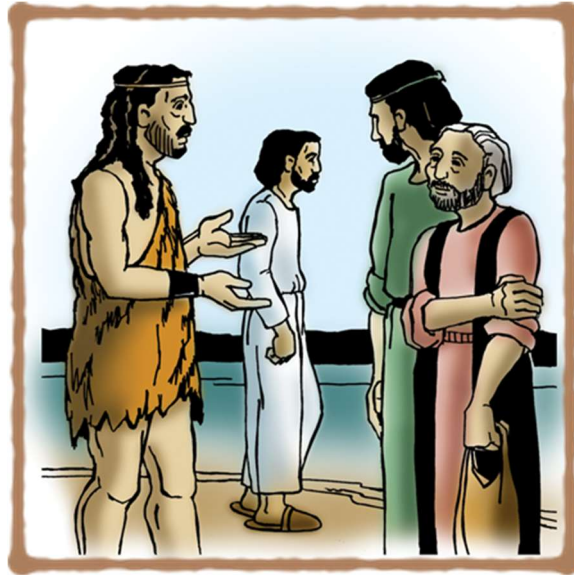


A FIRST CENTURY NEWS REPORTER!

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
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John 1:29-42

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward 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 Chosen One.'

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).

If I had been a newspaper reporter in the first century, I would have asked my editor to assign me to cover John the Baptist. What a fun assignment it would have been. John was such an interesting, colorful personality. He dressed in his own outrageous way. So as a reporter, I might have done a story on John's wardrobe, with an analysis as to what made John

dress that way. He had his own peculiar diet, too—locusts and wild honey. There's certainly another story there—perhaps on the health and nutritive benefits of his food regimen. And, of course, there's the crowd. How did John, against all odds, begin preaching in the wilderness and gain such a crowd of followers? His attendance grew from a trickle to a torrent. Furthermore, his crowds included everyone from Roman soldiers to the Jewish intelligentsia. And then comes the shocker. As the crowds and the enthusiasm mounted, questions grew as stated by the priests and Levites. *"Who are you? Are you Elijah? Are you a prophet? What do you say about yourself?"*

John quoting from Isaiah simply says, *"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord."* John was a prophet. There's no doubt about that. The people at that time were hungry for a prophet. There hadn't been a real prophet for centuries. Some were already saying John was the greatest prophet, since Elijah. So, what exactly did John have in mind?

It's true, he was building a following — a passionate, excited following. But what was his purpose? We could say that he was an announcer. His purpose was to announce the coming of a prophet greater than he. We could also say he was a prophetic figure. He was known to speak for God and baptize with water, symbolizing purification. He was a preacher. He preached about repentance and the coming of the Messiah. But here's what I'd like us to consider today. We could say John was God's first century news reporter. His role was to testify to the light. Jesus, the life and light of all people. A light that shines the darkness, and the darkness could not overtake it. That light that was coming into the world. *"Don't look to me as the Messiah,"* John says. *"Nor am I Elijah. I'm not the story. I'm only the reporter. I am the one who is introducing the story. My purpose is to witness and testify to the story. I am God's first century reporter who introduces, prepares, and tells you about the One, when he comes."* Everything in his ministry

was aimed to fulfill this assignment. The day comes when John does what he said was his only job. He introduces the one he had been waiting for: Jesus of Nazareth, a 30-year-old carpenter who was now ready to begin his ministry. But how does he do it? He does it with two sentences. As he sees Jesus coming toward him, John the Baptist's opening sentence is: *"Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."* According to the Gospel of John, John's audience was largely made up of Jews. They would have understood the allusion that might be puzzling to us in the 21st-century. A lamb was the most important feature of the most important holiday for the Jewish people. It was the symbol of their deliverance from the slavery of Egypt.

On the night centuries before, when the Jewish people were to escape from slavery, each household killed a lamb, sprinkled its blood on the doorpost, and ate the lamb as their nourishment for the journey that was ahead. In the centuries since then, the Jews had commemorated that night of freedom with ceremony involving a sacrificial lamb. So, they would have made that connection. It was quite an astonishing introduction. John was saying, essentially, that the one he was introducing had come on the scene to die, to be a sacrifice to take away sin.

Now I don't think that sin was the paramount issue in the minds of John's audience. I suspect that the first-century audience was pretty much like one in the 21st century. They were hoping for good news of economic security, of full employment and an end to war — or more specifically, in their case, an end to occupation by the Roman army. Like us, most people in the first-century audience were not too worried about sin except when they were the victim of somebody else's sin. Or when they saw, in some dramatic way, how their own conduct was destroying themselves or other people.

John continues reporting about his own experiences with Jesus. It's almost as if he is telling the crowd that he is as surprised as they are that this young teacher from Nazareth is the conclusion to his mission. He announces a remarkable thing happened. The Spirit of God descended upon Jesus in a unique way. It descended from heaven like a dove and remained on him. And then John goes on to testify that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit. *"He is the Chosen One, the Son of God."* It's surprising that someone in John's crowd didn't shout him down, or that some hothead didn't start throwing stones at him. It is only the great respect and awe that people felt for John that prevented such a response. What John said must have sounded like blasphemy. Besides, I have a feeling that the people had hardly noticed Jesus. How could he be the Son of God?

Now let's go a step deeper. If this is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and if Jesus is also the Chosen One of God — well, then, what kind of God is this? And what does all this mean for us? Let's turn this around a bit. What does sin do? Sin separates us from God. But what is happening here? What is John the reporter telling us? He is saying that God, in this news story, is coming to us. Here God comes to us and abides with us. How might that affect our relationship to God? Isn't it more than a substitutionary sacrifice? If the Son of God is also the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, then several things are true. For one, sin matters to God. Sin is a serious matter. All kinds of sin — the horrendous deeds of child abuse that horrify us, and the petty arrogance and half-lies and irritability that mark our days. All these sins matter to God. God sends Jesus, the Lamb of God so that the power of sin can be broken. And that Lamb is God's own Son. He comes to us heals, dwells with us, touches our hearts and our lives.

The effect of this news reporter's story touches us depending on how it is told. What the Lamb may also signify is God's saving grace for our lives. Jesus the Light of the World comes to enlighten and illumine our lives. He shows us a better way

to live and love. This means that God moves right into our problem. God doesn't deal with sin by sending pronouncements for action by a Heavenly Senate, Parliament, or dictator. Nor does God deal with sin by sending a lightning bolt of judgment. God moves into the muck of sin, sending his Son.

Think of the head doctor at a major university medical school, who leads a group of student interns through a ward of welfare patients and street people. They came to the bed of a man with a horribly infected foot, the kind of sight from which most of us would turn away. But the head doctor takes the foot in his hand, as he talks at some length with the patient about his condition. As the students and the doctor walk down the hall to another ward, the doctor says simply, *"Always touch the patient."* This is what John the Baptist reports to the people about God. God comes into the world's sick-room by way of his Son, Jesus Christ, and takes hold of our sin —the horrendous and the petty, but all of it ugly and ulcerating in its effect. God—in Jesus Christ—touches the patient. Touches you and me. Jesus touches our hearts and heals what is broken. He invites us to come and see. Come and follow him. He invites us to testify, as John did, to his goodness, light, and love. This is the continuing good news of Christmas. This is the good news of the Epiphany season. And it's good news we can share with others. We can become God's 21st Century reporters as the Holy Spirit alights on us and works through us, as John did so long ago.

In Jesus' name, amen.