Epiphany 2: John 1:29–42a

Other Lessons: Isaiah 49:1–7; Psalm 40:1–11; 1 Corinthians 1:1–9

Behold! Look! The lamb of God who takes away (or takes up) the sin of the world. The simple words of John as he pointed at Jesus. But these words do not simply tell his disciples to “look” as a point of interest and nothing more. John did not just want the disciples to look, but these words help them recognize the importance of this man from Nazareth. Twice John did this. He didn’t call him “Jesus” or “son of Joseph” or “my cousin”, but twice he called Jesus the lamb of God because John was called by God to do this. And this is the main theme of the season of Epiphany, which is about how God reveals Jesus to be the Christ. In our Gospel reading from last week, we heard about the baptism of Jesus and there, God directly reveals that Jesus is his beloved son and even sends the Holy Spirit to show this. But the season of Epiphany is more than just about revealing some heavenly secrets, it calls us to action as well. Now that God has sent his son to be born in the manger (as we heard in the Christmas season) and now that he has revealed that this man is actually God’s own son, what then are we to do with this revelation?

One response of the church was to sing this as part of the worship (now known as “Agnus Dei” which is Latin for “Lamb of God”, along with the other “lamb” song “Dignus est Agnus” (Latin for Worthy is the Lamb), and also the Gloria in the form that we have today. This song was first used in the 7th century during the breaking of the bread in the service of the sacrament. As the priest broke the communion bread (since they didn’t have individual wafers like we do today), the choir would sing this line repeatedly, until the bread has completely been broken. So originally this song did not have an ending. They just sang as long as they needed to. The current form that we have (with 3 lines of “lamb of God” and the ending “have mercy on us” and “grant us peace”) is from the 12th century, and it has been the regular form since that time. Certainly the church from very early on has understood the importance of this lamb motif.

In the Old Testament, lambs played an important role in the life of the people of God. Of course their wool and their meat are important for their bodily needs, but it is their blood and life that sustained the people spiritually. They were used daily as sacrifices for the sins of the people. There were other animals used like ox, pigeons, bread, grains, etc, but only lambs were used to atone for the sins. Even before the law was given on mount Sinai, we have examples of lambs being used, especially in the story of Abraham offering Isaac, in which a “lamb of God” was provided so that Isaac did not need to die (though Abraham believed that Isaac would be raised even if he should die because God had made a promise through Isaac). And again, we have the story of the Passover in which the firstborn were spared in those houses that have been marked by the lamb’s blood. And it is very likely that the animal that was used on Adam and Eve was also a lamb, so that it is possible that they are covered with the skin and the blood. The blood was a very reminder of death, but not theirs even though they were the ones who sinned.

And that’s why lambs are so important, because they take away people’s sins, but only by the command and promise of God. It’s not like lambs have an intrinsic ability to take or absorb sins upon themselves, but it was God who counted sins toward the animal as guilty instead of the sinner. The sinner remains a sinner, but forgiven through faith in the promise of the atonement. And this is what the two disciples heard and understood. Even though now the “lamb” turns out to be a human person they understood that this person is here to take away the sins of the world, this man will one day die and shed his blood in Jerusalem. They heard, they believed, and now they followed.

They followed because they want to know more. They wanted to know and understand more about God and how he is now doing a new thing by sending this “lamb” who is the Christ. Their first question, though, is “where are you staying?” The question seems mundane enough but it’s actually quite theologically charged. On the surface reading, it seems they are asking about Jesus’ lodging, that is, where he is staying for the day/night, but this verb is usually translated as “to remain” or “to abide” which is used very often in John’ Gospel. It denotes the presence of God. Where God remains/stays, that’s where he blesses. In the Old Testament, God remains/stays in the temple, and people could be confident that God is with them and that they can always find him when they go to Jerusalem. You can imagine how devastated they were when the temple was destroyed, especially when Ezekiel specifically described how he saw the glory of God departing the temple, leaving earth, so to speak.

The 2 disciples might not be consciously asking the question in the theological sense because after all Jesus was there before their eyes, God was right there in front of them. But this serves as a guide for us. Because after hearing John’s proclamation, they do not only “behold” but they went and followed after Jesus. Likewise, as we hear, listen, and sing the Agnus Dei and other hymns and spiritual songs, what are we to do? We follow Jesus and we too ought to ask “where is Jesus staying, where is he abiding?” He is not in Galilee, not in Nazareth, not far up in heaven after the ascension, but he is where he has promised to be, that is, to be with us when we are gathered in his name, when we abide in his word (Jn15), when we partake of his body and his blood (Jn6). To be a follower of Jesus is not an abstract thing because he has given concrete things for us to follow so that we abide/remain/stay in Christ and he in us. And it is in these things that we truly receive the benefits of the lamb of God. In word and sacrament, in the gathering around these gifts, we have the lamb who takes away our sins.

But the story doesn’t stop here. Though we don’t know how much time these 2 disciples spent with Jesus, they had learned just enough so that faith is now in their hearts. They knew this Jesus is the chosen one, that he had come from God, and he is going to save people from their sins. But this faith moves people to action. And so one of them, Andrew, goes to his brother Peter and tells him the good news. Andrew was not one of the so-called “inner circles” but he was one of the first to be called “The Twelve”. Certainly Peter became one of the 12 as well through the call of Jesus, but no doubt his brother Andrew played an important role in introducing the Christ to him. Andrew heard John, followed Jesus, and in a short while he was able to do the same in telling others about the lamb of God.

And we too have received this great gift of faith and love. Sometimes we feel inadequate in our evangelism efforts, especially when the world today is so hostile to the Christian faith. But we do not need to fear or to shrink away or hide from the world. We have the simple message and more importantly we have Christ abiding with and in us. The message is simple. For Andrew, it was “We have found the messiah” (now, for today, most people have no idea what that means, even if you use the word Christ), but we can substitute that word, we can say: we have found heaven, we have found eternal life, we have found forgiveness of sins, we have found eternal rest, we have found hope. Of course you don’t end the conversation there but it is a starting point. And notice too that Andrew shared this good news with his brother, not some random stranger that he happens to meet on the street. Peter was a believer already, although we would call that the “Old Testament” faith that looks dimly as through a veil. But with the help of Andrew, Peter was able to see more clearly and then with words of Christ, he was finally brought to the full New Testament faith and became one of the greatest leaders in the church. Evangelism, the sharing of the faith does not need to be in a faraway country or with some stranger that you probably will only meet once in your lifetime. It can happen at home, with a family member, or at work or school. There are plenty of opportunities around you. There are plenty of people do not know this lamb who has taken away all their sins.

This is the challenge of the epiphany season, the challenge of this text as well. What do we do with the revelation from God? We have been shown, as we have heard John proclaim: “Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” We, like those disciples, have seen, believed and now follow Jesus to where he stays and abides. We have now come to where Jesus is found, in his word and sacraments. But if we are in him and in his word, then we should not be silent (as one of our canticles says: Thank the lord and sing his praise, tell everyone what he has done…”) Therefore pray, pray for those who have not yet heard this good news, pray for those who have fallen away from the faith, and pray that God would give you the opportunity to share the faith, pray that God would give you the wisdom and patience for this task, and pray that God would create the faith through your words so that we may all share in the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, hope, and everlasting life.