

“Behold! The Lamb of God!  
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.  
Sunday, January 20, 2008

1

Sermon Text: John 1:29-42

Let us pray. Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I'm not sure why this happened. You will remember the story, which we sort of began last week. When John the Baptist was doing what John the Baptist did, and that is baptizing for repentance, and that was an old Jewish practice done before Jesus was ever born to cleanse from sins and also done when someone who was an outsider or a Gentile converted and became a Jew. You will remember that John saw the spirit of God descending like a dove and heard the voice from Heaven saying, “This is my son, my beloved, my chosen, listen to him!” Then to the crowds John the Baptist said, “I am baptizing you with water, but there is one among you, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.”

The next day after the baptism, John was standing with his disciple. You see, John had disciples as well. He saw Jesus coming towards them, Jesus whom he had baptized, Jesus upon whom the spirit of God had descended, and John cried out, as prophets must, he cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Here's a twist, which oddly enough reminds me of an incident that happened to me in high school when some friends of mine and I went to the Greenville/Pickens Speedway. You may wonder, how in the world? I hope you'll see. A couple of friends of mine and I went to see a race there, and there were some big names there. It started raining so they allowed people to kind of cross from the stands into the infield and mingle with the drivers and such. Then as it started to dry out, they decided to put the race back on. We had to go back to the stands. The drivers had to go back to the infield to their cars. As we were passing, a friend of mine named Ron Caldwell saw a really famous driver at that time. He's still in the encyclopedias if you follow that sort of thing. It was David Pearson. Ron, who was always a jokester, said, “Mr. Pearson! Mr. Pearson! Mr. Pearson!” He reached for his pen and kind of smiled as if to fill out an autograph. Then Ron said, “Can you tell me what time it is?” It kind of deflated him. It was an awkward deflating moment for him.

Well, the celebrities, the grand leaders of the day, when it came to John the Baptist and his estimation of their importance, he spoke quite disparagingly about them. He called them a brood of vipers. I'm not sure you can get a whole lot more disparaging than that. When John, the same one who called the leaders of his day a brood of vipers, saw Jesus coming, he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John the Baptist believed there was something unbelievably unique about Jesus. Jesus was above and beyond any other person he had baptized. Jesus was in his person able to do more than any prophet such as John could do. The very spirit of God had descended upon him, and it was within the power of Jesus to baptize others with the very spirit of God. This was John's proclamation. This was John's exclamation!

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2

It's been said that a prophet is one, who has a fire in his bones, that he cannot contain the message that is within him so he must speak it out, shout it out – no matter what the cost! Well, the fire in the bones of John the Baptist was to speak out, to shout out that Jesus was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

We'd better think about what that means. What does sin have to do with me?

It reminds me of a lady, and this actually happened. A grand lady, a sort of a Southern steel magnolia type, columned house, and I remember that there was an occasion where someone from one of the smaller independent denominations was sort of witnessing to her and talking about the opportunity for her to be forgiven of her sins, and shouldn't she not be grateful to God. She said that she would be grateful to God had she any – sins!

Anyway, what does sin have to do with me? I could do so much more that I know I should do, and I don't. Those are sins of omission, things I know that I should do, but do not do. Some things I do I know to be hurtful or hateful or destructive or down putting of others. I know it, and I do it anyway. Those are sins of commission that I commit knowing better, but do anyway. Sins of hypocrisy where I judge me and mine by one standard about this high, and I judge others that I dislike by a much higher standard! And many more!

John the Baptist declared that in Jesus God was taking away the sin of the world. That means mine, too. It wasn't a king doing it. It wasn't a president doing it or an elected official or a pope or a saint or another person or even another personality like mine, but it was God taking away in Jesus Christ the sin of the world. Who else but God could make any arrangement for the sin of the world to be taken away! Have you ever thought of that question? Who else but God could do such a thing! If God is indeed holy and God is indeed loving and wants to have a relationship with us, then God has a problem because we are not holy. The problem is that God's holiness, and it's very clear in the entire Old Testament, God's holiness cannot tolerate in God's presence sin and evil and hate or animus toward God or others, and we have it. We live that by omission and by commission and by hypocrisy for appearances sake. What is God to do?

Jesus lived out God's will in the flesh. The world and the powers that be didn't care for that, and so they killed him! Jesus lived out God's love in the flesh. I guess we're about halfway there. We are in the flesh. We are in the world. Jesus lived out God's will in the world! There is the rub. I'm in the flesh, and I'm in the world, but I am not always in God's will, and I am not always in God's love. I seek so many other things first when Jesus gave very clear, very easy to understand instructions for a life like His, a life in God's will. He said, and you will remember, seek ye first the kingdom of God, and get righteousness, and all these other things that you worry about, they'll be added unto you, but seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

I will confess. I have a few times sought and felt that I was in the will and in the love and echoing the love of God. I have a few times actually been so overwhelmed that I wanted

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3

to cry out, yes, thank you, God, for loving me as much as Jesus Christ. Thank you! I felt the reality of the magnitude of God’s act on my behalf; doing for me what I could never do, living and loving me in ways that I could not! I saw that I’ve felt it on my behalf because I cannot feel it on your behalf though I do believe it is done on your behalf as well. I’ve felt it so deeply, and I’ve been so overwhelmed that with a moment or two, dare I say, I have felt joy and wonder and awe, and I know that my reputation is that I never smile, I never laugh. You wonder if I ever feel joy. Well, I’m here to tell you. I have felt it. I have felt it.

I remember once the Minnesota farmer. They were notorious for not showing their emotions. The Minnesota farmer, have you heard this story? He loved his wife so much that he almost told her!

Well, I have felt the wonder and the magnitude of what God has done for me, that I have almost wanted to shout out with joy, but..., like John the Baptist did, but my raising, my educational background, my shyness, my cowardice have kept me pretty much from shouting it in public.

John washed with water. Jesus washes and fills with the very spirit of God. No wonder John cried out. He had indeed not only the call of a prophet, but enthusiasm. Those of you who are students of where words come from, you know that enthusiasm literally means filled with or possessed by God. That fire in his bones! It made him shout out behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

God! It’s God who has done it! The one who is, the creator, the sustainer, a reality not a concept, the one who exists whether you believe it or not, like it or not, accept it or not, the one God who was and is and will be. That God made arrangements to do something for us that we need. We being the sinners. God in Jesus taking away our sins. Not ours only as it says in 1<sup>st</sup> John, but also the sins of the whole world, a universal offer of atonement. Still, we have lukewarm, mediocre people even in churches, and it hurts my heart, trying to be just good enough to get into Heaven, whatever that means. Whatever that means!

I threatened this morning that I might just quit tomorrow if I hear one more person say that. If you want me to quit, that’s how.

That anyone can be even potentially good enough by some small margin or large margin, good enough to get into, to make God owe you some eternal reward! There is no good, good enough! There are no people good enough! There is nothing we can do!

God has given us the grace, and done for us in Jesus Christ what we could not do! God is the one, who is and is holy, and we are not, and so God, the one who is, revealed a law that God would have us follow. The law is essentially the Ten Commandments. All the rest is commentary. That law when we take it seriously, and we should, teaches us more than one thing. It teaches us how to live towards the one God, and how to live toward the

many other people we are in relationship with. It teaches us how to live vertically and how to live horizontally. The Ten Commandments neatly divide into relationship with God and with others. That law calls us into responsibility toward God and others. Love God and love others. Jesus expanded, love even your enemies.

The law teaches that God wants all to live this way, and at one and the same time, the law teaches us that none of us, not one, not even for a day, actually live this way! We break the law. The law of respect and responsibility toward others and toward God, we break it in thought and word and deed. So God made arrangements for the people who were given the job of teaching the world his law one more thing. He gave them a system of sacrifice for sin, which we find so horrible and so bloody in the Old Testament. The idea of Passover, the blood of the lamb sparing the people from death, and these shadows were four shadows, and combining them with the expectation of a Messiah, a Savior, who wants to come some day, these shadows and expectations and knowledge of God's holiness and our sin all culminate into this moment where John standing as the last Old Testament prophet and Jesus at the rank beginning of his ministry meet. When, after Jesus was baptized, John sees Jesus and says behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

It is the moment that he is acknowledging that God has done a new thing. The anointed one, the Messiah, the Savior has come. God has come. Of Jesus, John said, I am not worthy to untie his sandals, and yet the same Jesus washed the dirty feet of his disciples to show us in sign that he had come to serve us. God did not come in Christ to receive anything. He did not come to be adored. He did not come to be worshiped. He did not come for praise. God came in Jesus Christ to love us and to offer forgiveness and grace. He came as a lamb to the slaughter. He came as a lamb to sacrifice so that sin and death might pass over our lives, that we might be saved from the destruction that we deserve for our sins of omission, sins of commission, and hypocrisy and judgment of others! Jesus brought a message, but it was of a completely different order than the messages and messengers from God.

He did not come with proper rituals. He was the ritual. He said this is my body when he gave and signed the institution for the Lord's Supper. This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. He did not come with a temporary anointing of the Holy Spirit to say a word here and a word there about this or about that. No! He came from the beginning as a child who was flesh of Mary and spirit of the Holy Spirit completely both at once so that instead of a temporary anointing for a time and a place and a word to say as the other prophets had, he was the anointed one for always and all time in flesh fully and God fully, filled and able to baptize with and cleanse with the Holy Spirit, more than any prophet who came before!

He was like a lamb, not fighting, not protesting – not fighting, but submitting to what he had to do. It seems that God's holiness and justice required punishment for sin, but God's love provided it on our behalf. In Jesus Christ, as we hear in Colossians, God was in Christ making peace by the blood of his cross. So behold! Behold means to look at

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and to notice and to pay attention to something or to someone you may not have noticed or seen properly in their full import before.

John couldn't believe what he was seeing, and so he pointed out over and over, behold, look! Have you discovered how Jesus' Gospel is good news for you? It can make you feel so much light, so much joy, so much beauty and inspiration that you can't completely grasp it or absorb it or take it in with just one look. So with John the Baptist, I say behold again, look again. The Scripture says later on, Jesus entered into the holy of holies in Heaven as a high priest and a sacrifice at once making peace on our behalf. I could preach hundreds of hours and probably never fathom the deepness of that.

So behold again what God has done through Jesus the priest, Jesus the Lamb, Jesus the sacrifice. Behold and rejoice! Live as cleansed and new and holy people, not to earn anything. We cannot earn, but to live out of thankfulness and rejoicing for what God has done in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Amen.