

Sermon

Delivered at Plymouth United Church of Christ

Eau Claire, WI

© Rev. David J. Huber, January 16, 2011

Focus Scripture: Isaiah and John lectionary texts

John the Baptist captures well the paradox that is Jesus. Twice he says, “Here is the Lamb of God.” Once he says, “Here is the Son of God.” John the Baptist, the one who cries out in the wilderness to “make straight the way of the Lord,” who baptized with water, who prepared the way for the Messiah to come... who knew, when in his mother’s womb that the baby in Mary’s was that Messiah. John points the people around him toward Jesus and declares, “Here he is! Here is your Messiah!”, and then gives us one expected title – Son of God, full of power and might and divinity – and one unexpected title – Lamb of God, a title he uses twice, which is twice as much as he uses Son of God, which he sandwiches between the two lambs: Here is the Lamb of God. Here is the Son of God. Here is the Lamb of God.

This is surprising because why would John call the Messiah, the warrior god-king of political salvation, why would he call Jesus a weak little animal that can’t take care of itself and which is used for food, but more importantly used in religious sacrifices, the blood smeared on lintels to keep God’s angel of death from killing the firstborn, or eaten on Passover to remember that first one in Egypt. The Messiah: Son of God and Lamb of God. The one who came from God, not to rescue us from political powers and establish a new earthly kingdom, which would be the Son of God stuff – but came from God to save us from our darker selves, the sins we commit through action and inaction, and the sins of thought, of hopelessness, despair and fear, to save us from guilt and shame – the Lamb of God stuff. God incarnate in Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, to die on a cross at our hands to show us the power and depth of love, divine love, for all of God’s creation. To take the role of lamb in an act of violence in what could have been, maybe should have been, if we were paying better attention, have been our last act of violence. We can look at the crucifixion and say to ourselves, wow, our bloodlust is so out of

control, we just killed God! Now what do we do? And maybe we'd stop.

And for a couple days God was dead, but rose on Easter, to announce to us "You have the power to kill me, your engines of war and death are pretty impressive, but they are finite and ultimately powerless against the power of love. Why don't you give love a try."

That's what Jesus kept saying: "Try love. Everything else you've tried has left a trail of death and misery and shattered lives. Why not try love?"

We have a tendency, however, to kill the ones who say, "try love." Jesus, Ghandi, Bishop Romero, John Lennon, Martin Luther King, Jr. Why are we so ready to yell "crucify," and so hesitant to try love?

The Isaiah passage we read is the second of four Servant Songs, four passages in Isaiah that are about "The Servant," the coming Messiah. In this one, the Servant has been preaching and teaching God's way of justice and love and getting nowhere and says, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." He laments that he's telling the people, and it's not making a difference. We in the church might feel that way sometimes – two thousand years of teaching "love your neighbor" and still a child who can't take the bullying any more takes a gun to school to solve the problem himself, or other lands become polluted because we ship our garbage elsewhere or let it float on the wind or our social discourse becomes so full of dehumanizing and violent imagery that someone who's already unhinged thinks it's the new normal, and shoots a politician and a child and a bunch of other innocents.

The servant says, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." And it can feel like that – "When, God, when? When are we going to get it?" But, tired as the servant might feel about people not listening, God responds to the lament by saying, "I have asked you to do too little – instead of just Israel, your mission is now to be light to all nations. Tell the world about their salvation." And so, even when the culture in which we find ourselves thinks our message is a waste of time, impossible,

impractical, naive idealism, or downright silly – we are called to be light, to point that world to Jesus and say, “We don’t have to do things the way we’ve been doing them. We’ve been given a better way. All it takes is some courage. Because look – there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” And then invite people to follow.

Two of John’s disciples left John and went to Jesus, and Jesus asked, “What are you looking for?” I think – it is my suspicion – that a great many people are looking for meaning in life, are looking for something greater than themselves, are looking for community – connection with others, looking for an end to guilt or shame, looking for dignity and wholeness, and we have it here in the church. There is the Lamb of God! He came to give us fullness of life and freedom from darkness.

We don’t get to read Jesus’ story of temptation this epiphany, but I think it works here to remember it. Jesus goes into the wilderness and he’s tempted by that which is not God – that which is antithetical to God – which promises, if Jesus worships it, to have bread and power. That which is not God promises *things* in exchange for worship. Jesus rejects it all – And Jesus offers us freedom from things. What are you looking for? It won’t be found in the newest fad or from the latest self-help guru, even the latest Christian self-help guru, or stuff or fame or having more than your neighbor. It is found in grace and love on Christ’s path.

Like John the Baptist, we point to Jesus: here is the Son of God, who came as a lamb to take away the sin of the world. We don’t have to live in sin, and we don’t have to live in the guilt and shame when we do sin. Jesus, the Lamb, took it away to make us free, to follow the path of love and light.

“Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

May you all know the love of the lamb.

Amen.