

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
First Sunday after Epiphany- January 13, 2008

Scripture lessons: Psalm 40:1-8 & John 1:29-42

THE LAMB OF GOD

Six weeks ago we started a new church year. We began with Advent, which prepared us for Christmas. The twelve days of Christmas have come and gone. Now we're in Epiphany.

Epiphany's the season in which we celebrate the light of God shining in Jesus. In Epiphany, we commit to learning more of what Christ's light shows to us. We strengthen our desire and ability to reflect that light, to bear witness or testify to it with all that we are and do.

In today's second Scripture, John the Baptist testifies to Jesus' light. He points his own disciples to it so that they start following Jesus instead of John. Jesus sees them and asks, "What are you looking for?" They reply, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" and Jesus answers, "Come and see". It's one of the beauties revealed in his light.

The God who comes to us in Jesus is open and welcoming. He goes where he will go and does what he will do, but, as he does, he invites us to "come and see." He doesn't coerce or browbeat. He invites.

John the Baptist, however, gives us a good heads-up on what we *will* see if we follow Jesus. He clues us in on what will be shown to us in the light of God shining from him. John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". What clue does that give?

Let's begin with those last five words- "the sin of the world". The world "in sin" means that the world is broken. We and all of God's creatures have fallen- fallen away from the vibrant and loving harmony of all with all that God intends for us. The signs of our sin abound.

I recently saw the movie, *The Great Debaters*. Some of our nation's history recalled in it screams the world's sin at us. Not only in our past, but to this day we in sin mistreat and even kill others because of the color of their skin.

I read again recently of Rwanda in the 1990s. The genocide there screams the world's sin at us. During that terrible slaughter, people sought refuge in Christian churches, but it didn't make much difference. Christians in sin massacred their fellow Christians within the walls of their own sanctuaries.

I recently saw again the pictures of the 9/11 hijackers. Their suicide bombing screams the world's sin at us. They were fellow human beings meant to live in loving harmony with us and us with them, but in sin they mass murdered.

I recently saw again the pictures of American soldiers in charge of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Their abuse of those prisoners screams the world's sin at us. They were supposed to be just warriors, but in sin they tortured.

Those examples of our sin are loud and dramatic, but there's no shortage of quieter and more ordinary ones. I recently read about whistleblowers, people who expose malfeasance or crime within a business or government agency where they work. Their lives are usually made miserable because of their deeds of moral courage. They learn how much people in sin are willing to lie to cover up their wrongdoing. They learn how hateful we're willing to become when our falsehoods are finally uncovered.

Another quieter and less dramatic example comes in the campaigns we wage for public office. In sin the misrepresentation of facts and distortions of opponents' records and views are seen simply as part of the game, even when your opponents are members of your own party. Such deceptions are practiced so often and habitually that we hardly seem to notice or care any more about the damage they do to our self-government.

The most ordinary instances of the world in sin might be those that pockmark our daily life in families, friendships, workplaces, and churches. I'm talking of the many small and petty, but

often nasty ways we use to undermine or grind on each other. Backbiting, gossiping, withholding praise, spewing criticism, holding grudges, insisting on our own way, refusing to admit mistakes or wrongs, blaming others, breaking commitments to serve our convenience- those few examples make the point.

“The sin of the world”, whether loud and dramatic or quiet and ordinary, is painfully obvious. But John the Baptist says that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes (it) away”. That sounds wonderful, of course, but what does *it* mean?

The people of Jesus’ time and place knew lambs much better than we do. They were around them much more and understood that lambs are poorly equipped to fend off assaults. They knew that lambs are slow and without sharp teeth or claws so that when attacked they stand and suffer.

Jesus’ people knew as well that their Bible is full of lamb references. In their Scriptures, lambs are always associated with gentleness, innocence, dependence, and sacrifice. In the parable the prophet Nathan tells to uncover King David’s sin, the lamb is a helpless innocent. In the prophet Isaiah, God is a shepherd who carries his lambs in his arms. Later in Isaiah, Israel’s suffering servant is described as a lamb who’s led to the slaughter. In Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers lambs are related to sacrifice in more than 80 different passages.

John the Baptist’s saying that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” reveals God’s response to our sin. God could choose to rebuke, condemn, and punish us for it. In that case, John might have proclaimed Jesus as “the Lion of God who tracks down and mauls the sinners of the world.”

But instead God comes to us as a lamb. God in our flesh comes not to destroy the world in condemning sin, but rather to suffer sin’s assault, to absorb its blows, to take it into God’s own life even to death on a cross. Through free, suffering, sacrificial, and forgiving love, God is at work to remove our sin.

This is absolutely central to the good news revealed in God’s light shining from Jesus. It gives us both blessed assurance and an awesome challenge. It assures us of the lengths God will go to free us from sin. It challenges us to respond to sin against us in the same way God responds to our sin against God.

I wonder if these parents are doing that. Their daughter’s in college and out on a date. Her friend drinks too much to drive them home safely, but drives anyway. They have a terrible accident in which he survives, but she doesn’t.

The police take him into custody and the district attorney files manslaughter charges. Before any trial gets underway the parents of the young woman meet with the young man. Soon after their meeting, the parents issue this public statement:

“One precious, wonderful life has already been lost. We don’t want to lose another. This young man has served time in jail, and as far as we’re concerned that’s enough. He has wronged us terribly. We want him to be sentenced to live, to go on and make something of his life, to live the life that our daughter won’t be able to . . . We urge, therefore, that he be set free to live in the light of this tragedy, to go on and make something of himself for good.”

After this plea, the state decides not to prosecute.

What do you think? For myself, I believe these parents in fact offer the same kind of free, suffering, sacrificial, and forgiving love that Jesus does.

Michael Lapsley was ordained an Anglican priest in South Africa in the 1970s. As a Christian, he felt it his duty to actively oppose his country’s apartheid regime. In 1990 he received a letter from supporters of apartheid. It contained a bomb that blew up, shattering his eardrums, blasting away his hands, and destroying one of his eyes.

He writes, “For the first three months, I was as helpless as a newborn baby. People have asked me how I survived, and my only answer is that somehow, in the midst of the bombing, I felt that God was present . . .

“Quite early on after the bomb, I realized that if I was filled with hatred and desire for revenge, I would be a victim forever. If we have something done to us, we are victims. If we physically survive, we are survivors . . .

“(Yet I’ve been able) to travel further, going from victim to survivor to victor. To become a victor is to move from being an object of history to becoming a subject once more. That’s not to say I won’t always grieve what I’ve lost . . . I will permanently bear the marks of disfigurement. But I believe that I have gained through this . . . I’ve realized I can be more of a priest with *no* hands than with two hands.”

Imagine that. With no hands he can share even more powerfully the free, suffering, sacrificial, and forgiving love of God.

We remember the birthday of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. this coming week. In his writing and preaching, Dr. King often spoke of using “the weapon of love” in response to the world’s sin. In his late 20s he became a leader of our nation’s civil rights movement, organizing the famous bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Followers in that boycott were beaten and thrown into jail. Dr. King replied, “We will counter your force with soul force; we will match your ability to hate with our ability to love.”

In the light shining from Jesus, Dr. King learned that the free, suffering, sacrificial, and forgiving love of God never shrinks back from confronting sin. He knew that if Jesus had run away from facing up to the entrenched sins of his day, he would never have been crucified. Yet when we confront sin with love we never lash out.

In love, we boldly expose wrong, but never try to humiliate, harm, or destroy those doing it. At the same time, in freely suffering, sacrificing for, and forgiving wrong that’s done to us, we never pretend that it’s not there, that it doesn’t hurt, or that it shouldn’t be. To do that replaces courageous love with weak, pale, and phony sentiment.

But with Jesus, with the parents of the daughter killed, with Michael Lapsley, and with Martin Luther King, Jr. we know that real love is never sentimental. It’s always full-blooded and strong. It faces up to sin squarely. It calls it what it is, and only then does it suffer, sacrifice and forgive in order to take it away.

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” In the light shining from Jesus, we see God’s response to our sin. Following in that Lamb’s light, we do the same that God does. We freely suffer, sacrifice, and forgive when others sin against us. Amen.