

The Lamb of God

We are just at the beginning of eight, count 'em, 8 Sundays of the season of the Epiphany.

Now, who knows what Epiphany means?

Go ahead, pretend I'm Mother Imelda, just shout it out!

It means God showing God's self to us, to men and women and children of all stripes and kinds and colors.

It means God becoming one of us, in all of our wrinkled fleshiness, with our sprains and strains and headaches and wants and wishes.

And it means the season of God showing God's self to humanity, but not to just some of humanity.

Not just to the Jews or Episcopalians, but to the whole wide world.

So more, perhaps than any other time of the year, these 8 weeks are a chance to spend time mulling, pondering, meditating upon, the wonderment of who is God; to ask, what is God really like?

This is a time to stop for a moment, to look again at words and stories that are so familiar that we have stopped thinking about them, and to take the time to peer into them deeply.

One of those oh so familiar phrases is right here in today's gospel: as John the Baptist hollers out — as he points him out, with Jesus walking toward him; with Jesus walking toward us:

“Behold, the lamb of God!”

Now there's a phrase that runs right off your tongue.

We've said it a million times.

It's a phrase we've all grown up with in the faith.

We sing it every day in the midst of preparing for holy communion:

"Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us," we say, every Sunday, every Eucharist.

But today, maybe we can stop awhile and ask: what does it mean to speak of "the lamb of God?"

On the one hand, the lamb for our Jewish brothers and sisters is the animal sacrificed in Egypt on the night of the 10th plague sent against Pharaoh, because he wouldn't release the Jewish people from slavery.

The lamb is sacrificed, its blood smeared on doorposts, so that the angel of death, who sees the blood on the doorpost, will pass over that house and do it no harm.

This is the meaning and beginning of the Jewish feast of the Passover.

It marks the night they are transformed from slaves to free people.

But in Jesus, the lamb is not one taken from *our* flocks.

Jesus is not a lamb that **humanity** presents to God.

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

In other words, 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.....

And what about this lamb, and for what reason does God give this lamb to us?

Does God give us this lamb, as some have maintained 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, so God sends his son to pay the debt for us?

Most of us grew up with this story, this theory of theology, in one way or another.

But doesn't this theory of theology turn 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 us on this understanding of the Lamb of God.

They ask: "If God refused to allow Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, how can God possibly insist on the sacrifice of his own beloved son as some sort of appeasement?"

If Paul is correct, that in Jesus we have come to see the fulness of God, that in Jesus we get as near as we can in this life to the whole sense and sensibility of God; then maybe we need to look again at the life of Jesus if we want to really get what God is up to in giving us his lamb.

Is the sacrifice of the lamb something done to satisfy God, or is this sacrifice an unavoidable catastrophe that alone has the power to wake us up to the reality of our situation, and to the reality that is God?

Because Jesus, as you know, never engages in violence.

Jesus, as you know, 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 theory of theology that says God has a blood lust that must be satisfied?

What if we've thought about this all wrong?

What if God gives us the gift of God's lamb not so that God may somehow be satisfied, but so that we might put an end to our love of sacrifice?

Oh sure, you're thinking, he's really lost it now!

When's the last time anyone around here sacrificed so much as a chicken much less a sheep or a cow?

But in fact, we are in love with sacrifice.

In the old days they did it up front and out in the open.

Once a year all the sins of the community were piled up on a goat, and that poor beast was then 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 all in unison condemned the poor, sin-filled goat.

Today, we do the same thing, but instead of piling on a goat, we pile on say, Sadaam Hussein, or the communists or Iran or, especially today, the New England Patriots (which they completely deserve, by the way...)

If you think about 9/11, our initial coming together had a great deal to do with a shared horror and a shared grief; but it didn't take long for the horror and grief to be transformed into rage, a rage that took us into Iraq, merely so we might have a big enough target to express our rage—since the pipsqueaks of Afghanistan weren't sufficient to do the trick.

It's not just us, obviously.

This is human nature: to band together over a common enemy, to put that enemy to death, and then to rejoice, as if we are one.

It's how North Korea maintains its dictatorship, it's how the genocide in Rwanda exploded, it's at the root of the divisive violence throughout the Middle East and elsewhere.

Unity through violence has been the story of humanity from the dawn of recorded history.

It's what the high priest means when he says of Jesus:

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

The lamb of God, therefore, is the one who comes to undo all of this for us.

We create classes and groups in order to segregate society into those on the inside and those on the outside, but Jesus calls everyone together, the good and the bad, the insider and the outsider, and has lunch with us all.

We turn the judgment of others into a fine and noble art, whether its gossip over the back fence or in the very highest courts of law: we are in love with judgment, with determining what is good and what is evil; whether the one we are judging is the guy across the street or the gal in the mirror.

But Jesus says: "Take the log out of your own eye before trying to remove the dust from your neighbor's eye;" Jesus says, "don't judge and you won't be judged;" Jesus says, "the measure you give will be the measure poured back to you."

We have learned to love our friends and hate our enemies; but Jesus insists that we love our enemies, and befriend the friendless.

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 comes to be among us to show us a new way.

It is a way out of the endless cycle of violence and judgment – and a way into this new life that Jesus calls the kingdom of God.

“You’ve observed 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 going to be that way with you. Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. Whoever wants to be first among you must be a slave. That is what the son of man is all about...to serve and not to be served, and then to give away his life in exchange for many who are 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?

Perhaps it might be defined as the endless cycle of violence, of judgment, of us against them, of holding tight to grudges and resentments and old angers: all of which is fueled by the notion that **we** are equipped to say what is good and what is evil; for Jesus tells us over and over again to leave that to God – while offering our whole lives in faith into the care of the living God.

This is the great calling to which we are all of us called – precisely because of the freedom Jesus gives us to live, and to live without fear.

Today, now, we are called to be the hands, and eyes and feet of Jesus in the world.

Today, now, we are called to be the voice of Jesus in the world.

Like a pinch of yeast, like a lamp set on a table, like a tiny mustard seed, despite all the seeming odds against the mission, 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 the very image of God, as we work and wait, with eager expectation, for the day when all things shall be made new.

It is the season of Epiphany.

God makes God's home with all human beings, even with you, even with me.

"Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Come, let us follow him!

+amen