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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year A: John 1:29-42

"Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This outburst from John the Baptist suggests that he knew a bit more about Jesus' mission and purpose than anyone else knew. In fact, he pretty much nails it. Jesus was, indeed, the sacrificial Lamb who offered himself to take away the world's sin.

But without some grasp of what sacrifice meant in the context of ancient Judaism, one cannot appreciate this image fully. You see, ancient Judaism often required offerings of those who had sinned, which were known as (no surprise here) sin-offerings. If you had broken one of the commandments -- which number 613 in all if you count every one in the first five books of the Bible -- you may have been required to bring an animal (like a lamb) and have a priest offer it on the altar in the temple on your behalf. The idea was that God would see that you had made satisfaction for your transgression and thus, you were back on God's good side.

Needless to say, a lot of animals were sacrificed over the centuries, going all the way back to the institution of the Law itself. But in that single utterance found in John, chapter 1, verse 29, John the Baptist announces a tremendous paradigm shift. No more was sacrifice an ongoing thing; on the contrary, Jesus would be the sacrifice once and for all. Your sin would be absolved not by bringing a lamb to the priest and having it burnt up on the altar; rather, it would be absolved by the sacrificial death of Christ himself.

But what really jumps off the page when I read and reread these words is the

tail end -- "the sin of the world." This idea would be rather revolutionary in an ancient Jewish context, because the concept of "God and God's people" was pretty much restricted to those with an ancestral connection to Abraham. If you weren't a member of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, you weren't a descendant of Jacob, and if you weren't a descendant of Jacob, you weren't a descendant of Isaac. And if you weren't a descendant of Isaac, you weren't a descendant of Abraham. Indeed, you were a Gentile -- a non-Jew -- and you could never become a Jew (although there is a bit of evidence of possible conversion to Judaism in the Old Testament). But what we know now as "conversion to Judaism" is a relatively modern phenomenon.

So to say that this Lamb of God can take away the sin of the world was to make the tent much bigger than it ever was before. The apostle Paul, in particular, was a key figure in promoting the idea that non-Jews could participate in the promise to Abraham -- namely, by faith in Jesus Christ. By the time the earliest Christian communities were formed, Gentiles could count on being heirs to God's promise without even converting first to Judaism, although Paul struggled with a few folks who wanted to make that a requirement, too.

Perhaps John the Baptist didn't fully realize the implications of his outburst, but I think we can today. We can apply this notion "of the world" to the entire globe, thus making the Lamb of God the One who transcends borders, nations, and ethnic identities. I say this in a particularly pointed way to all who are United States citizens (which would, of course, include yours truly, as well). Americans have a tendency to identify themselves as God's chosen people, not because of their great faith or piety, but simply because of their American citizenship. To say that the United States of America is somehow more blessed by God than any other country is to be quite arrogant, if not idolatrous. After

all, how could you prove that? As Christians, we need to witness to the reality that God loves the world, not just the United States of America.

With his words, John the Baptist offers that global vision. God's love is not the exclusive possession of a particular nation, tribe, or culture. Yet we remember, too, that our great heroes of the Gospels -- Christ himself included -- were Jews. The holy places of the ancient Jewish faith figured prominently in the Gospels' stories, and, as he grew in years, Jesus participated in all the traditional Jewish rites of passage.

Furthermore, John the Baptist makes this rather intriguing statement: "I myself did not know [Jesus]; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel" (John 1:31). So how should one make sense of this?

While it is true that Jesus came to save the world from sin, we cannot forget that, in the minds of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah. Obviously, there were people who disagreed with that; that's why there still are non-messianic Jews in the world. But for the evangelists of the Early Church, it was simply too obvious. Just think, for example, of all the passages from Isaiah one could read and not help but think that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy...

But then things get taken one step further. Not only was Jesus Israel's promised Messiah, he was the Son of God. John the Baptist says just that much -- I quote: "And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1:34). Think 1985, Back to the Future: "Whoa Doc, that's heavy!"

While "heavy" may not be the most adequate descriptor of the relationship of God the Son to God the Father, it does convey the gravity of God's care for all the

peoples of the world. It is, indeed, heavy to think that God loves us so much that he'd send his only Son to grant eternal life to us and to all who believe. But good things are heavy, aren't they? Gold weighs more than tin, after all. An Oldsmobile weighs more than a Volkswagen. You get the point.

There's a meaning and depth to this image of the Lamb that John the Baptist gives us...a meaning and depth that hopefully resists the quaintly sentimental. Remember that, when you see an innocent-looking little lamb on a piece of Christian art, you're looking at a symbol of sacrifice...and a violent one, at that. This is the Lamb who was slain, embodying the image of the ancient Jewish sin-offering. Thanks to this Lamb, we need no longer bring lambs of our own to a temple altar to have them sacrificed by priests. No, Jesus himself is both the priest and the offering. He is the priest insofar as he offers himself and he is the sacrifice insofar as he gave his life for all people...for their sin.

All this happened on a cross, where blood was shed in order to restore the relationship between God and God's people once again. But this time, the sacrifice was complete...no repetition necessary. All we need to do to receive the benefits of this sacrifice -- namely, a right relationship with God -- is say yes to the grace God offers us. This grace comes to us in Baptism and through God's holy Word and in the Supper in which we are about to share. Think, too, of when we sing "Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us." It shouldn't be too much of a stretch for us to see that Lamb's very body and blood in the Sacrament today and always -- for there he is doing exactly what John the Baptist said he came to do all along.

He is forgiving the sin in which we and the whole world have dwelled.

May we always remember the global scope of what John the Baptist said...that the

Lamb of God came for the world, not just a certain nation, tribe, or culture. Indeed, God shows no partiality when it comes to these things, but looks instead to the purity of heart with which we come to him. He has no need for burnt offerings, so the Psalmist teaches us (40:8), especially given the more recent revelation of his Son as the perfect offering. We thank him for his great grace shown to us, not only in the gift of Jesus Christ, but also in our wholly undeserved election to be his daughters and sons. All these things come to us because God loves us and thought that saving us was worth the effort.

Why? We'll never know, at least on this side of Christ's return. In the meantime, let us continue to offer our thanks and praise to him.

Amen.