

Revealing the Lamb of God
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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John 1:29-42

Today we continue our series on Regarding the Way of Jesus by looking at a text from John's Gospel. Note how John the Baptist twice refers to Jesus as the Lamb of God in this passage.

The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is 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 ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look, here is the Lamb of God!' The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see.' They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, 'We have found the Messiah' (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter).

What are you looking for? I love that this is the question that Jesus asks the two disciples of John the Baptist who seemingly turn on a dime and now start following him.

Presumably, as followers of John, they had heard their teacher talk a lot about the One whose way the baptizer was sent to prepare. The One about whom he said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me" and "I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals." They'd probably spent a good bit of time, out by the river Jordan and elsewhere, listening to John's ranting—to tell the truth-- about what this individual for whom John was preparing the way would be and do. None of it, if you take the synoptic gospels seriously, none of it involved a Lamb of God. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins, yes, getting right with God, yes, but nowhere is there a mention of a Lamb of God. John was ranting about what this individual for whom he was preparing the way would be and do. He would clear the threshing floor. He would separate the wheat from the chaff and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. He would kick butt and take names. Oh, they'd heard **a lot** about the One who was to come, I'm sure.

Which means that they might have been *just the tiniest bit* surprised the day before when John first pointed at Jesus and said, "Here is the Lamb of God"—and then went on--"I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

Leave aside how the Baptizer can say he didn't know Jesus when Luke's Gospel says that they were cousins. Just stick with John's "Aha" moment—his recognition that the man whom he has just baptized, the one whose way he was sent to prepare, isn't quite what John had imagined at first.

He's the *Lamb of God* who takes away the **sin of the world**, not a force that was going to violently wipe out his enemies.

Having seen the Spirit of God descend and remain on him, John can now tell that Jesus—humble, non-violent, gentle Jesus—is the One for whom he's been waiting. When John sees Jesus again the next day and exclaims for second time, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"—that is enough for at least two of John's disciples to take note. They turn and follow Jesus—and then he asks them an important question. A question he asks us, too. *What are you looking for?*

It's really an ingenious question, when you think about it. Because what we are looking for so often determines what we perceive, **and what we miss**, right? If what I am looking for is evidence to back up my previously arrived at conclusions, I'm likely to find it—and then dismiss anything else. If what I am looking for is proof of what I already believe about God, about life, or about my neighbor, then I'll sift through my experience and find what fits my narrative and discount anything counter to it, at least until that utterly breaks down. If I think about life in purely transactional terms, I'll look for a transactional God and a faith that pays off in life going according to my plan—and if that fails me, well then so much for God. If I think or act like the most important thing in life is my comfort, or my sense of security, or protecting my ideas, or what I perceive to be in my own best interest—then I'll look for a God and a community who will co-sign that for me.

When Jesus asks them, "*What are you looking for?*" John the Baptist's soon to be *former* disciples provide what I think is a model answer.

They could have answered the question in any number of ways, chief among them, "We're looking for the Messiah, the one John told us about, a deliverer who is going to destroy our enemies and make Israel great again, a mighty judge who is going to remove nasty King Herod and the Roman Empire from power."

But that's **not** what they say—perhaps because they'd just heard John call him, surprisingly enough, the Lamb of God—and their previous vision of a Messiah would not have seemed on its face to be particularly lamb-like.

When I thought about words that I would associate with lamb, the words that came to mind were delicious, cuddly, fluffy, vulnerable, and sacrifice.

Instead of advancing some preconceived notion of what they think he might be and do, or *what they want him to be and do*, even a newly acquired notion of that, the disciples answer Jesus in a way that indicates that they might just be teachable. They might just be open to God revealing something new to them. So they say, "Rabbi--which means teacher--where are you staying?"

So the two go and spend the entire day with Jesus there. They remain with him, sitting at his feet and listening to him teach. And one of them, Andrew, is so excited about what he is learning that he goes and gets his brother, Simon, who winds up getting a new name and a new life out of the whole deal. They went where Jesus was staying. Where he remained.

One way to read the Gospels is to consider where and how Jesus, the Lamb of God, stays, remains. Who does he hang in there with? Who does Jesus engage? Where does he put his chips down? What will he not budge on? Look where Jesus, the vulnerable Lamb of God, stays—and follow him there.

Watch where he stays. Look at who he engages and refuses to walk away from—a tax collector named Zaccheus, a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman who had five husbands, a lame man who everybody stepped over and around, a blind man who Jesus' own disciples wanted to blame for his plight, people whose minds and hearts and souls were or had been tormented by mental illness—like Mary Magdalene.

Listen to Jesus' stories, like the one about the Samaritan who stopped and stayed to help a man left for dead when the good religious people passed by, or the one about the Father who wouldn't give up on a son who'd asked for his inheritance early and then frittered it all away.

When you ponder where Jesus remains, think about how Matthew 25 says you'll find him in the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned, the immigrants and the vulnerable ones, the ones without protection.

Watch how Jesus stands his ground even when it means he'll be sentenced to death, and how he hangs in there, the Lamb, between two thieves. Then recall that the tomb can't hold him. He doesn't remain there. He doesn't remain stuck.

Contrary to some ways of casting it, to say that Jesus is the Lamb of God and to ask where he is staying is not primarily about coming to accept that his death fulfills some kind of divine equation so that individual sinners get out of what should be coming to them.

It is rather, I think, to be invited into the way of self-giving love, a lamb-like way, that Jesus models for us and to trust God with the rest. It is to commit to remaining where Jesus remains.

It was such a privilege to have Bryan Stevenson come speak to us a year ago November, and to spend time with him when a group of us went down to Montgomery a few months ago. His commitment to work with people on death row, to be proximate to them, is an embodiment of asking where Jesus is staying and going to be there with Jesus.

Monday afternoon I watched the movie *Just Mercy* based on Bryan's book of the same name. Many of us already know the story. As I suspected it would be, the movie's portrayal was powerful. You see Bryan, played by Michael B. Jordan, living out his encouragement to us to be proximate, committing his life to stand with and for men on death row—particularly Walter McMillan, so ably portrayed by Jamie Foxx.

Early on, in their first meeting, McMillan tries to dismiss him as just another idealistic young lawyer who is there to take money that he doesn't have and then just give up the fight. But Bryan isn't going anywhere. He remains. He drives out a long dirt road to meet Walter's family. He hears the story. He digs through the flimsy case against him and fights through the enormous resistance of the Alabama legal system to get Walter freed. At the same time, Bryan works for a stay of execution for one of Walter's fellow prisoners, Herbert Richardson. When Herb's stay of execution is not granted, Bryan goes to be with him, before he is taken to the electric chair—and is present when Herb is executed. Herb committed the crime he was accused of, but Bryan was present. Bryan was present, proximate, to Walter, too—and got Walter freed.

One of the reviews critical of the movie says that it doesn't give us enough of a window into what made Bryan's character so committed to the work in which he's engaged. An Immanuel member had a revelation in response to that. She said, "That's because the movie is not about Bryan." It's

about the cases. It's about the work of justice which transcends hopelessness. It's about being proximate.

To ask where Jesus is staying and to remain with him there is to be invited into a way of living that is not about us. It's not about what we can get out of the deal.

But if what we're looking for is a life that has real meaning—that really matters to people around us, that really makes a difference to people who are hurting, to people who are longing for freedom, to people who are looking for justice, to people who are dying to be loved—I guarantee, we'll find it there.

If what we're looking for is a life of real meaning, we will find it if we follow the way of the Lamb. It might not be safe. It will rarely be comfortable. And it surely won't be easy.

Ask anybody who had followed the way of the lamb. They'll tell you.

Ask the person who forgives someone who at one point they thought they could never ever forgive. Ask the person who lays their life on the line for another person. Ask John Lewis who had his skull beat in on the bridge in Selma. Ask anybody who has ever really stood for justice and mercy. Ask any one of the recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor who risked their lives to help others under fire. They'll tell you, too.

If what we're looking for is a life that has real meaning, then we do well to stick with Jesus. Staying where he stays, abiding where he abides, we'll find it there. In Jesus' name. Amen.