



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida*

**THE SECOND
SUNDAY AFTER
EPIPHANY**

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A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham

The reading from the Gospel according to John offers some promising insights into the character of God. But first we have to confront a hurdle. Because what does John the Baptist say when he sees Jesus approaching? "Here is the lamb of God...." And somewhere in the recesses of our minds we have to be asking, "How can Jesus be both a good shepherd and a lamb?" Especially because Jesus in his life on earth was neither a lamb nor likely even a shepherd.

How do we respond? Well, first, we can admit and acknowledge that our understanding of the divine is limited by our language. Sometimes we may be blessed with an indescribable sense that we are in the presence of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit. But most often we are left to use words and language to convey our understanding of God. And one common literary device for describing something is the metaphor. And Scripture is replete with metaphors for Jesus. Jesus as light. Jesus as bread. Jesus as the way. And so on. And all of them are helpful in understanding who Jesus was and what Jesus was about.

Now we cannot be certain what the author of the Gospel according to John had in mind when he reports John the Baptist calling Jesus the "Lamb of God." But we can find some meaningful possibilities by looking to common understandings of the lamb in the Jewish religious and cultural context of the time.

John the Baptist would have been schooled in the Passover tradition of the lamb. The Hebrews who had smeared their door posts with the blood of the slain lamb were spared, were passed over, by the angel of death. They were delivered from death and liberated from their oppressors. Jesus as lamb then would be seen as one who delivered them from death and liberated them from the oppression of sin, as we now appreciate that, indeed, Jesus has liberated us from the oppression of sin and death.

John the Baptist, too, would have known of the Temple practice of sacrificing a lamb each morning and evening for the sins of the people. Again, Jesus as

sacrificial lamb delivers humanity from its sins. John the Baptist also might have been one of the first to see the connection between Jesus and the prophecy of Isaiah of a redeemer, meekly and lovingly submitted to slaughter to save his people, a harbinger of the crucified Christ.

And, lastly, John the Baptist likely would have been aware of notion of a lamb much less familiar to us, but still very fresh in John's and Jesus' generation among the Jews. Samuel and David and Solomon, and much more recently then Judas Maccabaeus, were referred to as horned lambs, which was a symbol of a great conqueror.

So when John the Baptist announces the approach of the lamb of God, he may well be describing Jesus in one word that "sums up the love, the sacrifice, the suffering, and the triumph of Christ."¹ Not bad for a roving first century prophet. And he obviously caught the attention of his two disciples. Hearing John call Jesus the Lamb of God, they deserted John the Baptist and followed Jesus as he walked through the countryside.

And here we begin to grasp the greater point to be learned from today's Gospel reading. A point that reveals so much about the nature of our relationship with God.

Now we already know that in the largest sense, the initiative always resides with God. After all, creation as we know it is a product of God's initiative. And what happens in the story this morning? Jesus walks by. Had Jesus not walked by, we would have no story worthy of mention. But he did. And John the Baptist's two disciples, do they rush him or crowd him or even approach Jesus? No, they just follow him, presumably at a safe distance. Does Jesus increase his step? Does he try to put space between him and these followers? Does he just ignore them? None of the above. Jesus turned and spoke to them, "What are you looking for?" He did not insist they run after him or catch up with him or head him off at the pass. He does not even require them to speak first. These two fledgling disciples may have been shy or scared or tongue-tied. Who knows? But it did not matter. When Jesus became aware of them, he turned. When he saw them, he spoke first. He met them where they were.

Can we see in Jesus that God is no mere looming presence in our lives, but an active, responsive presence? Jesus made it easy. He started the conversation they seemed to want to have, but were reluctant to initiate on their own. And Jesus at this moment, right now, wants nothing more than to see us approach, so that he might turn and respond to us with as much love and meaning as he offered the two disciples of John the Baptist.

And, indeed, it hardly was a quick conversation or casual acquaintance those two disciples were pursuing in their own reticent way. They call Jesus, “rabbi,” and ask, “Where are you staying?” These terms had particular meaning in Jesus’ time. In Hebrew, *rabbi* literally means “my great one.” But the Gospel writer uses the Greek word for teacher, which more accurately reflects the Jewish understanding of *rabbi* as a teacher or then wise man from whom one might gain great knowledge. And that, of course, is what these actual followers of Christ were seeking from Jesus. They wanted to spend real, meaningful, edifying time with Jesus. They wanted to question and listen and learn, not for a few minutes, but for hours or even days at a time, as a good student would do to learn from a great teacher.

Asking where Jesus was staying further demonstrates the depth of knowledge they sought. Again, the Greek word translated as “stay” has a much more expansive meaning. They are not asking whether Jesus will be staying with a friend or at Motel Six or the Ritz-Carlton or in a tent in the desert. They want to know something much more enduring and permanent, even eternal.

They wanted to know God, and they knew that in the presence of Jesus, they would come to know God. If Jesus was, as they were told by John the Baptist, the Lamb of God, the savior, the redeemer, the Messiah, then to be with him would be to be in the presence of God.

But no pressure. Jesus just says, “Come and see.” Come and see. If you want to know God, come see Jesus, the Christ. If you want light instead of darkness, come see Jesus. If you want to know love and compassion, come see Jesus. If you want to know peace and justice and mercy, come see Jesus. If you want to receive the bread of life, come see Jesus. If you want to know the way, that’s Jesus, too.

And how do we come and see? We come here. We hear the words of Scripture. We seek nourishment of our souls in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. God in Christ left us the divinely inspired words of the Scripture and the Church. And he instituted the Eucharist as a profound remembrance and present celebration of praise and thanksgiving for his conquering sin and death, as revealed in his resurrection.

And Jesus will meet us right here. He will turn to us. He will ask that we come and see. No pressure. Just the greatest opportunity of a lifetime.

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¹ *William Barclay’s Daily Study Bible*, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/john-1.html> (accessed January 2, 2020).

