

Worthy Is the Lamb (John 1:29-42)
January 19, 2020 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

In the 90s when the announcement came that the NFL was expanding to Charlotte, there was much excitement throughout the Carolinas – especially in the team’s name and mascot. The Panthers is a powerful name, isn’t it? And the team logo is just as powerful: a sleek, fierce-looking, black panther, snarling its teeth and threatening to do harm. They haven’t done much harm this year, but that’s a conversation for another day.

When picking their mascots, most teams try to send a message. They want to project an image of power and strength. Countries, too, pick national symbols to show their strength. The British Empire has the lion. Russia has the bear. China uses the dragon. And, of course, the US has the eagle. All are very powerful images.

What do you think? Would an NFL team ever call themselves the Lambs? Or would a country, intent on showing its power and position in the world, ever choose a lamb as its national symbol? Probably not, because lambs just don’t last long. They either turn into sheep or become lamb chops. But could the lamb ever be the symbol of strength and power? Could it ever be a worthy label for anyone to bear?

The gospel writer, John, thought so. One day – sometime after Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the wilderness – he records an encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist. John the Baptist sees Jesus in the distance coming toward him. and spontaneously declares, *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!* He uses a title that we’ve all come to know well – a title we use to display great devotion toward Jesus. John calls him the Lamb of God.

What was in John’s mind when he put that title on the lips of John the Baptist? Today I would like us to consider several things that may have contributed to this image.

First, John may have been thinking of the Passover Lamb. In the old story of the Passover from Exodus, we know that it was the blood of the slain lamb which protected the houses of the Israelites on the night they fled from Egypt. On that night, when the Angel of Death slew the firstborn of the Egyptians, the Israelites were to smear the door posts with the blood of the slain lamb. Upon seeing it, the angel would pass over that house. The blood of the lamb delivered them from death. Could it have been that John was saying of Jesus, *Here is the one true sacrifice who can deliver you from death?* We who live on this side of the cross know that Jesus did, in fact, sacrifice his life so that we might live. For that reason, he could be compared to the Passover Lamb.

There are other similarities, as well, between the Passover and the crucifixion. In his gospel, John tells us that the crucifixion took place on the same day the Passover lambs were being taken to slaughter. Imagine that scene in your minds. As Jesus is being nailed to the cross, the bleating of lambs being slaughtered is heard in the background. A coincidence? Perhaps, but not for John. He wants his readers to make the connection between Jesus and the Passover lambs.

Furthermore, when Jesus was hanging on the cross, he was offered sour wine placed upon hyssop. Hyssop, you'll remember, was used to sprinkle the blood of the slaughtered lamb upon the doorposts of the Israelites in Egypt. So, we have an image of Jesus the sacrificial lamb.

A second point of reference came from the Jewish religious rituals. Twice a day in ancient times – once in the morning and once at night – a lamb was slaughtered in the temple. The priest would take some of the blood from the lamb and apply it to the altar, thereby restoring the people to a right relationship with God. To refer to someone as the Lamb of God, then, was somewhat like the kiss of death. Just as Jesus was beginning his ministry, John was alerting people as to how that ministry would end. Jesus' blood would be poured out. He would sacrifice his life to atone for the sins of humankind and to reconcile us with our God.

So, as we build our image, we first have Jesus as the sacrificial lamb, and secondly, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. One other picture that may have contributed to the use of this title comes from the prophet Isaiah, who speaks of a gentle lamb being led to slaughter. Isaiah had the vision of one who would bear his sufferings and sacrifice himself meekly and lovingly to redeem his people. Maybe John is saying, *Your prophet of old dreamed of a servant who was to love and suffer and die for the people. That one is now here. Jesus is the one who has come as our servant, but will serve us most by being slaughtered for us and for our salvation.*

Finally, we have to consider the symbolism of the lamb in the Hebrew world. The lamb was a symbol of purity and innocence – the perfect image of sinlessness.

So, if we combine all these pictures and symbols of lambs as the Jews understood them, we can begin to understand what John meant when he said, *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.* He pointed to one without sin – the very Son of God – sent from heaven to serve humanity and redeem us from our sins by becoming the sacrifice for those sins.

So, does the image of the lamb still evoke weakness and timidity? Jesus, the Lamb of God, demonstrates strength and power. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit given to him in his baptism, Jesus has the strength to accept his mission and willingly lay down his life in a cruel and torturous death. You see, there is power in the Lamb – God's power. And this makes the Lamb worthy of all things. In fact, that's what we sing each time we have communion: *Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood sets us free to be people of God. Power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and blessing and glory are his.*

Is there any wonder that the image of Jesus as Lamb has become one of the church's most treasured images of him? In that image, we see One who comes to us gently, tenderly, compassionately, to comfort us as we journey through the trials of life. But he is the One who also comes to us with strength, power, and might, to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

We can be assured that whatever our sin, however deep the hole we've dug, wherever we find ourselves, there is One who can – and will – set us free from the suffocation of our sins. It is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. John the Baptist recognized this, and he pointed it out. In fact, John's whole mission was to prepare the way for Messiah and point to him as God's chosen.

There is a painting of John the Baptist by Renaissance artist, Matthais Grunewald. In that painting, John is pointing to Jesus. Now, that doesn't seem so unusual in and of itself. But looking more closely, one notices that the index finger of John is elongated and a bit out of proportion to his hand. The meaning of this painting is quite clear. Although John the Baptist had a considerable following, he spent his days pointing to the true One of God, the One who will open the gates of heaven to all believers.

John knew what he had to do: to redirect the attention from himself to Jesus. *He must increase and I must decrease.* We, too, are to do what John the Baptist did. We are called to point to Christ in all we say and do so that others may come to know him and the power of his presence in their lives...so that they may experience the forgiveness and saving grace he offers...so they may know that because he gave his life as a ransom, they may live throughout eternity.

Christ served us so that we may serve him. Let us serve others in his name every day by pointing to Jesus and saying, *Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Worthy is the Lamb.*