

John 1: 29-42
January 15, 2017
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

John the Baptist is standing by the river with his disciples. He has already baptized Jesus. Yet he is always on the lookout for him. He wants everybody to recognize Jesus. He does not want simply to point out the human figure named Jesus of Nazareth. He wants people to recognize who Jesus is and why he is so important.

And so it is that when John sees Jesus he does not say, “Hey look, there’s Jesus.” With the excitement and devotion, he cries, “Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

John’s disciples might have to pause to process this announcement. Yet, in not too long a time they would recall an image for Lamb which has deep roots in the history of Israel. The first is the lamb slain on the eve of the exodus from Egypt. The Israelites smeared blood of a lamb on the lintel over their front doors. When the angel of death, who would take the first born of the Egyptians “passed over” their dwellings he would spare the first born of the Israelites. The Lamb of God was thus associated with salvation from death. It is this lamb which Isaiah allies with the Suffering Servant who was led to death as a lamb to the slaughter.

Thus John answers the “who” question of Jesus. In the second phrase he identifies *why* this Lamb of God is important. This Lamb “takes away the sin of the world.”

This phrase is dangerous because we think we know what it means. I have always believed that John refers to the doctrine of original sin—the sin of Adam and Eve. The problem is that in John’s day there was no such doctrine. The story of what we call “the Fall” was a story designed to explain humanity’s stubborn and perverse inclination of following our own self-

centered and willful way to our perpetual self-destruction and the harm to God's creation. The truth of this story for me is undeniable. But we will miss the significance of John's proclamation if we pass it over with, "Oh yeah, that's original sin." When deep spiritual truth is reduced to a theological belief it has no chance of touching the heart.

So if sin is allowed to be that idiotic and self-defeating pursuit of narrow self-centered desires to the cost of one's relationships, which harms the world around us, then we have the ugly and messy human condition which the Bible portrays. Sin is both the cause and the result of the stupid human attempt to impose our ill-informed will upon creation and upon each other.

To me the most impressive fact of human history is that we are still here. Surely given the depth and breadth and pervasiveness of our self-destructive will, our micro-focus on our need for security and getting our way as individuals, tribes and nations, we would have destroyed all human life by now. There must be some restraining force. There must be some power which counteracts our propensity to drive through all the stop signs and danger barriers and prevents us from plunging off the cliff.

More than a restraining force, there must be some power within us which seeks to be creative and not destructive. There must be some power within us which is concerned for others, maybe even at the cost to our own desires. There must be a sense that, like the addict trapped by alcohol, narcotics, food, gambling or sex, we are trapped and indeed enslaved by the power of self-will. For all our bravado about our personal power is there not something in us that wants to be liberated from this tyranny of the exclusively self-centered life?

The answer, of course, is *yes*. Unlike the doctrine of total depravity attributed to John Calvin, we are not totally depraved. We are capable of amazing generosity and goodness. We are capable of compassion which completely forgets about our own self-preservation. There is precious beauty in every human soul for a very simple reason. The Bible tells us that we are made in the likeness of God. We are made with the same generous love that caused that massive explosion of creativity which spread the energy of creation far beyond the power of any finite being to comprehend. We are made to be tiny bits of creative energy extending inward what God has flung across the heavens. Indeed we are meant to combine our individual bits together and so extend the goodness of God in God's creation.

So if we are so good, why are we so bad? If we have all this God-given capacity for generosity and compassion, why is the world such a mess, why is there so much anguish and horror? The most terrible answer to this question is the easiest. There is no God. It is all just haphazard chance born of original chaos. We are helpless against fate without resource. The second most terrible answer is that there is a God and it is all God's plan. Most people who identify as atheists do so because they reject this God: this God who allowed the Nazi holocaust, starvation, disease, cruelty, abuse, poverty. Frankly, I can't blame them. Yet the prospect of a meaningless and purposeless creation is more terrifying to me.

So how do we live in this dilemma? How do we live who are aware of our tendency to look out for ourselves first at the cost of others? How do we proceed aware of our hypocrisies and self-destructive patterns? How do we find hope when our efforts to do the right thing seem so small in comparison with the magnitude of the world's evil?

Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!

The key to our hope lies in a secret hidden in the little word translated “takes”. In the Greek the word indicates *continuous action*. John calls his disciples to see in Jesus the saving lamb who saves by continuously taking away the sin of the world.

This isn't just *good news* it is *amazing and extraordinary news!*

For years we complained about the cleaning service at the church. The building was never clean. Finally Steve Smith took the bull by the horns and found someone who does the job well. Twice a week I come into my office and it smells clean and is clean. Of course I can't find anything on my desk, but that's a small price to pay. The point is that twice a week my mess has been cleaned up. I can start fresh. When I start fresh I see more clearly, I make better decisions, I feel I am back on the path of God--before I was always noticing the stains and dust, the crumbs of my lunches on the rug. By the same token, left to myself, my sins accumulate in the corners. I try to ignore them and “shove them under the rug. They grow in my consciousness and before I know it I am primarily about my failures and inadequacies; these in turn become fears and doubts and soon become despair.

But the Lamb of God continuously takes away the sin of the world. I continuously am offered a new start and the chance to do the next right thing. I have the opportunity to keep my eyes on Jesus and to join him. With Jesus by my side, every day is a truly new day. As Paul writes, “the past is finished and gone and life has become new.” This is not just so in some ultimate reality. It is literally true *every day*.

I suspect that when the disciples went with Jesus to discover where he was staying, they found a presence which would renew them every day. Now wonder they wanted to be with him every day! Who wouldn't? Amen.