

Pastor's Column

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Jesus—The Lamb of God

At every Eucharist, during the Breaking of the Bread, and shortly before the reception of Holy Communion, we pray and call out three times—“Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

What John the Baptist announced near the Jordan River over two thousand years ago, we continue to celebrate: Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away sin and who grants us peace. In his mercy and in that peace, we are privileged to live our lives, set apart by grace and set afire by love for the sake of the world and in the service of the word.

What meaning is contained in this imagery of Jesus as Lamb of God and how does he take away our sin?

As for the title Lamb of God, it seems to have been John, the Gospel writer's, intent that his readers call to mind three lamb figures that were featured in their sacred literatures. First, the title recalled the paschal lamb; according to the tradition recorded in the Book of Exodus (12:6-13), the Israelites were instructed to sacrifice a lamb and apply its blood to the doorposts and lintels of their homes. By virtue of the lamb's blood, the Israelites were passed over and delivered from death.

Second, the title recalled the figure of the Suffering Servant, described in the fourth song by Isaiah—Isaiah as an innocent, oppressed and condemned lamb who would give his life as an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:7-10).

Third, the title Lamb of God referenced the figure of a lamb featured in Jewish apocalyptic literature; though slain, this lamb conquered sin (Revelation 5:6), became the source of life-giving water (Revelation 7:17; 22:1), and ransomed humankind by its blood (Revelation 5:9).

By featuring John the Baptist acclaiming Jesus as Lamb of God, John, the Gospel Writer, has offered his readers a full-blown



description of Jesus' saving mission, as the lamb by whose blood sinners are delivered from death, as the innocent one who has borne the guilt of many, and as the victorious lamb who has forever conquered sin.

As for how our sin is taken away by the Lamb of God: As civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. set out to overcome racial hatred, he said, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” In the face of the real threat of violence, he drew on the image of Jesus and the words of another mentor, Gandhi, who, approaching his own assassination in 1948, insisted on meeting violence with nonviolence:

“If blood be shed, let it be our blood,” Gandhi said. “Cultivate the quiet courage of dying without killing. For man lives freely only by his readiness to die, if need be, at the hands of his brother, never by killing him.”

“Lamb of God” is a potent messianic symbol that ties the identity and mission of Jesus to Passover. He will liberate his people not by direct power from this or that political oppressor, but from the power of sin itself. Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world by absorbing evil into himself, accepting the suffering that sin causes.

John, the Evangelist, shows the kind of messiah Jesus will be and reveals a radical reading of the scriptural prophecies—that God will come to rescue us from evil, not as a warrior but as the victim of our violence and rejection, who is still ready to forgive!

Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, grant us peace...

(The information for this Column was liberally taken from “Preaching Resources, Celebration, January 2002” by Patricia Datchuck Sanchez, Jeannine Lightburn and Rev. James Smith.)

F. Mike