

## The Lamb of God

Welcome to the season of Epiphany!

Epiphany means God showing God's self to us, to people of all stripes and kinds and colors.

It is God's "coming out" party to humanity, in all of our wrinkled fleshiness, with our sprains and strains and headaches and wants and wishes.

It's the season of God showing God's self to the whole wide world!

So more than perhaps any other time of the year, this is the season to ask: what is God really like?

This is a time to look again at words and stories that are so familiar that we've stopped thinking about them, and to think about them again.

One of those familiar lines is in today's gospel, as John the Baptist hollers out:

"Behold, the lamb of God!"

It's a phrase we know well.

We'll sing it in just a few minutes as we prepare for holy communion:

"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."

But what does it mean, this "lamb of God?"

For our Jewish brothers and sisters, the lamb is the animal sacrificed in Egypt on the night of the 10th plague sent against Pharaoh, because he won't release them from slavery.

The lamb is sacrificed, its blood smeared on doorposts, and the angel of death, who sees the blood on the doorpost, “passes over” those homes, doing them no harm.

That’s how the Jewish feast of Passover gets its name.

It marks the beginning of their journey from slavery to freedom.

But in Jesus, the lamb doesn’t come from **our** flocks, meaning, Jesus isn’t the lamb that **humanity** presents to God.

Jesus is the lamb that **God** presents to humanity.

“The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is not our lamb given to God, but God’s lamb given to us.

But why?

Does God give us this lamb, as some have insisted over the years, because an angry God demands payment for sin, and because humanity doesn’t have a big enough bank account to pay the debt, God sends his son to pay the debt for us?

Many of us grew up with this story.

But when you really sit with it, it turns God into a kind of monster: one who needs blood to be satisfied, and not just any blood, but the blood of the entirely innocent: the blood of his own son!

Our Jewish friends challenge this understanding of the Lamb of God when they ask:

“If God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac, how can God possibly insist on the sacrifice of his own beloved son as some sort of appeasement?”

Good question!

Paul tells us that in Jesus we see the fulness of God.

Paul tells us that Jesus gets us as near as we can in this life to the true nature of God.

And because of this, perhaps we need to look again at the life of Jesus if we want to grasp what God is up to in giving us his lamb.

Jesus never engages in violence.

Jesus freely forgives, freely welcomes.

Jesus openly embraces anyone who is willing to be embraced.

So if Jesus is the true face of God, how do we square the reality of peaceful, non-violent, accepting Jesus with a theology that says God has a blood lust that must be satisfied?

What if we've thought about this all wrong?

What if the gift of God's lamb not to appease God, but to put an end to **our love** of sacrifice?

In the old days they did it with animals.

Once a year all the sins of the community were piled up on a goat, and that poor beast was driven into the desert to die: and the people rejoiced, because by sacrificing the scapegoat they were free, for awhile, from their sins; and they were united to one another in a deep way because the whole community condemned the poor, sin-filled goat.

Today's scapegoats are not so much the four legged variety as they are our fellow human beings: from Central American immigrants to Muslims to whomever we deem to be a terrorist.

We see this false, scapegoating, anti-Christian unity of "us against them" on display at every Trump rally and at the massive street demonstrations in Iran; it's what lies behind the slaughter of Hutu against Tutsi in Rwanda, it's what propels today's dangerous rise in fascist white nationalism.

Scapegoating creates unity, but not the unity that God longs for.

The thing is, unity through violence is the story of humanity from the dawn of time.

It's why the high priest says of Jesus:

"It's better for one man to die than for the nation to be destroyed."

So what does the lamb of God say to all of this?

He comes to undo it all for us.

We segregate society into "insiders" and "outsiders."

Jesus calls everyone together.

We are addicted to judging others, but Jesus says:

"Take the log out of your own eye before trying to remove the splinter from your neighbor's eye."

We love our friends and hate our enemies; but Jesus insists that we love our enemies, praying for those who wish us ill.

We kill because we fear being killed, but Jesus willingly accepts death, and lo and behold, on the third day, he is raised from the dead!

The lamb of God shows us a new way:

He shows us the way out of the endless cycle of violence and judgment – and the way into this new life that Jesus calls the kingdom of God.

“You’ve seen how godless rulers throw their weight around,” Jesus says, “and when people get a little power, how it goes to their heads.

It’s not that way with you.

Whoever wants to be great, must be a servant.

Whoever wants to be first, must be a slave.

The son of man is here to serve and not to be served, and to give away his life for the sake of those held hostage...” Mk 10:43-45, The Message Tr.

Held hostage?

To what?

Held hostage to the sin of the world.

And what is the sin of the world?

The sin of the world is the endless cycle of violence and judgment and us against them: all of which is fueled by the notion that **we** are equipped to say what is good and who is evil.

But Jesus tells us to leave such things to God – while offering our lives in faith into the care of the living God.

We are called to be the hands and eyes and feet and voice of Jesus in the world.

We are called to live, in community, as witnesses to the wider world, this new way of life, as we throw our lot in with the one who is God revealed to us, as we work and wait, with eager expectation, for the day when all things shall be made new.

This is the season of Epiphany.

God is home with all of humanity.

“Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Come, let us follow him!

+amen