

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany • January 16, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

John 1:29-42

“Behold the Lamb of God”

I. Invocation, Confession & Absolution

In today's Gospel text, we'll hear John the Baptizer exclaim, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” That same message is proclaimed by the liturgy of the church in worship when we come together, calling us to look to Jesus as Savior. The ancient liturgy shapes our time together each week and, if we let it, directs our attention towards the same person to whom John was pointing when he spoke those words. So I invite you to listen closely to what we say and sing in the worship service today as together we explore how the liturgy leads us to the Lamb.

Here at the beginning of the worship service, we have come into a sacred space. The invocation that opens the liturgy isn't about us “making our beginning in the name of” God, it's us calling on God's name, the same God who was present at Jesus' baptism as we heard last week, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are in the presence of God, as we call on Him to hear our prayers, to receive His people. In the liturgy for Holy Communion, we kneel before God, confess our sin before Him and everyone else in the congregation, asking for His forgiveness, for Him to take away our sin. So when the pastor pronounces the absolution, he's not merely announcing that you are forgiven, God is actually forgiving you for all the ways in which you have fallen short, even those thoughts, words, and deeds that you don't recall. Forgiven, we are freed to worship the Lamb, who has taken away our sin. And so, when we sing the processional hymn, we turn to face the cross as we look to the Lamb, our Emmanuel, God-with-us.

II. Gloria in Excelsis, Word

This is the time of the church year that's called Epiphany. It's all about pointing people, you and me included, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But even in this season of Epiphany, the song and celebration of Christmas continues as we join in singing “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!” It wasn't all that long ago when we heard tell of that glad refrain being sweetly sung by the angels o're the plains. With the part of the service that we know Gloria in Excelsis, we echo the angel chorus in sing out to our almighty and holy Father in heaven, to His Son, the Lamb, and to the Holy Spirit. Worship, thanks, praise, and glory are God's alone! He welcomes us into the mystery of His presence as His people and brings us peace.

Continuing on in the liturgy, God speaks to us through the readings from the Scriptures. A significant part of our heritage as Lutheran Christians is the preeminence of God's holy word as the sole source and norm for what we believe and teach about our faith. Through His word, God points us to how He has worked throughout history to bring rescue to His people: through Abraham and Moses and King David, through Elijah and Isaiah and all the prophets of what we know as the Old Testament, and, ultimately, through His Son, Jesus. We stand for the reading of the Holy Gospel, recognizing and in honor of the presence of the Lamb of God among us.

In the ancient and historic liturgy of the church, almost the entirety of what we say and sing is adopted from passages of the Scriptures: we repeat God's word back to Him throughout the worship service.

III. Sermon, Creed, Prayers

At this point in each week's service, we pause for meditation on God's word. The message that we hear in the sermon each Sunday is usually shaped by that day's assigned texts and the season of the church year. And although the particulars of the sermon might change from week to week with different passages and different illustrations or preaching styles, the underlying message should

always be the same one that we heard from John: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” Here at St. John’s, we aspire to speak the truth of God’s word in all its clarity, both God’s Law – that which convicts us of our sin and our need for forgiveness – and His Gospel, which shows us our Savior, the one who makes our salvation a reality. Jesus is the perfect servant that we heard of through the prophet Isaiah; in serving His Father, he has served each and every one of us. This is the ancient truth that we need to hear anew each and every day.

The Creed follows the sermon as a proclamation and response: We have heard the Triune God speak to each of us through His word, so we join together in speaking out (confessing) the faith that we share with those believers participating in the liturgy with us here in this place, along with all those around our world. Using the same words, we say, “This is what I believe. This is my faith.” What we have heard from God we repeat back to Him.

As God’s people, we boldly come before Him in prayer, at His invitation. Our prayers aren’t limited to just one part of the service: the whole liturgy, including the hymns, is one extended prayer. But even so, we come before our Father through the Holy Spirit in the name of the Lamb of God, asking Him to remember us. We give God thanks for what He has done in our lives, and we lay our concerns and petitions at the foot of His throne.

IV. Sanctus, Communion

Something amazing happens as the liturgy moves into Holy Communion. Following the preface, which again connects God’s saving work with the current season of the church year, we come to the Sanctus. The refrain goes up from the congregation as we sing, “Holy, holy, holy,” joining with angels and archangels who are continually giving praise around the Lord’s throne: heaven is converging with earth to bring us into the divine!

Praying the prayer that our Lord taught us, in preparation for his presence among us in his body and blood according to his promise, we come to the table that he has prepared. We come, singing the *Agnus Dei*: “Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us.” With John, we proclaim that Jesus is the one who is come to fulfill God’s promise of a Savior for our world. Jesus is the answer to our prayer of “Lord, have mercy;” yet the answer to our prayer comes at a price. The innocent and perfect Lamb must be sacrificed, his blood spilled for us. We have life through his death. Jesus’ story doesn’t end at the cross or the tomb: the Lamb won victory over death and now lives and reigns with the Father and the Spirit. And he is with us now as he calls us to eat and drink at his altar. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good!

V. Response, Benediction

God has called us together to the cross of His Son. Jesus is the Lamb, the one who gave up his life that we might live in fellowship with God and with one another. As the liturgy draws to its close, the Lord sends us out with His blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” It is the Lamb who is your blessing, the one who keeps you in his care. It is through the Lamb that God makes His face to shine on you, through the Lamb He shows you His gracious love. In Jesus, the Lamb, God looks towards you and gives you peace.

The Father now sends us into the world through the Spirit, by the Son: we entered into this sacred space in God’s name, and in His name we go out. He has taken away our sin and called us again to be His own. He have heard the Lamb, we have known his presence. We depart, renewed in God’s grace, given strength for living, made bold to say: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Amen.