the world is on His way!" That's one part of the message of the Church in Advent.

Another part is to proclaim, "Hey, world! Here comes – the Bread of Life! Here comes the only thing – the only *One* – who will ever truly fill that *vacuum*, that *emptiness*, that desire for something more that lurks within us all. Because of Christmas, no one has to live with that – that hunger within. God didn't intend for us to be spiritually hungry. Jesus, the one who satisfies, is coming."

That's part of the Church's Advent message to the world.

And then, it's also the Church's message to announce to the world in these days, "Hey, world! Here comes – the *Lamb*, the *Lamb of God*."

Now, that's a funny sounding sort of announcement to make, isn't it – that a lamb is coming?

We don't typically go around announcing the arrival of animals, unless they're big and mean and hairy and chasing us.

But that's not the case here. So, what does it mean – "Lamb of God"? What's it about?

Well, in trying to figure that out, we find that we're not the first ones to make this announcement. We borrow that phrase, "Lamb of God," from John the Baptist – from that passage in Chapter 1 of John's Gospel that was just read for us.

One of the first things we notice there is that John made that proclamation, *not* at the time of Jesus' *physical* birth, but rather at the beginning – or you might say at the "birth" – of Jesus' ministry years. Jesus was 30 or so years old when John first said those words to the world: "Look! Here comes the Lamb of God!"

This was, really, the whole point of John's life: to make that statement. John the Baptist was born in his own miraculous way. His ministry of calling people to God grew and grew. He was, what you might call a quirky, but very effective and popular preacher. He had crowds around him all the time. His altars were full of repentant people.

But really, the truth is, John the Baptist lived, worked and died, and the whole point of his life was to get to that place, that day, where he was able to say – to announce – to the world, "Here comes the Lamb of God!"

John was like a giant, living, neon arrow, who, at just the right time, lit up in blazing color to point others to Jesus.

And then he was killed – imprisoned and beheaded. How about that?

We think, "Ah, that's not very good."

But that was God's purpose for John – and John knew it. John said, "*the one who comes after me is greater than me because he was before me. I'm not worthy to untie his sandals. He must become greater, and I must become less.*"

That's the tremendous thing about John the Baptist: he always knew that He was not the point of his own life. He knew that his life – his purpose – was never to simply do as he pleased.

That's why Jesus said about John, "*there's no one born of women who is greater than John.*"

Think about how different the world would be if everybody sitting in churches around the world today would take up that spirit and realize that we're not here for our own sake. We are not the point of the days God has given us. Rather, we're here by the design of God for a job that He wants us to do.

John knew that he was born to be simply a *preparer for...*, an *announcer of...*, an *arrow pointing toward* the coming of someone else – someone bigger and greater and better.

And he calls that One – John calls Him, the “Lamb of God.”

“Lamb of God.”

Most of us are so used to Bible-speak, we just blow right by that phrase.

But when you think about it, that really is a funny phrase. It’s an odd sort of thing to call someone, and not much of a compliment.

Sheep were commodities, as much in Jesus’ day as in ours. Cute as they are when they’re small, they don’t stay that way – they grow and get big and dirty and smelly. Like some people, actually.

Sheep have always been there to be used – for their wool and their meat.

And besides that, they’re not very smart, even as animals go.

So, what did John mean, and what did all those around John hear him say, on that day there in the wilderness when he announced Jesus was the “Lamb of God”?

That’s a question that students of Scripture have tried to answer for centuries. And there are several different suggestions.

One thought is that John was identifying Jesus as the Suffering Servant of the Lord that we find in Isaiah 53 – where the prophet talks about one like a Lamb that was led to slaughter. Later on, Jeremiah gives us that same sort of image: one who would come and, though despised and rejected by his people, would redeem them by his own sacrifice.¹

If this is the case, if this is who John sees Jesus as, then John would have been the very first to tie all this together, because no one had done it before.

That’s one possibility of what John meant by calling Jesus, “Lamb of God”: the one who suffers for the redemption of others.

Another possibility would be that John speaking here of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb – the offering that was made every day in the Temple (two of them actually, morning and evening). John was the son of a priest, after all, so he’d understood how all that worked.

But those lambs were never called, “God’s lambs,” or, “Lambs of God.”

And, in the Old Testament, although lambs are very commonly spoken of, offerings for sin were typically bulls. In the account of Abraham and Isaac, it was a ram that God provided to take Isaac’s place on the altar, not a lamb. And it was a goat that took the sin of the people away from the camp on the Day of Atonement.

So that whole thing – it works, sort of, but it’s not a perfect fit either.

A third option John might have been thinking of here: to present Jesus as the Passover Lamb – the animal that

was sacrificed and whose blood was put on the sides of the door posts to protect the Hebrews from the angel of death who came to Egypt to take the lives of all the firstborn children. That was the last of the plagues before Pharaoh agreed to let Hebrews leave their land.

But that’s not perfect either, since the sacrifice saved them from *death*, not from *sin*, as John says the Lamb of God does.

And, since the Hebrew word in Exodus 12 can either stand for lamb or kid (a young goat), there’s not necessarily a lamb specifically mentioned.

And then there is another thought – a very different thought – that John was talking here about the triumphant lamb of apocalyptic literature. Several intertestamental books speak this way, and, in our Bibles, so does Revelation 5.

John, in Revelation, tells us about one who seemed like a lamb that had been slain, being the only one found worthy to open the scroll that moved history forward. That same lamb, John says, is the now triumphant and victorious one who would come to crush evil and take sin out of the world.

This is the lamb that the angels – ten thousand upon ten thousand of them, John says – sang about: Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

Maybe this is the Lamb that the Baptist is talking about.

And yet, this sort of doing away with sin seems to be by force and not by sacrifice, as the other images of lamb suggest, so it doesn’t align perfectly either.

The point is, John’s image here of “Lamb of God” doesn’t really correspond perfectly with any other Biblical image, which very likely means that John is not saying Jesus simply fulfills one or two of these images, but rather He’s fulfilling *all* of them.

John is saying that Jesus, as the Lamb of God, collects to Himself and then perfectly fulfills all of these other prophecies and images and symbols and ideas.

Jesus is first the *suffering servant* that Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke of, who would be rejected, yet by His sacrifice would save His people.

Jesus is also the one, perfect, ultimate sacrifice offered up, not just to *cover up* the sins of the *Jews* for a *day*, but to *remove* the sin of *all people* for *all time*.

You see the difference?

Jesus is not just another lamb from the farm or the pen. He’s not even just a very, very good lamb with no visible spot or blemish.

Jesus is the *ultimate lamb*. A “super-lamb,” you might say. God’s own lamb.

And He comes not just to deal with these or those or mine or your individual *sins* – *plural*. He comes to deal with all sin, past and present and future.

¹ Jeremiah 7

And He's not just covering it up either, or painting it a more pleasing color. He comes to take it away.

And He comes to do this, not just for the Jews, but for all the world – the cosmos – the creation.

That's all wrapped up in John's sentence, "*Look – the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*"

Jesus is also the Passover, or Paschal, Lamb, who's blood saves us from death.

And then, Jesus is also the triumphant Lamb – the conquering champion of God who fought with sin and mastered it, and in doing so, defeated and abolished it forever and ever. It was a war fought and won by force, yes, but the force was that of the Lamb's own sacrifice of Himself, you see?

John is announcing that Jesus is not just the fulfillment of *one* of these prophetic images. Jesus is the fulfillment of them all. In this one strange and intriguing phrase, "Lamb of God," John sums up for the first time all the love, sacrifice, suffering, rejection, pain and triumph of Jesus.

John has enlarged the several images to try to squeeze in a Savior that can't be squeezed into any single image, you see? John is trying to give us a description of what is – *someone* who is – all but indescribable in human language.

[Hold up small nativity scene in one hand.]

If I were to try to describe this, to try to explain to someone what it is, how might I do that?

Well, we'd say it's small, but not too small. Not microscopically small.

It's wood, but it's cloth too.

It's triangular, but it's also round and rectangular too.

It's red, and it's yellow, and it's blue and white and green.

It's one piece – one unit, but it's also many separate pieces.

It is people and animals, but not really.

How's that for a clear, definitive description?

It's all those things, isn't it?

And you see, this [figure in the manger scene] is only a crude representation of Jesus. If it's that hard and imprecise to describe this [manger scene], think how hard it was for John to describe the real thing!

With my description, no one would have been able to guess what this was. But if we just say, "it's a crèche – a nativity," then when we say those words, we know exactly what's being talked about.

That's why John said, "Look, the Lamb of God." He needed – and he found – a way to say it all.

The one God promised to give: to suffer Himself in order to rid the world, and everyone in it, of sin and all sin's effects; to save us from sin's hurt and pain; and to crush death, sin's final consequence. That One is coming.

Here comes – the Lamb of God!

That's who Jesus is.

The question is, "Is He that to you today? Has the Lamb of God entered your world? Have you received Him as the sacrifice for your sin? Have you applied His blood to the doorposts of your life so He might save you from death? Have you opened all of yourself to Him that He might take your sin away and leave you clean and pure?"

That's the work of the Lamb of God.

He's coming to do all that in all who receive Him.

Here He Comes – the Lamb of God!

That's what Christmas is, and that's our message to a hurting world.

Closing Song: *The Lamb of God*

Benediction:

In all our lives, but in this season especially, may we all be the John the Baptists our world needs to see – pointing always to Jesus – announcing who He is, that He's both come and coming, and all that He's willing to do.

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