

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

John the Baptist came as the one “[preparing] the way of the LORD, [making] straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa. 40:3). He came as “the prophet of the Most High” that he might “go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76).

And yet, today, John has transitioned from prophet to preacher. He has moved from preparation to proclamation. No more anticipation; Jesus has come. John points his hearers to Him: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

These words are not unfamiliar to us. We know them quite well, at least, we should. Yet, do we pay much attention to them? Do we pass over them with little interest? Or do they garner our attention! Do our ears perk up at their recitation?

The church through the years has heard them and has put them in our liturgy! We sang them today in the *Gloria*! It’s not just the angels’ song that we sing there, but John the Baptist’s proclamation: “O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who takest away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. Thou who takest away the sin of the world, receive our prayer.” But not just there. You know it as well as we prepare to receive Christ’s holy Sacrament. Having just heard the instituting words of Christ that bring forth His very presence in the Sacrament, we sing to Him: “O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.” Indeed, we repeat it three times, the last time praying, “Grant us Thy peace!”

But not just in the liturgy; also in our congregational song! “Mark how the Lamb of God’s self-offering Our human sinfulness takes on” (LSB600), we’ll sing in the first of our distribution hymns. Back in Advent we sang, “See, the Lamb, so long expected, Comes with pardon down from heav’n” (LSB345) and “Behold the Lamb of God That bears the world’s transgressions, Whose sacrifice removes The devil’s dread oppression. Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away our sin, Who for our peace and joy Will full atonement win” (LSB346). In Christmas we sang “See, the Lamb, our sin once taking To the cross, Suff’ring loss, Full atonement making” (LSB360) and “See amid the winter’s snow, Born for us on earth below, See, the gentle Lamb appears, Promised from eternal years” (LSB373).

And not just in these, but in the church’s iconography, too. Here at Zion, can you find the stained glass window of the Lamb holding His victory banner? Or if you can think back one week of the white altar parament—do you see the Lamb? In my mind, I can see the marvelous Lucas Cranach painting of the Weimar altarpiece. Many of you know it, with Christ on the cross front and center and with John the Baptist in the painting pointing both up to Jesus on the cross and down to a Lamb, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You can see . . . through the years, the church has taken John’s preachment to heart. So may we today.

Now, last Sunday we heard how John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, Jesus doing it to fulfill all righteousness. We heard how the Holy Spirit descended from heaven to anoint Jesus as the Christ. And we heard the Father's loving approval: "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17). Thus begins Jesus' ministry.

In fact, what takes place today takes place some time after Jesus' baptism. According to the Evangelist's chronology, it happens "*the next day,*" but that's not necessarily the day after Jesus' baptism. It's the day after John the Baptist's identity was questioned: "*Who are you?*" some priests and Levites asked. John knew and confessed that he was not the Christ; he was "*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness*" (John 1:23).

Jesus had been baptized by John as today's account takes place, and the Baptist reports that he was told to be on the lookout for the very things that happened at Jesus' baptism, especially the Spirit in the form of a dove. This would identify the One John was to reveal to Israel as the Christ, the Son of God, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, the One that John would bear witness to as "*the true light, which gives light to everyone, [that] was coming into the world* (John 1:8-9), the One who would effect the "*salvation [of] his people in the forgiveness of their sins*" (Luke 1:77).

Of course, "*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*" (Heb. 9:22). And without a sacrifice there is no atonement, as the Lord says, "*I have given [blood] for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life*" (Leviticus 17:11).

John's preaching, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,*" therefore, has prophetic overtones, for if this Lamb is to take away sins, He would have to be sacrificed. He would have to shed His blood! Which is exactly what Jesus does by His cross. He becomes the true Lamb of God the Father, who ransoms us "*not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Yes, Jesus becomes the true Lamb of God, foreshadowed by the Old Testament sacrifices commanded by God, by the myriads of lambs slaughtered as sin offerings and burnt offerings. But let me point you to three places in the Old Testament that connect us today to John's proclamation of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

First, John says that this Lamb of God "*takes away the sin of the world,*" or we could translate that word as he "*bears away*" this sin. This wording brings to mind the Old Testament Day of Atonement. On this holy day, to be sure, it's goats and not lambs that are used. But you recall that one goat is used for a sin offering for the people; and on the other goat are placed all the sins of the people, and they are

borne away into the wilderness. For us, the Lamb of God fulfills both of these roles, both shedding His blood as the perfect sin offering and bearing the sins of the world away from us.

Second, and in this same vein, the Lord through prophet Isaiah speaks of his “*servant,*” who bears “*our griefs and [carries] our sorrows,*” who is “*oppressed, and ... afflicted.*” He is “*like a lamb that is [silently] led to the slaughter*” (Isa. 53:4, 7). He bears our iniquities, so that by His self-“*offering for guilt, ... [He makes] many to be accounted righteous*” (Isa. 53:10-11).

Who is this silent Lamb? Who is this ἀμνος, as the Septuagint translates it? An ἀμνος is a sacrificial lamb, one year old, the lexicon tells us. Yes, this Lamb is the One who “*goes uncomplaining forth, The guilt of sinners bearing, And laden with the sins of earth ... To slaughter is led without complaint*” offering up His “*spotless life*” (LSB438). Paul Gerhardt has it right in his Lenten and Holy Week hymn that speaks of the Lamb: “*This Lamb is Christ, the soul’s great friend, The Lamb of God, our Savior.*”

Third, this Lamb of God is the perfect lamb, a male lamb, a one-year-old lamb, offering up His blood that death might pass over us, and that we might be delivered from the bondage of sin. That the Evangelist uses this same word for Lamb, ἀμνος, shows us that he wants to connect Christ to the Passover Lamb. Paul says it explicitly, “*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed*” (1 Cor. 5:7).

Christ, the Lamb of God, is the fulfillment of all these Old Testament types. He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. His once-for-all sacrifice has established it. The world’s sins have been atoned for; we live in the reality now of sins forgiven. Faith takes hold of it.

But God knows how weak we are, how often we sin, how much we doubt. Thus, this Lamb serves us still. Thus, He gives us not just His word of forgiveness, but especially the Sacrament of His sacrificed body and blood. Thus, the image of the Lamb on our white paraments, the Lamb of God, yes, but the Lamb of God bleeding into the chalice. Christ, the Lamb of God, who takest away the sin of the world, does have mercy on us in this Sacrament. He offers up the benefits of His body broken and blood shed in forgiveness, life, and salvation. He gives us peace.

And He strengthens us in our weakness, who like Andrew and Peter, and later Philip and Nathanael, follow after Jesus. He strengthens us, not just to follow Him, but also to live as His disciples, loving one another as He has loved us, and going and telling, and doing our own inviting, for we know where Jesus is staying, that is, where He may be found ... there on our altar! “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.