

Second Sunday after Epiphany – A

“The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God.’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.”

A little boy was offered the opportunity to select a dog for his birthday present. At the pet store, he was shown a number of puppies. From then he picked one whose tail was wagging furiously. When he was asked why he selected that particular dog, the little boy said, “I wanted the one with the happy ending.”

In our gospel reading, two of John the Baptist’s disciples have a choice to make. They are not choosing a puppy, but they too chose the one with the happy ending. John the Baptist was arrested and later beheaded. Jesus was also arrested and died a far more agonizing death. But Jesus rose to eternal life, not just for himself, but for all who call him Lord. That is not to say that John the Baptist does not share in that eternal life, but Jesus is the one who brings us eternal life. These two disciples chose to follow the one who brings a happy ending to all his followers.

Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” What an amazing statement for John to make: Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” How does John gain this insight? It can only be that God has revealed it to him. Jesus’ own disciples would not understand this until after the resurrection. But John understands it at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry. He understands that Jesus’ primary mission is to “take away the sin of the world.” He understands that he will do that by being the sacrificial Lamb who is killed for others’ sins. He understands that Jesus will accomplish what the law could only point to symbolically. How amazing that until the resurrection, John seems to be the only person in the entire world who understands why Jesus became a man and lived as one of us.

Two Sunday’s ago we celebrated the feast of Epiphany, Christ being made manifest to the world. Today we continue to encounter Epiphany themes in the scripture. What a great Epiphany proclamation is made for us by John: “Behold the Lamb of God.” That is what Epiphany is all about – letting people know that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

On Epiphany we recalled the story of the wise men. This was the beginning of Christ being made known to the whole world and not just the Jewish people. The wise men are shadowy figures to us. We do not know much about them. Likewise, we are not certain how complete their understanding of Jesus is. We only know that they are searching for one born “King of the Jews” and when they find him they offer gifts and worship him. But John makes it crystal clear that he knows exactly who Jesus is: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” This echoes the words of God that we heard last week as his voice rings out from heaven saying: “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.”

Each Passover, until the destruction of the temp, a lamb was sacrificed by the priests to atone for the sins of the people. On one particular Passover as the lamb was being slain for the sacrifice, Jesus, the Lamb of God, died on the cross

for the sin of the whole world. And so when John declares Jesus to be the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world,” he is making a statement that his listeners can recognize as a huge claim for who Jesus is. He not only replaces the sacrifice, which ceased with the destruction of the temple in the year 70, but he greatly widens the scope. The Passover lamb is only for the sin of the Jewish people. But Jesus’ sacrifice is for the sin of the whole world. As we heard the words of the LORD in our reading from Isaiah: “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation my reach to the end of the earth.”

The term Lamb of God may have its roots even further back than the Passover, as far back as Abraham. In Genesis 22, Abraham is going up the mountain with his son Isaac. Abraham has a heavy heart because he thinks he is going to sacrifice his son. Isaac, not knowing what God has said to Abraham, wonders where the lamb for the sacrifice is. They are carrying everything they need for a sacrifice except the lamb. Abraham responds quite prophetically, “God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” And so he did and so he has. In Abraham’s case, it turned out to be a ram caught in a thicket to his great relief. But for us and for the whole world for all time, it is Jesus the Lamb of God who does indeed take away the sin of the world by being the sacrificial lamb and dieing on the cross.

So John is making a powerful statement when he calls Jesus the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Powerful and accurate. But why does John choose to say this here? What is his motivation? This is not to say that the statement needs to be validated. Jesus life, death, and resurrection validate John’s claim quite sufficiently. It is always an appropriate statement to make about Jesus. But to understand what the text is saying to us, we need to know why John says what he says when he says it.

First of all, John simply can’t help saying what he says. He says it joyfully with much exuberance. This is the climax of his mission. This is what he came to do – to prepare the way for Christ. His big moment has arrived. He has accomplished the task that God sent him to perform. He could have prefaced his declaration by saying, “My task is now completed.” But he doesn’t say that because he has come to draw attention to Jesus not to himself. It is as if John is presenting Jesus to the world: “Your attention please. I have an important introduction to make: Behold the Lamb of God,” an Epiphanal moment if there ever was one. Do you and I proclaim Jesus with the same joy and power that John does? We should. It is our job no less than it was John’s to introduce Jesus to all who do not truly know, to all who do not understand what he has done for them.

But it is more than just the uncontrollable joy of the moment that causes John to burst forth with his joyous proclamation. It is the very nature of his ministry, a ministry that points the way to Christ. **THERE ARE TREMENDOUS IMPLICATIONS IN JOHN’S WORDS!** He is telling everyone who can hear him that this is the savior of the world. If you want salvation you had better come to him. **THIS IS THE MESSIAH.**

As recorded in scripture, John twice calls Jesus the “Lamb of God.” He almost certainly did this many more times, but we are not told of it. Neither are we told of the results of the first time we hear John say these wonderful words. But we are told the results of the second time. John is with two of his disciples and when he sees Jesus coming he says, “Behold the Lamb of God!” And the next verse informs us, “The two heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.” That’s what John wants. He wants people to follow Jesus. We too want people to follow him, only for some strange reason, we do not seem to be as bold in our proclamation as John is.

But these two are not yet following Jesus as his disciples. They are following him to find out about him. They know what John has said, and as disciples of John they do not doubt his words, but they need to discover for themselves who Jesus truly is. We all need to discover who Jesus is before we can truly follow him as he calls us to follow him.

What these two really want is to have a conversation with Jesus. They want to get to know him. They want to find out what he is all about. Following behind him isn’t going to get the job done. Walking behind him isn’t going to tell them whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. Reading between the lines, we see that these two are not quite sure how to go about this, but they figure if they follow Jesus and he is the Messiah something will happen to let them know, somehow a connection will be made. And they are right. Jesus, knowing what is on their minds, helps them out. He turns and says to them, “What do you seek?” And they do not say the obvious which is, “We seek to know if you are the Messiah or not.” They don’t say that. That is a little too direct for them at this point. You don’t just go around asking people if they are the Messiah. If they are the Messiah, God will reveal it to you if you seek to find out. And so they say ask Jesus where he is staying. That’s not a bad way to start to get to know somebody, especially if he is the Messiah. If he tells you to go jump in the lake because it’s none of your business where he is staying, then you can pretty much eliminate him as a possibility for being the Messiah.

But of course Jesus does not tell them to go jump in the lake. He invites them to come and see. And they spend some time together. Now one of these two is completely unknown to us. We have no clues as to who it might be. So we don’t know if he became a disciple or not. I tend to think he did. He may have become one of the twelve, but we just don’t know. He was a disciple of John’s, so the chances are he became a disciple of Jesus. He was seeking the Messiah, so when he found him he probably became his disciple, but we can’t say so with certainty. But we do know who the other one is. He is Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. We do know that he did become one of the twelve.

And what does Andrew do? He goes out and finds his brother Simon and brings him to Jesus. That is how the good news spreads. It is revealed by God to John the Baptist that Jesus is the Messiah. John tells his disciples. They encounter Jesus and discover that John is right, and they go out and bring others to Jesus. And on and on down through the centuries. Every time someone makes a commitment to Christ, it probably began by someone saying, in effect, “Behold the Lamb of God.” Now we don’t use those exact words of course. Not

many of us use the word behold in our day to day conversations. But the point is that people need to know who Christ is and what he has accomplished for them. It's amazing how many people do not truly understand those things. We need to tell them. We need to tell the Truth. The most important Truth there is.

Hudson Smith tells of a man who once climbed to the top of a mountain and standing on tiptoe, seized hold of the Truth. Satan, suspecting mischief from this upstart, had directed one of his underlings to tail the man. But when the demon reported with alarm the man's success – that he had seized the Truth – Satan was unperturbed. "Don't worry," he yawned, "I'll tempt him to institutionalize it."

H. King Oehmig reminds us, "God needs to become real for us. It's true for Andrew in today's Gospel and it is true for us as well. Discipleship begins with an active engagement with Jesus. And the way that God becomes real for us is found in following Jesus." And not only following Jesus, but also inviting others to join us in our journey. Oehmig continues, "It is not by accident that the first significant words spoken by Jesus to his eventual disciples were 'come and see.' The Gospel is as much discovered as it is disclosed."

A novice once came to a spiritual master seeking illumination. He asked, "What action shall I perform to attain God?" The master replied, "If you wish to attain God then there are two things you must know. The first is that all efforts to attain the Divine are of no avail." "And the second?" the aspirant asked. "You must act as if you did not know the first."

Fortunately, we do not seek to attain God, we seek to give ourselves to him knowing that he will share all he has with us. And we know that our efforts are not of no avail. We know that if we follow Christ, we will be his.

I return once more to Oehmig: "Epiphany as an encounter with revelation also calls forth a response from us. There is a 'come and see' that issues naturally in a subsequent 'go and tell.' Having come to know Jesus by personal encounter, Andrew does not keep the 'great Eureka' to himself. He responds to the revelation of Jesus by going to find his brother Simon, and then telling of him about the Lord" and bringing him to Jesus.

Andrew has set a model for us. Finding. Telling. Bringing. This is what we also need to do. We need to invite others to share our journey of following the Lord. For us, the words of John, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," are not the best invitation for our generation. That started Andrew and his friend on their journey, might not be quite so well received today. They are a perfect invitation for us as we approach the altar rail, but perhaps not the best to start others on their journey. A far more inviting offer is found in the simple words of Jesus to those who sought to know him: "Come and see."