The Gospel of John: *The Lamb of God*

John 1:29-34

As we return to our journey through John’s Gospel, our passage for today is John 1:29-34. Please stand for the reading of God’s Word.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."

My message this morning will fall under five subheadings: 1) The God Who Comes to Us; 2) The Story of the Lamb; 3) John’s 3-fold proclamation; 4) John’s personal testimony; and 5) The Source of our hope.

I. The God Who Comes to Us

If you recall, last Sunday we met John the Baptist who was being interrogated by a group of priests and Levites from Jerusalem. There we learned who John the Baptizer was, and who he was not. We observed how clearly John the Baptist humbled himself, referring to himself as a voice “crying out in the wilderness;” whose only intent was to make the way straight for people to meet the One whose sandals John was not worthy of untying.

As we return to John 1, it is “the next day,” and right away we meet the One who John was referring to…His name is Jesus. In vs. 29 we read, “The next day he (John the Baptizer) saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

First, notice that Jesus is “coming toward” the Baptist. These small details should not be overlooked. Remember that in his prologue, John the Apostle writes, “The True Light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” Most religions says, “Here is the path for finding god or the gods. Walk on this path and you will find god.” Christianity says, “Behold how God has come to us when we were lost and unable to find our way back to Him.” In Luke 15 Jesus describes “The Good Shepherd” that leaves the 99 to seek and save the one lost, wandering sheep who has gone astray. This is always the picture of our loving God who takes all the initiative to come to us; thus, it is fitting, here at the outset of John’s gospel, that when we first meet Jesus, He is coming towards US…Jesus has not been “discovered” or achieved through some sacred pilgrimage of religion. God has taken the initiative to come to His own through the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

Now, as we read vs. 29, we come to what NT scholar Fredrick Bruner refers to as, “The Mount Everest of John’s witness to Christ.” When the Baptist sees Jesus coming towards him, he declares, “Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” I will attempt to unpack the mystery of the Lamb here in just a moment, but first I want to invoke the Geek with the Greek! The Greek construction of this sentence is full of emphasis, and I want you to see it because those familiar with the Greek would have appreciated this.

John the Baptist’s declaration here in vs. 29 features 5 definite articles. So, a literal reading of the Greek might sound like this: “Behold, THE Lamb of THE God, THE ONE who is taking away THE sin of THE world!” Bruner writes,
Each definite article wants to make its own definite point: Jesus is not one among many lambs, given by one of many gods, as one of many possible liberators, from only some of our deep sin, for only a portion of the entire world. He is the lamb of the One God, who is the Liberator from the entire sin of the whole cosmos.

And He comes to us…He is THE ONLY ONE who is coming to save us…there is no other savior, amen?

II. The Story of the Lamb

Now, how are we to understand “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?” I’m going to tell you “the story of the lamb” here in just a moment, but before I do, I want you to know my final conclusion even before we get started. My final conclusion is that John’s proclamation of Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” should be understood as a prophetic proclamation straight from God that reveals the role and nature of His Son. That is to say, this revelatory descriptor of Jesus as “the Lamb of God” is NEW…it is not something re-packaged from the old. That Jesus is God’s Lamb, the One who is taking away the sin of the world, is pure REVELATION that, prior to this moment, remained veiled. Such is why even John the Baptist will twice admit, “I myself did not know him.” No one in the ancient world was looking for a Lamb…the Lamb caught the world off-guard. The Baptist declares Jesus to be the Lamb of God because that truth has been revealed to him as a prophet; however, (and please take note of this!) just as soon as John declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the OT explodes with stories and images that help us to see how God was always preparing His people to meet Jesus, the Lamb of God. So, without further ado, join me for a brief tour of the OT scriptures that I will refer to as, “the story of the Lamb.”

Our story begins early on, in Genesis 22, when God mysteriously summons his servant Abraham to do something unimaginable. In Genesis 22:1-2 we read: After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

I heard a sermon recently where Dr. Tim Keller unpacked this story. Keller observed that we in the 21st century find this story unthinkable and offensive; but in the ancient world, people heard this story quite differently. In the ancient mindset, it was assumed that the sins of a man would require the life of his firstborn son. We actually see this portrayed in living color in Exodus 4. When God sends Moses to liberate his people from Pharaoh, he instructs Moses to say, “Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me.’ If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.” Later, in Exodus 11-12 God sends the Destroyer to “bring justice” by striking down every first-born male animal in Egypt (I’ll come back to that in a minute!). Finally, in Exodus 13, God says to Moses, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and beast, is mine.” Again, in Exodus 13:11-15 Moses speaks to the people saying:

11"When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, 12you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. 13Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. 14And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. 15For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.'
Can you see that Abraham hears God’s command to sacrifice his son differently than we would? The firstborns belonged to God unless redeemed, due to the sin of the people. So, when God calls Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a guilt offering, Abraham understands that God is only commanding Abraham to pay what he owes. God had accepted guilt offerings made of animals up till now; but Abraham understood the true cost of sin: the debt of sin requires the death of the first-born son—the son that he loves.

Now, listen to the exchange between Abraham and young Isaac in Genesis 22:6-8,

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb…?” And Abraham said, “God will provide for himself a lamb…”

Now listen to how the story ends:

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you… and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

God resolves the tension by suspending the death of the first-born…instead there is a guilt sacrifice made with the ram. Notice…Isaac’s question and Abraham’s response is never resolved. Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb?” Abraham prophesied, “God will provide for himself a lamb…” But there is no lamb, right? A ram is not lamb…particularly a ram with horns. The lamb remains missing…but anticipated.

What else did we learn? True faithfulness is revealed by the willingness to give up one’s only son…don’t miss that. And then there is a prophecy: From the offspring of Abraham will come a blessing for the whole world.

Now…let us return to the wilderness a few thousand years later. God has sent a prophet named John, and he proclaims a message of judgment and repentance. He speaks of One who is coming with his winnowing fork, who will gather up the chaff and throw it into the fire…One who comes with the axe that will cut down every un-producing tree and throw them into the fire. There is no doubt in the hearts of the listeners that this prophet, John the Baptist, is referring to the judgment of God that will accompany the advent of the Messiah—the Christ of God. The message is clear: all will be judged, all will be found guilty, and the just penalty of sin is the “fire.” The anxious crowds ask of John in Luke 3, “What shall we do?”

But the better question…the right question that they should have been asking…was the question of Isaac: “Where is the lamb?” Where is God’s provision for atonement? Where is God’s mercy for those who have sinned, that they might not perish under God’s wrath for their many acts of injustice?

Had the world been asking the right question, they would have understood the Baptist as he declares God’s ultimate answer in John 1:29: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is THE SON…God’s only begotten Son…the Son that He loves.” Jesus is the Lamb come to redeem the sons of Abraham; He is of the seed of Abraham, and this Lamb will bless the whole world, for
he has come to take away the sin of the world, just as God promised in Genesis 22. Do you hear how God was preparing the world thousands of years ago to meet Jesus, the Lamb of God?

Let us return now to Exodus 12. It is the 10th day of the first month, and according to God’s instruction, every household among God’s people is to find a lamb without blemish, and then, four days later, they are to slay the lamb. They will then take the blood of the unblemished lamb and paint their doorframes...why? Because the Destroyer is coming to wreak justice upon Egypt; and justice will be accomplished at the expense of every first-born son. That justice is for everyone...the Jews included. However, God, in His mercy, provides a way for his people to be spared. We read in Exodus 12:12, “For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I am the LORD. The blood [of the lamb] shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you…”

Once again we observe that the justice of God demands the life of the first-born son, but God provides a means of deliverance...the blood of an unblemished lamb. The flesh of the unblemished lamb provides food for the journey of emancipation, and the blood of the unblemished lamb “hides” their sins from the Destroyer of God who passes over them.

Let us jump a few thousand years forward now, to the last supper of Christ in the upper room on the eve of Passover. All of Jerusalem is remembering and commemorating what took place in Exodus 12, as is Jesus and His disciples. As we zoom into the upper room, Jesus passes around the bread and the cup to his disciples...but where is the lamb? Every Jewish family in Jerusalem would be eating lamb that evening, but there is no mention of roasted lamb on the Lord’s table. Why not? Where is the lamb? Jesus is the lamb...and he says, “Take, eat...this is my body, which is given for you...this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” Can you see it? The paschal lamb in Exodus 12 pointed to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!

Let us look at one more part of this story in the OT, though there are more observations we could make. In the great Messianic prophecies of Isaiah, particularly Isaiah 53, we read these words:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

It was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt...he shall bear their iniquities...because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

If we had the ears to hear, Isaiah presented the Lamb as a man, one who would bear the iniquities of us all. This man will serve as a “guilt offering,” a reference that takes us all the way back to Genesis 22! Can you see it? The clues were there in the great story of God’s revelation to his people, but until John the Baptist declared Jesus as the Lamb of God...they all missed it...everyone did...most of us still do.
Church, all the world then and now is looking for a political champion, a superhero of great power to swoop in and save day with his mighty sword. But had the world paid attention to the prophecies of Isaiah 53, had they paid attention to the clues in Genesis and Exodus and all throughout God’s self-revelation to His people, they would have been looking for a what Arthur Pink calls, a “Saviour-priest”…One who could intercede and save them from the coming justice of God. We should have been looking for the Lamb, the one whose sacrificial suffering and death would “heal the people” and “make intercession for the transgressors;” but the idea that our Savior would die on a criminal’s cross has always created issues for sinful human beings.

Pink writes of John’s announcement of the Lamb: It was the Spirit of God presenting the Lord Jesus to Israel in the very office and character in which they stood in deepest need of Him. They would have welcomed Him on the throne, but they must first accept Him on the altar. And is it any different today? Christ as an Elijah—a Social-Reformer—will be tolerated; and Christ as a Prophet, as a Teacher of ethic, will receive respect. But what the world needs first and foremost is the Christ of the Cross, where the Lamb of God offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin.

The story of the Lamb continues, by the way, all the way through this age and into the next. John writes of what is to come in Revelation 5:

…and I began to weep because no one was found worthy to open the scroll…and one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain…and thousands and thousands said with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!...To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

Church, BEHOLD the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world…He is worthy of all glory, honor, and praise, amen?!!! OK, let us now turn to…

III. John’s 3-fold proclamation

As we look to vs. 30, the Baptizer declares: This is he of whom I said, “After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.” John the Baptist is quoting himself from a previous sermon that we don’t have access to, though John the Apostle was certainly familiar with this teaching and quoted it earlier in John 1:15. In the Baptizer’s proclamation, he makes three distinct claims about Jesus:

1. Jesus is a man. Though the humanity of Christ is not the primary focus of John’s Gospel, it is always preserved. In fact, Jesus can only serve as the Lamb of God if he is both fully God and fully human. The early church father, Gregory Nazianzen, once wrote “What has not been assumed has not been healed.” That is to say that if Christ has not assumed full humanity, full humanity cannot be redeemed. Jesus was a man…fully man…thanks be to God!
2. Jesus ranks higher because He is the Messiah…He is the long-awaited King of Kings. In Luke 3 we learn that people wondered in their hearts if John the Baptist was the Messiah. Here in vs. 30 John clearly states once again, “Jesus is the Messiah…He ranks above me.”
3. Jesus is God; He is the Logos who was in the beginning with God, who was God. That is why the one who comes after John was always the One who was before John.

These are themes that we will touch on regularly in our journey through the Gospel, and on account of time I will move on. But never forget that when we think or speak of Jesus, we must always keep these three things in mind: Jesus was a man; He was the Messiah of God; and He is God.

IV. John’s Testimony
OK, let us now turn to the remaining verses in our passage that comprise John’s testimony. Let us read again vss. 31-34: I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel. And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

Notice how John the Baptist twice humbles himself, admitting: “I did not know him.” This is the “before” part of any great testimony. There was my life “before” knowing Jesus, and my life “after” knowing Jesus. Now, this is not just the testimony of any average man. John the Baptist has been filled with the Holy Spirit since birth; he is the first prophet of God in 400 years; thousands of people have been flocking to his ministry; and, according to Jesus himself in Luke 7:28, “John is the greatest of all men born of women!” But even John did not immediately recognize Jesus as the Lamb of God. Clearly Jesus did not look the part. As Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years earlier, “He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Had it not been for the supernatural sign that John had been given to look for, the Baptist may have missed Jesus altogether. Let us all find comfort in that…we do not all come to know Jesus at once or at the same time. Yet God will reveal Jesus to us as we open our hearts to see what God wants us to see?

So, John was sent to baptize, and through the ministry of baptism with water, the Messiah was going to be revealed to Israel. Can we give John the Baptist a little love? Think about how difficult it would be to step into the wilderness out of sheer obedience, baptizing people with water…all the while trusting that in your faithful, wilderness ministry, the Messiah of God, the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, would be revealed to Israel! And how would the Messiah be revealed through the ministry of baptism? John makes it clear in vs. 33, “He who sent me to baptize with water (God or God’s angel) said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” So…for years now, John has been preaching about sin and repentance, and he has baptized hundreds, if not thousands of people, all the while looking for this sign…the Holy Spirit descending and remaining upon the mysterious “baptizer with the Holy Spirit.”

But then one day…it happens! John proclaims, “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him!” The Greek verb here suggests that John the Baptist actually “beheld” this event with his physical eyes…this was not some private vision. John’s witness to what took place at the baptism of Jesus is found in all three synoptic accounts. According to Luke, our NT historian: …and when Jesus had also been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” Luke does not limit the witness of this event to John the Baptist, though both Mark and Matthew suggest that it was the Baptist who saw the spirit of God descend and remain upon Jesus at His baptism. In all four gospels the point is clear: God gave the Baptist a sign to look for, and that sign came to fulfillment on one person and one person only: Jesus of Nazareth. It was upon Jesus that the Holy Spirit descended and remained at His baptism.

For the John the Baptist, the fulfillment of this sign leads to one final conclusion that he proclaims boldly: “I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

The Baptist has done his job. He has served as God’s faithful witness to the world. He has pointed the world to Jesus, and proclaimed Him to be God’s beloved Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Church, may we be found faithful, at the end of our lives, to be God’s witnesses as well. This is the call for all those who have a testimony of meeting Jesus, amen?
V. The Source of our Hope

Let me conclude now with the source of our hope. We live in an age where hope is hard to find. So many people are hurting in so many ways. Every day I hear stories of people in our church or our community experiencing loss, conflict, and pain. So many marriages end in divorce; so many children become estranged from their parents; and it seems that the anger…the sheer anger in our culture…increases by the hour. If you are paying attention, things are not well in the world, things are not well in our own minds and hearts, and the darkness that weighs upon us…the hopelessness of so many people…is largely due to one thing: we don’t believe in God’s love for us.

Church, if you ever actually accepted God’s love for you…if you could ever grasp just how MUCH God loves you…you would never run out of hope. The love of God is our hope; for as the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:31, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” The problem we have…that all hurting humans have…is that we doubt God’s love for us. We doubt that God cares when we experience loss or pain. We doubt that God cares when we see our loved ones struggling. We doubt that God cares when the innocent are victimized. This is our problem: we doubt that God cares…we doubt the love of God.

Friends, our passage today is an anchor of hope in this sea of confusion and chaos. God came to us…He came looking for us. He sent His Son…His only, beloved, first-born Son…to join us in the fray, to show us the way, and to pay what we could never repay. He came to us in humility, wrapped in the peasant’s blanket, and walked among us as one of us. He came with healing in His hands, and he came with gentleness and understanding. The sinful world in which we live nailed the Lamb to a tree…it was a tree that we all deserved, but He willingly gave up His life to pay our debt and to deliver us from evil. And why? Because God so loved the world…

Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, came to us as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world so that we would never doubt God’s love or His resolve to redeem those who are lost! Jesus didn’t come to eliminate sin, He came to bring the REMEDY for our sin; it is a remedy that is completely adequate for the need of all people. The sin problem of the world has been once and for all addressed in the Son…the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God. On the cross Jesus satisfied the cost of sin for those who will receive Him and rely upon His name, and in giving us His Holy Spirit, The Lamb gives us the power of a new life in God to overcome the tyranny of our sin even now. Herein is the source of our hope: Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Turn to Him: He is coming toward you even now. See the nail prints in His hands; see the light in His eyes as He looks upon you as the lost sheep He has come to save. Church, Jesus would have come and lived and suffered and died…if only for one lost person…if only for you. This is my testimony: I was lost, confused, and covered up in darkness. Even as a seminary student I lost my way; I could not see Jesus, and I was struggling with despair. But on that day when I cried out with all of my heart, “I want to see Jesus,” He came to me…and I am here to bear witness that Jesus saved me, that Jesus is saving me, and that Jesus will save me. I am not as I should be, but I am not who I was! I was redeemed, I am being redeemed, and I will be redeemed. My hope is secure. On Christ the solid rock I stand, and I am convinced that all other ground is sinking sand. This is my testimony…Jesus is the Son of God…He is the Hope of the world.

Behold the Lamb! He is our Hope…and He is worthy of all glory, honor and praise! Thanks be to God! Let’s pray.