

Second Sunday after Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
19 January 2020

John 1:29-42

We have an incredible passage for us today from the Gospel of John. This is a book of "signs" -- namely things, events, and people who point to something else. In his Gospel John uses the verb "to give witness" 24 times, twice as much as any other evangelist. In the passage today, the Baptizer gives witness to Jesus in two different episodes. During the first episode John sees Jesus coming and declares:

- Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world:
- He ranks ahead of me because he was before me.
- I came baptizing with water that he might be revealed to Israel.
- I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. (God himself said) "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."
- And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.

First John makes a very clear connection between this Jesus and the sacrificial system of the People of God in the Old Testament. The first statement he makes about Jesus is "Here is the Lamb of God!" In fact, John will make this affirmation about Jesus twice within the same short section of Scripture. This Jesus who is the Word of God and who is God, through whom all things were made, is also the sacrificial lamb of God.

The image of Lamb/Goat/Bull offered in sacrifice is seen throughout the Pentateuch. Remember, for example, the burnt sacrifice Able offered from the first born of his flocks (Genesis 4:4), the sacrifice Noah offered God as soon as he and his family come out of the Ark (Genesis 8:20), and the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in Genesis 22:1-19, where God intervenes to spare the boy and provides a perfect ram for the appointed sacrifice. In that famous passage, Abraham tells the boy, "God himself will offer the lamb for the burnt offering." The burnt offering was a sacrifice of approach, a sacrifice through which sinful people came into the presence of the Most Holy God.

For John, Jesus is both, the very Lamb through whom we can approach God to be in his presence, and the guilt sacrifice that atones for the sin of

humanity. John adds that Jesus the Lamb of God “takes away the sin of the world.” Because he is the lamb of God, through the shedding of his blood on the cross Jesus becomes the perfect sacrifice of approach. We can now be in the presence of God without burnt offerings. He also becomes the perfect atoning sacrifice through which the sins of the world are forgiven.

In a very real way, what John is saying is that Jesus, the Son of God, who was with God from the very beginning, fulfills for all times all the requirements of the Jewish sacrificial system. We no longer need the shedding of blood to approach God. We no longer need animal sacrifices to atone for our sins and obtain God’s forgiveness. Through Christ all the requirements of Leviticus have been fulfilled. Now, it is easy for us to overlook the importance of this because we live on this side of the resurrection of Christ and because we are blessed to have unimpeded access to God. But, let me try to explain why this would have been so radical for John’s audience to hear.

According to Biblical tradition, no one can see God directly, for if someone did that person would die. God’s glory is so incredibly awesome that no one can stand to be in his presence. In fact there are only two people in the whole scripture that are allowed to be in God’s presence, one is Moses and the second is the prophet Elijah. Even then, they only get glimpses of God’s glory. For the rest of humanity, they need the mediation of priests who act as go-betweens God and the people. In many ways, the burnt offerings that all pious Jews were required to offer acted as a humble gesture of approach to God, a way of getting God’s attention. Once this approach was made, the faithful Jew would make a sacrifice of atonement for sin, a fellowship sacrifice, a thanksgiving offering, or any other offering that was appropriate. Before any of these sacrifices were acceptable to God, however, an offering of approach was necessary.

Jesus is for us this offering of approach. This is radically important because it changes everything for us. For starters, our ability to approach God directly is no longer dependent on what we can offer God, but rather on what Christ has already offered God on our behalf. Christ’s sacrifice is the only sacrifice we need to have direct access to God. Second, this sacrifice was offered for all times, which means we no longer need weekly sacrifices. We don’t have to kill Jesus at this altar week after week. We come together in his name to celebrate an event that has already taken place. An event through which we are reconciled with God. An event that moves us from the category of enemies and traitors to the category of forgiven children, beloved sons and daughters. It is done! Christ having died once no longer has to die again. The sacrifice has been offered. The gulf has been bridged. The penalty has been paid.

Reconciliation has been obtained. We have been ransomed and now we are free to approach God with confidence and love.

My friends, we are almost done with this sermon and we have only covered one statement of the first testimony of John about Jesus. And we haven't even mentioned the second testimony. Let me briefly summarize the first testimony and introduce the second. John stated that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; Jesus ranks ahead of John because he was before John; John came baptizing with water that Jesus might be revealed to Israel; John himself saw the Spirit descending on Jesus from heaven like a dove and heard the voice of God saying to him, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And, finally John says that he has seen and has testified that Jesus is the Son of God.

This last phrase leads us directly into the second testimony. The very next day, John saw Jesus approach and exclaimed to two of his disciples, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" It is this second testimony that leads two of John's disciples to leave John and follow Jesus. After a brief encounter, Jesus invites these disciples to "Come and see", after which they choose to follow Jesus. We are told one of these disciples is Andrew. Once he comes and sees, he finds his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus, saying, "We have found the Messiah." Again, we could preach a dozen sermons on these verses, but I want to focus for a few seconds on John's role as "match-maker".

John tells us that he has seen and has given testimony that Jesus is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. He knows he himself is not the Messiah. He knows that his job is to prepare the way for someone who is greater because he existed before all worlds were created. In great humility, John chooses to point the spotlight on Jesus rather than pointing that spotlight on himself just a bit longer. John gets out of the way so his friends can have unimpeded access to Jesus and, through him, to God. My friends this is a great lesson for priests and for many of us engaged in ministry. There are many times when by focusing attention on us and our "flashy" ministries we obscure the way to Christ, we fill the road with roadblocks, we load people up with burdens and expectations that are absolutely unnecessary.

Like John, we are invited to give testimony to what Christ has done for us in our lives. We are invited to bring those who don't know Christ to the fountain of all living water. It is important to remember, however, that we are not the focus of our own ministry, it is not us people are coming to see. At best, we are to be like traffic signals whose only job is to point others to Christ. We are not the destination, but rather we point to the destination that is Christ himself.

May Christ who is our sacrifice of approach to God and the atoning sacrifice for our sins continue to lead us closer to God and may he give us the courage to share his love for us with those who need it most. Amen!