

“Behold the Lamb of God!”

(The Gospel of John, Part 6)

John 1.19-51

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For years I puzzled over this passage, the first narrative segment in John’s gospel. There’s some action that takes place over the course of several days right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, but mainly it’s just a series of short conversations. In the next chapter Jesus will turn water into wine and chase the money changers out of the temple, but here, he doesn’t seem to do anything terribly noteworthy. His baptism is mentioned, but John doesn’t describe it, the way the other gospels do. It almost feels the main characters here are John the Baptist, Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, and Nathanael, not Jesus. For years I wondered, “What’s the *point*?” Why did John include all these random bits of conversation? Why didn’t he just go straight from that majestic prologue to Jesus’ first miracle? Sometimes you can stare at a passage of scripture for days, months, even years, and not get it. Then, suddenly, a light bulb goes off, you have that *eureka* moment, that *aha!*, and it all makes sense. What holds this strange narrative together are *two very clear, very vivid themes*. The first is the *identity* of Jesus Christ. Just who *is* this guy, anyway? And the second: what people *do* with that information.

The narrative opens with John the Baptist hanging out by the Jordan River, telling people to change their ways and be cleansed in the waters of baptism. Word has reached Jerusalem about John; the religious leaders are wondering, “Who *is* this guy, and what’s he doing?” So they send some priests and Levites to investigate. John tells them three things he is *not*: (1) He is not the Messiah. Jews of that era generally expected that someday God would send a Messiah, an Anointed One, in Greek the “Christ,” who would take up political power and kick all the enemies of the Jews out of Israel, once and for all, like David had done, a thousand years earlier. But John says, “I’m not the Messiah.” (2) He is not Elijah. Jews of that era generally expected that prior to the Messiah God would send Elijah, that prophet from eight hundred years earlier who had been taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. Malachi 4:5 – the next-to-last verse in the Old Testament – says, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” But John says, “I’m not Elijah.” (3) He is not “the Prophet.” This harkens back to Deuteronomy 18, where Moses says: “I will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you.... And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.” (Deut. 18:15, 18) Jews of that era generally believed that God would someday send a “prophet like Moses.” Many prophets had come and gone since the days of Moses, but none quite fit the bill. Someday, God would make good on that promise. But John says, “I’m not that prophet.” So the priests

and Levites press him: *Who are you, and why are you baptizing people?* John reveals three things about himself: (1) He is “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.” That quote from Isaiah 40:3 appears in all four gospels, in reference to John the Baptist: he is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the Lord who is to come. (2) He is a “baptizer in water.” That means *he’s just a man*, an ordinary man, using ordinary water – the flowing water of the Jordan River – to symbolically represent a change of ways and will in the hearts of those whom he baptizes. It’s just *water*. Nothing more, nothing less. (3) He is “unworthy,” he says, to untie the thong of the sandal that’s on the foot of *someone* nearby. There’s *someone* in that crowd who is of far greater significance in the grand scheme of things than he is. *John knows his place*. He knows who he is, and who he *is not*. He’s just a messenger, a herald. The person who *really* matters is standing right there, in the crowd, and the priests and the Levites have *no idea* who John is talking about. Jesus is *right there*, but they don’t have the foggiest clue who he is. It’s very possible for Jesus to be *immanently present* in a person’s life, and for that person to be *completely* oblivious. Which is why we have to *talk* about him.

Which is what John the Baptist does, the very next day. Looking at Jesus, but talking to the crowd, he proclaims: “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Older translations render it like this: “Behold the Lamb of God!” You may have heard that verse, in song. When George Frederick Handel was composing his most famous oratorio, *The Messiah*, he took this verse – John 1:29 – and turned it into a chorus. (Perhaps we can get the choir to sing it for us some day!) But what does John mean? Jesus doesn’t exactly *look* like a lamb. To understand the reference, we need to go back to the Old Testament, to Isaiah 53, which describes the “suffering servant”: “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.” (Isaiah 53:7) This is part of a series of passages that describe how “a man of suffering” was “wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isaiah 53:3, 4, 5) and whose life became an “offering for sin” (Isaiah 53:10). From the earliest days of the church, Christians understood that Isaiah was referring to Jesus; *he* was the lamb that was led to the slaughter, on Good Friday, offering a sacrificial death that completely freed us from the guilt and the weight of sin. Other passages from the Old Testament add some additional flavor, like the Passover Lamb from Exodus 12 and the morning and evening lamb sacrifices from Exodus 29, but the primary meaning is that Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy in Isaiah; he is the lamb that was slaughtered for our transgressions; his death completely freed us from the burden of our sins. That doesn’t mean we don’t sin – heavens no! – but it does mean that, because of our faith in Jesus, our sins no longer have eternal consequences. God forgives us and absolves us from any penalty. We truly are free. It is a blessed gift, to be able to stand before God as if we had a completely clean slate, which we *only* have because of what Jesus did for us, and not through any merit of our own. Thanks be to God!

That is John the Baptist’s first public proclamation about Jesus: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” He continues: “This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” (John 1:30-31) He says that even he didn’t know who Jesus truly was, until the Spirit revealed it to him, at the moment when Jesus was baptized. He concludes: “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:34)

Now it's out there. John the Baptist knows who Jesus is, and he's telling the world. He's doing that thing that we Presbyterians tend to shy away from, that "e" word, *evangelism*. The whole rest of chapter 1 is evangelism in practice: people telling people about Jesus. Frederick Dale Brunner (a Presbyterian!) identifies three different forms of evangelism here in John 1: (1) *Preacher evangelism*. That's what John the Baptist does – he's *preaching* to people; he's telling a large crowd about who Jesus is and why he matters. That's what I do up here, to a certain extent. But the testimony of the church was never intended to be just preaching. (2) *Family evangelism*. That's when someone tells other people in their own family about Jesus. This is what Andrew does, when he finds his brother Simon Peter, says to him, "We have found the Messiah," and brings Simon Peter to Jesus. Telling members of your own family – that's family evangelism. (3) *Friend evangelism*. That's when someone tells their friends about Jesus. This is what Philip does, when he says to Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth," and then invites his skeptical friend to "come and see." When Nathanael encounters Jesus he realizes that his friend knew what he was talking about, and correctly identifies Jesus as both "Son of God" and "King of Israel." Three different kinds of evangelism, right here in the opening chapter of John, one that folks like I do and two more that *anybody* can do, and the growth of the church depends on *all three kinds of evangelism happening*. Without friend evangelism, Nathanael wouldn't have heard. Without family evangelism, Simon Peter wouldn't have heard – and imagine how the gospel story would have been different! But over the centuries we've let those two kinds of evangelism slide. We've got the richest treasure in the world, and we're not very good at sharing it! Wait, I take that back. I learned just two weeks ago that there's somebody in this church who has been inviting their friend to "come and see." It's the Philip and Nathanael story playing itself out two thousand years later. It takes courage to extend an invitation like that, and it takes courage for a new person to walk through the door of a church for the very first time, and I'm thankful for the courage I'm seeing displayed. Who do you know who doesn't know Jesus? Who do you know who hasn't been to church in decades, or maybe *ever*? What truth about Jesus can you offer them that might change their life for the better? That's what this is about, after all – offering people *the hope of the world!* I know it's challenging for some of you; and there was a conversation here in this building just last month about how we need to be offering some training to help people become more comfortable and more effective at this. We're working on that and hopefully I'll have more to say on that topic that sometime in the next few months!

For now, I just want you to see what's going on here in this opening chapter of John's gospel. It boils down to two things: *who is Jesus*, and *telling other people*. *Identity* and *evangelism*. And who is Jesus? Well, John has told us: he's the Word (1:1); he's God (1:1); he's Life (1:4), he's the Light of all people (1:4); he's the Word Made Flesh (1:14); he's God's only Son (1:18); he's the one who comes after John who ranks ahead of John because he was before John (1:15); he's the Messiah (1:17); he's the Prophet (1:21); he's the Lord (1:23); he's the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29); he's the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit (1:33); he's Rabbi / Teacher (1:38); he's the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote (1:45); he's Jesus the son of Joseph from Nazareth (1:45); he's the King of Israel (1:49); he's the Son of Man (1:51). That's who Jesus is! All of that – and so much more.

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