

SERMON: Lamb of God

TEXT: John 1:29-42

Remember last spring when one of the big stories on the news was about a gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo? A little boy had gotten through a barrier and fell into the gorilla's habitat. Zoo officials ended up shooting the animal in order to save the little boy. Not surprisingly, controversy erupted. Some people were horrified and infuriated at the injustice of the killing, to the point of wanting the parents of the boy held criminally responsible for the gorilla's death. Others protested at the zoo, one holding a sign that said, "Protect the animals; keep brats out of the habitats."

Does anyone else feel like our world has become more and more pro-animal over the years? I'm sure it's partly due to the work of the ASPCA, bringing our attention to some terrible cruelties inflicted upon animals. And, I'm glad we are realizing that animals are God's creatures, too. I applaud efforts that are made to save certain species from extinction. But when an animal's life becomes more important than a child's, I have to wonder if we've taken this a bit too far.

I also saw on Facebook recently, a video of a little girl who was in tears when she realized that some of the food her family ate was from animals. In a

conversation with her mother, she insisted that she would no longer eat animals, because she didn't want to hurt them.

Of course, I understand the feeling that our pets are important members of the family. I have pets that I love, too, and I've cried like a baby when I've lost a pet.

And here we have on the front of our bulletin, a picture of a precious little lamb, looking so cute and cuddly. This ties in with the lesson for today, when John declares of Jesus, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Jesus, the LAMB OF GOD. It's a nice title, and I guess, since we're just three weeks past Christmas, the warm and fuzzy little lamb is an easy metaphor of the baby Jesus in the manger. But for a thirty-year-old man, LAMB OF GOD seems a curious and even confusing description. While certainly a gentle shepherd and compassionate man, I wouldn't describe Jesus as warm and fuzzy. Furthermore, little lambs are frail and helpless. No, that's not Jesus either. LAMB OF GOD just isn't a very powerful image in my mind.

But the lamb *was* a powerful image for the Jewish people of that time. In the temple where the Jews worshipped, lambs (along with other animals) were brought as an offering. As a sacrifice, they were far from cute and cuddly. Instead, they were slaughtered on the altar, and their blood was poured over all sides of the altar. Such sacrifices were offered to God as a way of paying for one's sins. If you brought a lamb to worship and killed it on the altar, your sins would be forgiven. It's a good thing there was no ASPCA around at that time!

In today's scripture lesson, Jesus is just embarking on his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. John the Baptizer is announcing his arrival and introducing him around town, if you will. And instead of proclaiming, "Behold, the Son of God" or "Behold, the King of the Jews," or "Behold, the Messiah", John identified Jesus with the words, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus, as the LAMB OF GOD, was the one who would be sacrificed, the one whose blood would be shed, the one who would offer himself as payment for our sins.

I find it interesting that John's audience seems almost as ignorant as we are regarding the significance of this title, LAMB OF GOD. They are curious, for sure, and several of them follow Jesus to find out more. But no one seems to be

stopped in their tracks by the announcement that a human being will become the sacrifice to pay for their sins.

The term LAMB OF GOD also refers to the Passover Lamb, which makes it even more powerful. It was the last of the ten plagues placed upon the Egyptians to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves. This final plague would kill all the firstborn babies in the land – humans and animals alike. And the only thing that would save the Hebrew babies would be for each family to paint over the doorway of the house with the blood of a sacrificed lamb. If they did this, God would “pass over” their homes, not touching them with the most destructive of all the plagues. Just as the blood of the Passover Lamb saved and freed the Israelites, so the blood of Jesus, as the LAMB OF GOD, saves and frees us. His blood paid for our sins. He sacrificed his own life to give us abundant and eternal life.

This idea should stop us in our tracks, but somehow, it doesn't. Maybe it's too overwhelming to think about. Our brains are tired, and we've got too much to do to stop and consider what it means that someone gave his life for us.

Tomorrow is the day set aside to remember and celebrate the life and the work and the sacrifice of Martin Luther King, Jr. Now I don't know about you, but

to me it is shameful to think about how much he did, but how little we've learned and how little we've changed. Today, over fifty years later, the Black Lives Matter movement is grossly misunderstood by so many. When people respond to cries of *Black Lives Matter* with the answer *All Lives Matter* is to miss the point. The Black Lives Matter movement is *not* to say that black lives matter *more* than others. Rather, it is to point out that black lives have never mattered as much as others. Martin Luther King, Jr. put his own life on the line and died to change that attitude, and we have yet to fix it.

We know what it means for us to honor King's life; it means we need to continue his work, to carry on his legacy. Well, that's also what it means to recognize that Jesus is the LAMB OF GOD.

Like John's disciples, we need to follow the LAMB OF GOD. And we need to realize that following is not a spectator sport. We are not just observers, we are ministers – all of us. Following means to participate fully in Christ's life and his work, in teaching and healing, in seeking and reaching out to the lost and forgotten, in loving the unlovable, in forgiving the unforgiveable, and yes, even in sacrificing ourselves as he did.

As we come to his table, let us remember Jesus as the LAMB OF GOD who takes away the sin of the world. Let us take his body and blood and be nourished and strengthened in body and spirit to follow him, to continue his work, and to be his representatives in our world.

Let us be humbled and give thanks that He sacrificed himself for us...to the glory of God!

AMEN.