

Mark D. Reichert

Epiphany 2 – John 1:29-41 – Learn to Look to the Lamb of God
1/18-22/23 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

Words have implications. If someone says to you, boy this couch is heavy; chances are what they really mean is, will you help me carry it? If I say to my kids, your room is awful messy, what I'm really saying is it's time to start cleaning. If I say to my wife, wow, that sunset is beautiful tonight, what I really want is for her to look and see it for herself.

Words have implications that are sometimes unspoken and are sometimes more than surface deep, and that's really very common in how we communicate. But while the examples I just used weren't really all that important, what John the Baptist was talking about in our Gospel lesson for today absolutely was. He spoke some words that every Bible-believing Christian knows well: "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" But he didn't just mean that people should look at Jesus with their eyes and that's it. What he said had some implications. He wants us first of all to behold Jesus and be amazed at who he really is and what he really came here to do for us, and then he doesn't just want us to look at Jesus; he wants us to follow him and listen to him and believe in him! In this lesson, John teaches us to learn to look to the Lamb of God, because the implications of doing that are eternal.

So our story for this week follows up not long after the story of Jesus' baptism that we had last week. Remember that Jesus came to John to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness – to do what was right before God and to make us right with God by faith in him, and the way he proved that he was the right man for the job was when the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and landed on him and when the Father spoke from heaven with that resounding approval of him and his work. Those things all specially set Jesus apart as the one who was sent to be our substitute in order to save us from our sins.

But John knew that being our substitute was only one part of the equation of our salvation. Jesus had to live under God's Law as our substitute and bear our sins on his shoulders, yes; but he also needed to be our sacrifice and suffer the punishment for those sins in our place. And that's why shortly after Jesus' baptism, John spotted Jesus and shouted out, "*Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*"

Those words had implications – implications that the Jews in Jesus' day would probably have picked up on a little more readily than we do now. See, in our day, we know that certain animals generally only have one ultimate purpose. Beef cattle provide our steaks and hamburgers. Dairy cows make our milk and cheese. Well in those days and in that culture, lambs had one main purpose, too: sacrifice. They were used in the service of the temple in Jerusalem and represented the vast majority of the animals that were brought for slaughter and burnt offering. All that blood and death that went along with the sacrifices at the temple must have been a terribly unsettling sight to see, but it had an important purpose. Those sacrifices taught the Israelites the seriousness of their sins, that their sins brought death. But they also taught the Israelites that their God did not intend for that death to be theirs. No rather, he would provide a substitute.

And after all those years and all those countless sacrifices, finally that substitute had come. Yes, when John called Jesus the Lamb of God, he was implying that Jesus was really God's perfect lamb who was headed for sacrifice for us. See, God had told the Israelites that if they were going to bring a lamb to the temple altar in Jerusalem as an offering for their sins, it needed to be a year-old male without blemish or defect. In other words, it needed to be a perfect specimen in the prime of its life. Otherwise it just wasn't good enough to cut it before God.

And the same goes for Jesus, too. The price that Jesus' sacrifice had to pay for our sins was far too high for anything less than perfection to satisfy. He too had to be a perfect specimen in the prime of his life, and thank God, that's exactly what he was for us. He was totally without blemish or defect, perfectly pure in every one of his thoughts and words and actions. He earned perfection and deserved life to its fullest extent, while we only earned condemnation and deserve death to its fullest extent. But that's the thing about a sacrificial lamb. When he went to the cross to be slaughtered as our substitute, he took all the bad we deserved so we could instead have all the good that he earned. He exchanged our sin and death so that we could have instead his righteousness and life.

John wanted there to be no mistake that day about the implications of who Jesus was and what he came here to do. He was the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! He came here, sent by God to carry out God's plan of salvation for his people, and like two sacks of dead weight that he hoisted up onto his shoulders for us, he picked up all the

things we should have done but didn't on one shoulder and all the things we shouldn't have done but did on the other, and he carried all those sins off to the cross where we will never find them again. Like the famous psalm says, "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us*" (103:12), and have you ever really thought about that? See if you go north or south, eventually you reach a point where you're going to start going back the other direction. But east is always east and west is always west, and no matter how far you go, that never changes. So far has the Lamb of God taken away the sin of this world and every single one of you, that they are gone forever and never coming back.

John understood the implications of that, and he knew how important those implications made it for us to learn to look to the Lamb of God. So he said, "*The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.*" Only the true *Son* of God could be the true *Lamb* of God, because only the Son of God himself could live a life perfect enough for us and die a death valuable enough for us in order to make us right with God again. Jesus might not have looked like anything special to the naked eye, but it was his Word and his work that revealed his true glory as God's Son and our Savior.

But now don't miss what else John said there: what Jesus did was for the whole world, yes. But the way we personally receive the benefit of what Jesus did is through the power of the Holy Spirit that he pours out on us to work faith in our hearts. And that's why the next day when John was with two of his disciples and he saw Jesus come by again, he said once more, "*Look, the Lamb of God!*" And this time you can almost see John shooing his disciples along there, can't you? The implication was, "Look, he's the one you should be following, so go, listen to him and believe in him!"

But when those two disciples came to Jesus, he had an important question for them: "*What do you want?*" And that question had some implications of its own. See, lots of people want things from Jesus that he didn't come to be or to give. Jesus doesn't want us to come to him just for some political statement. Jesus doesn't want us to come to him just looking for a buddy or a life coach or a source of inspirational quotes. Jesus doesn't

want us to come to him looking for a good luck charm or an easy shot at prosperity. Jesus wants us to come to him not with our own preconceived desires and notions, not focused on how we can use him for our own selfish aims, but rather he wants us to come to him focused entirely on who he really is and what he really came here to do.

And to their credit, that's what those two disciples did that day, and that's what all of Jesus' true disciples have done ever since. Those disciples asked Jesus where he was staying, and they spent the day with him. They wanted to be near him and hear him and learn from him and know more about him, just like every believer still does today. Now we can't do exactly like those men did, of course – not physically, not visibly – but Jesus does still invite us to come and see and spend the day with him when we come here to his house and listen to his Word. We can still spend the day with Jesus when we prioritize time for Bible study or set aside time for personal reading and devotions at home. And maybe most special of all, we can still spend the day with Jesus whenever we come to his Table to dine in his presence as we receive his true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. And after all, isn't that why we sing that song, "O Christ, Lamb of God" before Communion? It's because here at the Lord's Table he shares with us the mercy and peace he won for us when he sacrificed himself to take away the sins of the world. So friends, let's do like those disciples did. Let's learn to look to the Lamb of God by following him and listening to him and believing in him.

And then did you notice that one last unspoken implication of the all-important fact that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? It's that these disciples didn't just come and see. They also went and told! If Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world*, then that means the world must know. And so ever since then, God's people have been both treasuring and sharing those implications. Yes, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – we can never marvel at it enough! – so let's learn to look to the Lamb of God like he truly desires and deserves, dear friends. Behold with wonder and awe who he really is and what he really came here to do for us – the Son of God himself who loved us enough to be our substitute and our sacrifice and our Savior – and then by the power of the Holy Spirit working in your hearts through his Word and Sacraments, follow him, listen to him, believe in him, tell about him both now and for eternity. Amen.