

Behold the Lamb of God!

by The Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins

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As a discipline, I try to preach from the lectionary, and I try to present the biblical texts from an historical-critical perspective and I also try to offer a contemporary, practical application. I want to share both the historical and cultural contexts from which the scriptures come, and I want to demonstrate how these texts are still relevant to post-modern, critical thinkers. It's a bit of a challenge, but one that I quite enjoy...usually.

Today's gospel reading is fraught with challenges that I would probably by-pass if not for my personal commitment to preach from the lectionary and to try to do justice to the text. The translation that I use the most presents our gospel reading this way:

[The day after Jesus' baptism, John] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'

Now, when we hear phrases in our liturgies, in our hymns, in our sermons from the time we are four, we become so familiar with them that they lose their power to disturb. We assume we know what they mean, and we are comfortable with our assumptions. But when I allow myself to hear this phrase in a new way, as if I'm hearing it for the first time, it stings. It disrupts my comfort. It brings to mind more questions than answers. It robs me of my myth of certainty, and replaces it with ambiguous hope and multiple possibilities.

The Lamb of God? What does that mean? We might think of the story of the Passover where the people were instructed to drip lamb's blood on their door posts as a sign for the angel of death to pass over them, leaving them unscathed. Now, the story of God sending plagues of destruction, and not knowing who to spare from the destruction without the aid of blood magic offends my 21st century sensibilities; but it was a powerful story of hope and liberation in the worldview that produced it. Is John comparing Jesus to the Lamb that was slaughtered to magically save ancient people from a plague? If so, then *Lamb of God* is a symbol of hope and liberation, because that Passover event preceded the Exodus, the flight from oppression into a new future and the hope of freedom.

Another image that comes to mind when we hear the word *lamb*, is a gentle, non-threatening beast. Lambs are powerless, and yet this Lamb of God has the power to lift people out of sin (whatever that is). Is John saying that real power comes from gentleness, from playing fair, from being kind and generous and using power with others to lift them up rather than power over others to control or manipulate them?

Of course, in Revelation the Lamb is enthroned! It is a royal figure...the sheep becomes the Shepherd...the last is made first, the weak becomes strong, the victim is the victor. Is John using Lamb in this way in today's gospel reading? Is John saying that God has a preferential option for the least and the lowly? People who struggle against illness, or poverty, or who have been victimized by racism or heterosexism or classism...is John saying these are the people in God's economy, in God's realm who are actually uplifted and blessed? Is the Lamb of God a symbol of solidarity with the forgotten and down trodden?

Luke says that followers of Jesus will be sent out like lambs among wolves? Does John agree? Is John saying the Lamb of God, and those who follow him, are choosing a life of risk? Is the Lamb of God a symbol in opposition to power and privilege? Is the Lamb of God a symbol of those most despised among us, and so to follow the lamb is to renounce our own selfish ambitions or to stand with those who still struggle?

Or is the Lamb of God a symbol of value and significance? In the Song of Songs, the most erotic book in the bible, the lover says to his beloved, "Your hair is like a flock of goats streaming down

from Gilead . Your teeth are like a flock of sheep which come up from the washing..." That writer uses sheep to say that someone is beautiful, desirable, well cared for, and appealing. Is Jesus' teaching or character so appealing that he is like a Lamb? Is true worth, true value found in the love and hope and justice for which Jesus continually stands?

Historically, the Lamb metaphor was often used to imply innocence. Was John remembering Jesus' crucifixion and saying that it was unjust and that Jesus was innocent, like a Lamb, regardless of how he had been accused, tortured, and killed?

Of course, astrological images find their way into our bible. Could the Lamb of God be a cosmological image referring to the constellation Aries? Aries was the god of war. Might it have been an act of sedition to use "their" god as a symbol for "our" messiah? And Jesus wasn't powerful or war like by worldly standards! To use the war-god image and apply it to someone who was executed for rebellion but who in fact never raised an army or commanded a militia might be a way of redefining power. In God's realm, power is measured by love and justice and courage, not by wealth or political standing or physical might.

Behold the Lamb of God! What does that mean? The possibilities are many. It could mean any of the things I've suggested, or something I haven't mentioned, or it could mean more than one thing. What are we supposed to do with such wonderful, miraculous, extravagant ambiguity?

John puts these words in Jesus' mouth: *Come and see for yourself*. That is meant to be the answer to the question, "where are you staying?" But it can also be the answer to "what are you all about?" It might even be a clue to what John means by "Lamb of God."

Maybe John intentionally uses a term that can be understood in multiple ways. Rather than saying, "this is the only way, the only option," maybe John is saying, "do your own seeking, and find out what it means for you and how it can make a difference for you." Where are you staying, Jesus? How can we pin you down? YOU CAN'T! But you can explore and search and find the truth that you need in the moment that you need it. Come, see for yourself. And John's disciples followed Jesus. They didn't believe a certain thing, they followed Jesus' leadership. They explored new territory. They answered the call to come and see for themselves.

By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean that we are Christians who have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus. One of those teachings is "Come and see for yourself." Following Jesus isn't about having the answers; it isn't even about being right. It's about exploring the possibilities, and trusting that the journey will lead us to where we need to be, and that wherever it leads, God will be with us.

In my office, I get the phone calls, the emails, the drop ins...people whose families have disowned them. Some people can no longer accept uncritically the faith of their childhood but they can't let go of faith either. They feel conflicted and torn. Other people call or write to say that they are suffering grief from a profound loss in their lives. Some people are literally fighting for their lives in one way or another – battling disease or addiction. And I wish I had a magic answer, a word or phrase that would make the pain go away. I wish I could assure them that things would be easy from now on, but I don't have access to such magic. I have my experience. And I have the sacred stories of our tradition...stories like this one, stories that don't give easy answers to difficult situations, that do not promise ease, that do not even remove pain or the sting of fear...the stories just say, "Look! There is something amazing in our midst, and we are free to explore it and to see for ourselves how it can make a difference in our situation, in our experience of life." Explore the possibilities...one may offer the blessing you need most.

Behold the Lamb of God that can lift you up, somehow, and reveal possibilities to you that you may not have considered before. Behold the Lamb of God, I don't even know what that means, and yet as a progressive Christian I believe it offers possibilities right where we are in life. And so, without saying what it must mean, I embrace this teaching and I invite you to join me in exploring

it...let's come and see for ourselves how this Lamb of God can offer us hope right where we are today. This is the Good News. Amen.

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