

# Ecce! Agnus Dei!

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## John 1:

[29] The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

[30] This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.'

[31] I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel."

[32] And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him.

[33] I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'

[34] And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

[35] The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples;

[36] and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!"

[37] The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

[38] Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?"

[39] He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.

[40] One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

[41] He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ).

[42] He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

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In Christian imagery the figure I like best is the image of The Lamb of God. In Latin - Agnus Dei. Of course, there are numerous depictions of the Lamb of God throughout the world.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him and exclaims, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't want anything less than for the world's sin to be taken away.

Interim Pastor Tom Ford



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I've had it up to here with the world's sin! I want to be rid of it! I want it out of here! All of it! And if Jesus can do it, by God, he's got the job!

I think Jesus taking sin away is why we are involved in Christianity, now isn't it? The world got so cluttered up with sin that something had to be done. So Jesus came. The literal Greek for today's Gospel reads, "Behold, the Lamb of God who keeps on taking away the sin of the world." Sin, singular, is so pervasive that Jesus has got his work cut out for him. It's a job that he won't finish until there is a New Heaven and a New Earth, with all the former things passed away. All the former things meaning a lot of the things we still know and experience including hatred, war, grudges, pride, poverty, natural disasters, suffering, disease, death all that make up that three-letter word sin.

The images of The Lamb of God that I look at proclaim: Jesus, the Lamb of God, is at work taking it all away. And I am reminded that it is not my job to take it away. And it is not your job to take it away.

There is only one Lamb of God. Jesus. It is his job to take it away. And he is taking it away. He really is, whether you believe it or not. I choose to believe it. Things are getting better, in spite of all appearances and experiences to the contrary.

A tourist visited a church in Germany and was surprised to see the carved figure of a lamb near the top of the church's tower. He asked why it was there and was told that when the church was being built, a workman fell from a high scaffold. His co-workers rushed down, expecting to find him dead. But to their surprise and joy, he was alive and only slightly injured. How did he survive? A flock of sheep was passing beneath the tower at the time, and he landed on top of a lamb. The lamb broke his fall and was crushed to death, but the man was saved. To commemorate that miraculous escape, someone carved a lamb on the tower at the exact height from which the workman fell.<sup>1</sup>

Just think of all your life experiences - experiences in which you could see Jesus as the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world - dying in breaking your fall and how those experiences could lead you also to choose that symbol and place it in a prominent place to see each day.

One rainy afternoon a young mother was driving along one of the main streets of town, taking those extra precautions necessary when the roads are wet and slick. Suddenly, her son Matthew spoke up from his relaxed position in the front seat. "Mom, I'm thinking of something." This announcement usually meant he had been pondering some fact for a while and was now ready to expound all that his seven-year-old mind had discovered. Mom was eager to hear. "What are you thinking?" she asked. "The rain," he began, "is like sin. And the windshield wipers are like God, wiping our sins away." After the chill bumps raced up her arms, the mom was able to respond, "That's really good, Matthew." Then

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Fairchild B <http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/a-or02su.php>

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curiosity broke in. How far would this little boy take this revelation? So she asked, "Do you notice how the rain keeps on coming? What does that tell you?" Matthew didn't hesitate one moment with his answer. "We keep on sinning and God just keeps on forgiving us."<sup>2</sup>

Behold! The Lamb of God, who keeps on taking away the sin of the world.

And yet, how does he do that?

The disciples of John understood the power of the image of Lamb of God. ... The early believers, reading John's Gospel, having celebrated Passover each year, having watched the lambs slaughtered in the Temple, would have equally understood the connection. But can we?<sup>3</sup>

We don't like to see, hear or speak about suffering and death.

On a shopping excursion to a large mall, one of the shoppers noticed a young boy watching with great fascination the presentation of a video on deer hunting. The six year old watched spell bound as the deer was stalked, shot, bled and butchered. The kill-an-animal-at-any-cost video was very graphic. Suddenly the boy's mother appeared, and was quite upset at finding her son watching the video. "Come on. We don't want to watch this." They walked briskly down the aisle into a hamburger franchise where death and the source of the hamburger are neatly disguised.

We all know a death is involved in supplying our hamburger meat. We just don't want to think about it. We know chickens were killed so we can enjoy Kentucky Fried Chicken. We just don't like to think about death.

As people moved to the city they also moved away from those intimate, life-and-death moments that regularly appear in raising livestock, or poultry, or even pets. We have grown increasingly uneasy dealing with illness, suffering, tragedy, death. We want our lives to be neat, tidy, sanitized, not messy, bloody, stained by dirt or sweat. ...We want to embrace the Lamb of God as a cuddly lamb which no one would hurt, because it's so cute.

But Jesus, the Lamb of God, was not cute and cuddly. The experience of the Lamb of God was very messy:

born in a cave,

<sup>2</sup> ASimple Sermon@ B <http://www.praize.com/jokes/kids/page13.html>

<sup>3</sup> William Willimon.

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a refugee before he is two years old,  
 hiding from vengeful politicians,  
 living on the edge of poverty,  
 never having a place he could call home as an adult, pursued by bitter enemies determined to wipe him out.

His life was all messed up. And it stayed messed up to the gory end. Taking away sin is a bloody, messy business!

This is both shocking and at the same time wonderfully reassuring. Because his life was all messed up, we have One to whom we may turn when our lives get all messed up.

Shirley C. Guthrie has written in the journal Theology Today:

“I believe one of the most important discoveries of Trinitarian theology in our time, is the discovery of the suffering love of the suffering triune God. All the cheap and easy talk about a God of sovereign power who is in control of a world in which there is so much poverty, suffering, and injustice is obscene. All self-confident talk about a powerful church that has the mandate and the ability to transform society with this or that conservative or liberal social-political agenda, or with this or that evangelistic program, is increasingly absurd in a disintegrating church that cannot solve its own problems, much less the problems of the world. The only gospel that makes sense and can help in what Moltmann calls our ‘godless and godforsaken world’ is the good news of a God who loves enough to suffer with and for a suffering humanity. And the only believable church is one that is willing to bear witness to such a God by its willingness to do the same thing.”<sup>4</sup>

When John the Baptist announced Jesus was the Lamb of God, his listeners understood this was the image of sacrifice. God comes voluntarily to our godless world to suffer with us and for us. Jesus chooses to be the sacrificial lamb, chooses to enter and accept our messy, bloody world as his world. This is the pivotal revelation of Epiphany. A voluntary choice; a choice of sacrifice.

We use the language of ‘sacrifice’ too loosely. We live because other living things have their life taken away from them. The hen whose head my mother chopped off on our farm, the steers who become steak and hamburger, the wheat and corn and carrots we consume all have their life taken away, so we may live. But this mutual surrender of life is not ‘sacrifice’ in the accepted sense. Every true sacrifice is voluntary. We could not say the hen mom slaughtered or the bread we grind for flour were willing victims of their fate. But this season of Epiphany, when Jesus is made known to us, reveals that Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> (Shirley C. Guthrie, A Human Suffering, Human Liberation, and the Sovereignty of God, Theology Today, April 1996, p. 32)

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submitted deliberately and willingly to his crucifixion, which took place at the very moment that the Passover lambs were sacrificed in the Temple.

The Lamb of God chooses to accept and live in the messy, sometimes awful circumstances of our lives and our world. This is an amazing act of love.

John the Baptist expected the Messiah would come to clean up all the moral mess of our world, in a righteous crusade of retribution and house cleaning. But this is not the agenda Jesus chose. Jesus came to live in our messy world with us; to walk with us as our companion, to stand with us when tragedy stares us in the face, to grieve with us when we grieve our losses, to encourage us to be good neighbors and to teach us how to love even our enemies.

Jesus comes to be with us when life is messy; birth, illness, death, and all the parts in between are the places where we will find Jesus by our side. It is precisely at this decision by Jesus to be the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, and to accept our messy lives as his arena of sacrifice, that John sees “the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him... This is the Son of God.”

It is astoundingly good news that Jesus chooses to live with us in the messy circumstances of our lives. Jesus shows us that God is not uncaring about our hard times. Quite the opposite is true. Jesus chooses to be with us in all the messy experiences of our sinful world. He joins us in our family arguments, he walks in the unemployment lines, and he is by our side when we volunteer to help others.

In those awful experiences where tragedy stares us in the face, the death of a toddler on the highway, the hard news of cancer, the desperate struggle of our children and grandchildren to make sense of our world, Jesus is by our side, not to criticize us, but to encourage and empower us. To take away despair and give hope.

Jesus is not like John the Baptist. Jesus comes to help, not to condemn. He comes to lift up the fallen and heal the broken hearted. He doesn't go around publicly condemning people. Those who have been bruised in life, come to him for healing.

Jesus knows our weakness, and still chooses to call us his friends. Jesus accepts our messy lives, and enters into our experiences with mercy and compassion filling his heart.<sup>5</sup> He takes away sin and all its manifestations, you see, by wading into our messy lives and world with redeeming love, forgiveness, compassion and tenderness. And he keeps on doing it!

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<sup>5</sup> My thanks to Fred Unruh for his sermon, *The Lamb of God*, located at: <http://www.telusplanet.net/public/lethmenn/Sermons/02-01-20.html> . I have borrowed extensively from it.

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Every time you love, as he loved. Every time you forgive as he forgave. Every time your heart surrenders to compassion as his did. Every time you call forth from deep inside you the tenderness that is there, as Jesus was always doing. Sin is being taken away.

Behold! The Lamb of God!

Amen.

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