

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We didn't consider the Baptism of Jesus last Sunday, choosing instead to celebrate the Epiphany Feast on Sunday. But that means we missed seeing "*the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on*" Jesus (Matt. 3:16). We missed hearing the "*voice from heaven*" saying of Jesus: "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matt. 3:17). We missed this revelation of Jesus' divinity on display, of "God in man made manifest" (LSB394).

But some of what we missed last Sunday, we got to hear today from the mouth of John the Baptist. "*John bore witness,*" the Evangelist said. "*I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.*" This happened, of course, at Jesus' baptism. In our text, it is "*the next day*" after Jesus' baptism, so it was all fresh in John's mind. His own cousin was "*anointed ... with the Holy Spirit and with power*" (Acts 10:38).

John surely knew his cousin Jesus. The infant John, still in his mother's womb, had even "*leaped for joy*" when the pregnant Mary came to visit his mother Elizabeth. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and cried out in faith when "*the mother of [her] Lord*" (Luke 1:43) greeted her. John, too, heard the greeting, and by the Spirit carried to him through this word, leaped in faith in the presence of Jesus.

Was this faith a blind, unreasoned and unreasonable faith? That's what "leap of faith" has come to mean, hasn't it? Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is credited for this term, but in fact never used it in any of his writings (see www.logos.com/grow/kierkegaards-leap-of-faith). But faith is never based upon reason. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him" (Luther, Small Catechism, Creed, 3rd Article).

Faith and knowledge are two different things. That's clear from the Scripture and from experience ... from experience as we see those who, as they gain knowledge, lose faith ... and from the Scripture as Jesus says, "*I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children*" (Matt. 11:25). Which is why we should constantly pray, "Lord, humble me; make me as a little child to trust in You, that I may '*enter the kingdom of heaven*'" (Matt. 18:3).

Thus, faithful John the Baptist in our text could say twice: "*I myself did not know him*" Before he baptized Jesus, John didn't understand all of what God would reveal of Jesus in the days ahead. And even after it, John didn't understand what he would have to endure for the sake of Jesus, so that even the great John the Baptist had a crisis of faith because of that.

But, faithful John did what he was called to do — he preached: "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt. 3:2). He baptized with a baptism of repentance.

And he preached: *“Bear fruit in keeping with repentance”* (Matt. 3:8). And his purpose was this: that he might reveal *“the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth,”* come in the flesh. John preached and baptized that he might bear witness to the light of men, the light that overcomes the darkness. John preached and baptized that he might draw people to the Light of the world (John 1:4-5).

And when the time came for him to baptize Jesus, John saw and realized: *“this One is so far superior to me that ‘I am not worthy [even] to untie’ ‘the strap of [His] sandal’”* (John 1:27). John saw and realized: *“I baptize with water, but He is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit.”* John also surely heard the Father's benediction upon His Son: *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”* (Matt. 3:17), so that he realized this One is God from eternity, that he might bear *“witness that this [One] is the Son of God”* in the flesh.

Which then leads John to realize and confess and proclaim: *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* In Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist comes to know and proclaim what the Twelve would only realize by experiencing it themselves: that Jesus, God's lamb without blemish, who for our sake fulfilled all righteousness, became the perfect substitute for us; that Jesus, God's lamb, bearing our griefs, our sorrows, our transgressions, our iniquities was led away uncomplaining to the slaughter, to shed His holy, precious blood, to give up His life unto innocent suffering and death; that Jesus, God's lamb, would endure the punishment we deserve that we might have peace; he suffered the wounds that are by right ours that we might be healed. This is the payment price for our sins ... but not just ours ... for the sins of the whole world.

Andrew told his brother Simon Peter about Jesus. *“We have found the Messiah.”* Peter would follow Jesus and make a glorious confession: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Matt. 16:16). And yet, Peter didn't have John's understanding. When Jesus told him what was in store for Jesus, Peter rebuked Him: *“Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you”* (Matt. 16:22). Jesus rebuked him back: the bloody sacrifice of the Lamb of God is precisely God's plan of salvation, for *“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins”* (Heb. 9:22), and again, *“it is the blood that makes atonement by the life”* (Leviticus 17:11).

Martha would come to know Jesus as the Christ, too. She made a beautiful confession: *“Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world”* (John 11:27); she believed that Jesus wielded power over death: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”* (John 11:21). But she had to be instructed that by Jesus, the Lamb slain for the world, but risen again, by Him who is resurrection and life itself, *“Whoever believes in [Him], though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in [Jesus] shall never die”* (John 11:25-26). *“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,”* who lives

and reigns (Rev. 5:12). “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*” (Rev. 7:10)

Even witnessing Jesus' cross and death was not enough for the disciples. It took resurrection and a word from Him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit to move Thomas back to faith and to the confession: “*My Lord and my God!*” (John 20:28) “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*” (John 20:29), not a blind faith or unreasoned faith, but a faith by the Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.

All of these are marvelous confessions of the faith, once the confessors got there; but none of these confessions has found its way into the church's life quite like John the Baptist's has. His confession of Jesus as the Lamb of God is perhaps the confession of Jesus without peer, and it's found in our liturgy. We cry out for mercy to this “Lamb of God, who takest away the sin of the world” in the *Gloria*, and as we prepare to meet Him in the Sacrament, we sing out again to the Lamb of God for mercy and peace in the *Agnus Dei*.

It's in our hymnody. Today we “Mark how the Lamb of God's self-off'ring Our human sinfulness takes on” (LSB600). In Lent we'll praise how “A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, The guilt of sinners bearing” (LSB438). We eat and drink “At the Lamb's high feast” each Sunday, partaking of His body and blood as we sing “Praise to our victorious King, Who has washed us in the tide Flowing from His piercèd side” (LSB633). There are many more.

It's found in our iconography. Our white altar parament has the Lamb pierced for our transgressions bleeding into a chalice; look on the front of your bulletin for a similar icon. Consider our stained glass windows here at Zion. This lamb (S Transept) represents us whom our Shepherd has lie down in green pastures; but that one (N wall) has the lamb holding His victory banner. That's the Lamb of God who has taken away our sin by His cross and resurrection. And look on the back panel when you have a chance. There again is the Lamb sacrificed for us, who offers up His atoning blood in the chalice for the forgiveness of our sins.

These all bear witness: John's confession is now the Church's confession, the confession of the baptized, the confession of the faithful, our confession and our faith. Jesus is “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world,*” we are unashamed to say, and we follow Him. More than that, strengthened by this gospel proclamation and confession, we not only follow Him, but we are also moved to live as His disciples, loving one another as He has loved us, and bearing witness like Andrew did; that is, going and telling, and doing our own inviting, for we know this Messiah, and we know where Jesus is staying ... we know where He may be found. He is here in our midst, here 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.