

The Lamb of God

John 1:29-42

Wayne Eberly

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Spoiler Alert! How is that for a way to begin a sermon? Spoiler Alert! John the Baptist is going to tell us just about everything we need to know about Jesus, and he is going to tell it to us in chapter one. The Gospel of John has 21 chapters, chapters full of intrigue and excitement and revelation and wrestling with the identity of Jesus. There is plenty of time for this to develop, for the drama to build, for the story to unfold. But not for John the Baptist. In chapter one, the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and verse 42, John the Baptist spills the beans. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Thanks a lot John the Baptist. Now we know just about everything we need to know about Jesus. That really takes the surprise and the suspense out of the Gospel. John the Baptist could at least have shouted out, “Spoiler Alert!” before he said what he said about Jesus being the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Boy, am I glad I did not go Star Wars Episode VI with John the Baptist. Episode VI in the Star Wars series is the movie titled, “Return of the Jedi.” It premiered on May 25, 1983. For three long years we had all been desperately waiting to find out who was really Luke Skywalker’s father. We all had our opinions, but no one knew for sure who Luke’s father really was. So my friend Mark went to the movie theater on May 24, 1983, got the first spot in line, laid out his sleeping bag, and slept at the front of the box office so he could buy us all tickets to the very first show of “Return of the Jedi.” We held our breath and waited anxiously for the big revelation of who was really Luke Skywalker’s father. If old John the Baptist was there he probably would have whispered to us while the opening credits were still rolling...you know those opening credits in Star Wars...A LONG TIME AGO IN A GALAXY FAR, FAR AWAY...John the Baptist would have probably leaned over and said, “Hey, did you know _____ is Luke’s father?” What a thrill kill!

What if you taped a certain football game and planned to watch it later? What if the game you taped was played on Sunday, February 5, 2017? What if the game you taped was the Super Bowl, Super Bowl LI? What if the game was between the Atlanta Falcons and everybody's favorite east coast team, the New England Patriots? What if you popped your popcorn, poured your soda pop, opened the chocolate candies, made a spread for your nachos, and turned on the game, ready to enjoy every moment as it unfolded, all sixty minutes? What if you had everything all prepared to watch the game you had taped, and the doorbell rang? You open the door and who should be there but John the Baptist. He looks over your shoulder, sees the game on, and says, "Wow, that was an incredible comeback by the Pats." Ahhhh. John, give us a spoiler alert. Now we will miss all the drama of the amazing comeback from a 28-3 deficit, including the winning touchdown the Patriots scored in overtime.

Imagine John the Baptist walking into your living room and noticing you are reading a beloved book, maybe a childhood favorite like, "Where the Red Fern Grows." Picking up the book you could count on John the Baptist to say something like, "Isn't this the book where the dogs...." Hush John! Spoiler Alert. Don't tell us how it ends. With John you could never tell a joke. He would always spoil it by blurting out the punch line. The network television stations played the role of John the Baptist in the first Presidential election in which I could vote. I was nineteen years old in 1980 when Ronald Reagan ran against Jimmy Carter. I waited all day to vote, to fulfill my duty as a conscientious citizen, and late in the evening I went to cast my ballot. I stopped by a small grocery store on the way to the polling place and when I walked in a television was broadcasting news about the election. At the time I was living in California, which is on Pacific Coast Time. The polls on the east coast had already closed and votes had been tabulated and before I ever got to cast my first vote in a presidential election the networks were announcing that the race was already over! Warn a young man! Somebody shout out, "SPOILER ALERT". You never saw a more disappointed and discouraged nineteen-year old cast his first ever vote in a presidential election than me on the night I already knew the race was over before I ever marked my ballot.

The Gospel of John begins with great drama. It is a drama that builds. Like a balloon slowly being filled with air the Gospel of John expands and takes shape, breath by breath by breath of this living Word of God.

In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was with God...and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us...No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son who is himself God and is in closest relationship with Father, has made him known.

At this point the story is handed over to John the Baptist. It seems that instead of building the drama John the Baptist gets so caught up in the excitement of seeing Jesus that he blurts out, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” He lets the air out of the balloon. All the drama is gone. Now we know Jesus is the Lamb of God and he will take away the sin of the world. What else do we need to know?

Okay, let me give you another spoiler alert. Although it might seem like John the Baptist says too much too soon, what John the Baptist says does not spoil the Gospel by telling us Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Although that statement does capture just about everything we need to know about Jesus, instead of spoiling the Gospel, it sets us up to discover the Gospel in a way that expresses the deep and lasting impact Jesus has made, and continues to make on this world.

When John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, he is joining two central images from the Old Testament.

The Lamb of God...would immediately bring to mind the lamb that was sacrificed by the Jewish people during the celebration of the Passover. The blood from the lamb that was sacrificed was spread over the doorframe of each Israelite home. When the angel of death traveled through throughout Egypt during the days when the Israelites were living in bondage, the angel “Passed Over” every home that had the blood of the lamb spread over the doorframe of the house.

...**who takes away the sin of the world** connects the Lamb of God to the forgiveness that was found in what is referred to as the cultic sacrifices that God instituted, sacrifices offered both in thanksgiving and sacrifices offered in recognition of sin.

Since I have already referred to Star Wars I might as well let you know one of the other movies that captivated my imagination and attention was Raiders of the Lost Ark. Besides being an awesome movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark served as a Sunday school primer for countless moviegoers. The Ark in the title is the Ark of the Covenant. When Israel was delivered from their bondage in Egypt God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were housed in a chest, or as the chest is referred to in the Old Testament, an ark. The Ark carried the Ten Commandments, the words of God's covenant, hence the title The Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant occupied a very special place in the tabernacle that was the place of worship in the time of the Exodus, as well as the Temple that became the permanent house of worship in Jerusalem. The special place in the tabernacle and the temple was called The Holy of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant was set in a place of prominence in the Holy of Holies. The Ark of the Covenant did not sit open in the Holy of Holies. The Ark had a cover. The cover was called the atonement cover.

That the cover of the Ark of the Covenant is called the atonement cover conveyed a powerful message to the people of God. To atone is literally to cover. When atonement is made for the forgiveness of sin, the sin is covered. The blood of an animal that was sacrificed was spread on the atonement cover as a sign and a symbol to the people of God that their sin was covered, that their sin was atoned, and that their sin was forgiven. All these images and more would have come to mind when John the Baptist saw Jesus that first time and proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Now there is something very intriguing about the sacrificial lamb, the forgiveness of sin, the atonement cover, and atonement for sin. In Leviticus 16 God specifies a day that is to be remembered every single year. It is called The Day of Atonement. Once a year Israel was commanded to observe the Day of Atonement, a solemn remembrance of God's forgiveness. It was on the Day of Atonement that an animal was sacrificed and the blood spread on the atonement cover. But the animal that was sacrificed was not a lamb. It was not a sacrificial lamb. The animal at the heart of the remembrance of the Day of Atonement was a goat. In fact, on the Day of Atonement there are two goats.

One goat is sacrificed, and the blood is spread on the atonement cover in the Holy of Holies. The second goat plays a critical role in the Day of Atonement. The priest lays his hands on the second goat and confesses all the sin of the people. And then the second goat is released into the wilderness. The goat carries all the sin of the people into the wilderness. One goat dies but the other goat, the one carrying the sin of the people, escapes. Spoiler Alert! That is where we get the term scapegoat.

Ah, that phrase Spoiler Alert! When we begin to explore and examine forgiveness and atonement it becomes clear that when John the Baptist declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, it is not a spoiler. You cannot take all the things that transpired in the Old Testament, at the Passover, in the Holy of Holies, on the Day of Atonement, you cannot take all those things and put them in a box saying, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” That phrase evokes numerous images and they don’t all neatly fit together in one little box. Jesus will fulfill all the promises of God, including taking away the sin of the world, but he is unique. In Jesus, God is doing something new. When John the Baptist points to Jesus and declares, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the world” he is not letting the air out of the balloon. John is inviting us to discover the new thing God is doing in Jesus, to follow Jesus, to grow in our understanding of Jesus, and to enter into a relationship with Jesus, a relationship that will literally fill our lives with his Spirit.

The writers of the New Testament understood what a powerful image The Lamb of God was.

- Christ (Jesus) is our Passover Lamb. (I Corinthians 5:7)
- God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3:25)
- When Jesus takes the cup at the Passover Meal, at what we now call the Last Supper, at what we now celebrate as Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper, he holds the cup and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin.” (Matthew 26:28)
- The writer of Hebrews ties together the importance of Jesus being born as a human being, the importance of the Word of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, with the atonement Jesus was able to make for our sin. “Jesus had to be made like us, fully human in every way, in order that...he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2:17)

Last week we made note of how Jesus fulfilled the role of the servant of the Lord promised in the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah sheds light on why John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, combining both the goat from the Day of Atonement and the lamb from the Passover. Among the servant passages in Isaiah, chapter 53 bears the title, “The Suffering Servant”. In Isaiah 53 we are told the Suffering Servant will be led like a lamb to the slaughter. What results from this lamb that is led to the slaughter is a rich blessing that is poured out for others.

- “Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering...he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53, selected verses)

John the Baptist is not a spoiler. When he points to Jesus and says, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, he is not letting the air out of the balloon. The story begins with the Word of God...with God...is God...made all things...became flesh...each breath filling and expanding our understanding of Jesus...and John...The Lamb of God...an image full of life...the Passover Lamb, the sacrifice of atonement...the servant whose suffering will cover our sins and whose wounds will bring healing. It turns out we never need a Spoiler Alert! when it comes to Jesus. Nothing we could ever say would spoil the blessings Jesus brings. No one word we can say will ever capture the gift God has given.

I purposely used the image of a balloon today, a balloon filled with breath, because breath is related to the Holy Spirit. Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit on his disciples. The Spirit comes like a mighty wind in the Book of Acts. Like breath the Holy Spirit comes and fills the lives of those who trust in Jesus. And the Spirit was present when John the Baptist realized Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. John says, “I didn’t know who he was...” John the Baptist didn’t know who Jesus was until he saw the Spirit come down from heaven and remain on him (Jesus). That same Holy Spirit wants to come and fill our lives with the peace, the presence, and the power of Jesus Christ.

If John the Baptist spoiled things when he said Jesus was the Lamb of God then we could close the bible and say, “Well, now we know everything.” But that is not what happens when John the Baptist says Jesus is the Lamb of God. Instead of being the ending, it is the beginning. Some disciples of John the Baptist hear what John says about Jesus, and in turn those disciples follow Jesus. It does not serve as a spoiler to know Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It serves as an invitation. In fact, it is the ultimate invitation. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world invites us to find all the blessings God has in store for us, and we find those blessings through following Jesus. Those two disciples of John the Baptist who follow Jesus ask him, “Teacher, where are you staying?” The answer of Jesus is an invitation. Jesus says, “Come and see.”

Even though we are early in the Gospel of John, it is not too early in the Gospel to realize we are being called and invited to put our faith and trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and since Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we are being invited and called to realize Jesus is the Lord and Savior of our world, the Lord and Savior for all humanity. When the disciples ask where Jesus is staying, the word staying is also the word abiding. Jesus, where are you abiding? Come and see.

In John 15 Jesus will tell his disciples he is the true vine. In John 15 Jesus will tell his disciples the only way they can find life is to remain in him, the true vine. If they are cut off from him, the true vine, they will wither and perish. That word remain is the same as the word stay and that is the same word as abide. Jesus is saying to us, “If you abide in me you will have life.” Listen to what those first disciples asked Jesus. “Where are you abiding?” Jesus says, “Come and see.”

On Christmas Eve I had a door set up right here in the chancel. I wish it was still here. Where are you abiding, Jesus? He opens the door to his life, he opens the door as an invitation to follow him, he opens the door and says to us, to each one of us, “Come and see.” Come and abide with me. To know Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world does not spoil anything. It serves as an invitation to abide with Jesus, to follow him, to get to know him with all of your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength.

On Christmas Eve I had a door set up right here in the chancel. I wish it was still here. You see, Jesus not only invites us to abide with him, he also wants to abide with us. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the whole world, all humanity, the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son, wants to abide in your heart and in mine. In the Book of Revelation, we are told that Jesus stands at the door...many people believe as I do that the door is the door of our heart, of your heart, of my heart. "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." (Revelation 3:20)

Friends, hear this good news of great joy for all the world. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world wants you to abide with him. And that same Lamb, God's Blessed and Beloved Son, wants to abide with you, to remain with you, to stay with you, to be in your heart and to fill your soul. Behold, he stands at the door and knocks. If you just open the door...if you just open the door...he will come in and he will abide with you...now...and forevermore.