

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 15, 2017

“Behold the Lamb.”

John 1:29-42

Last week we dealt with Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. I read an amusing story concerning John the Baptist recently that is too good not to tell.

It’s about a Bible scholar from this country who travels to Jerusalem every few years where he enjoys walking the streets of Jerusalem’s Old City. Once he was walking down a quiet alley when he was waved into a small shop. Within a few minutes he found himself with a glass of tea in his hand, sitting in the back room of a rug merchant’s stall. The merchant assured him that he had a priceless treasure for him. The merchant reached beneath a pile of carpets and brought out a small bundle which he carefully unwrapped to reveal...a human skull.

“This” said the merchant, “is the skull of John the Baptist.” John the Baptist, you remember, was beheaded by Herod. The merchant said the skull had long been lost but recently had been found. This, he assured the Bible scholar, was a treasure indeed. Then he asked his guest how much he would be willing to pay for it.

The visitor to Jerusalem responded, “Well...I was at another shop just yesterday, and the man there wanted to sell me John’s head as well, but his was bigger.” And without missing a beat, the storekeeper replied, “Ah, yes. But this, this is John the Baptist’s head...when he was a boy.” Well, I guess John the Baptist lost his head at least twice.

Today we want to look at another aspect of Jesus’ encounter with John the Baptist. We need to understand that John the Baptist had a real impact on the people in the area around Jerusalem. It is estimated that as many as three hundred thousand people came to be baptized by John.

According to the Gospel of John (Apostle), when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him to be baptized he spoke some remarkable words: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”

This proclamation even before Jesus had begun his ministry is unique to the Gospel of John. Jesus to this point has performed no miracles, called no disciples, raised no one from the dead. He is still fresh from the carpenter shop. He made no enemies, issued no controversial teachings nor ruffled any royal feathers. Any comparison to the sacrificial Lamb for the sins of the people is premature. And it would be some time before Jesus would tell his disciples that he must suffer and die.

Most of us are aware that the writer of the Gospel of John, in contrast to the other three Gospels was not so much interested in writing history as he was in writing theology. He wanted us to know not only that Jesus came into the world but also what that means. He uses tremendous imagery in his first chapter when he writes “the Word became flesh” and “the light shines in the darkness.” But no image carries greater power than this one, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.”

We also read about the Lamb in a dramatic scene in the Book of Revelation (5:12) where millions of angels sing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Here we are given a stunning portrayal of the majesty of Christ.

You and I desperately need an appreciation and understanding of the majesty in our own lives. In this day when nothing is holy, we need more than ever before a knowledge of the one whose very essence was holiness.

Do you remember the scene in the Gospel of Matthew 14 when Peter tried to imitate the Master and walk on the water? That scene is so instructive. Peter starts to walk out on the water to come to Jesus but makes the mistake of taking his eyes off of Jesus and looking around at the high waves that are breaking about him. As a consequence, he becomes terrified and begins to sink. That can happen to us. If we keep our gaze fixed on our problems, our frustrations, our limitations, our poverty of either money or resources, we will never make any headway in coping with life. It is a matter of focus. You and I have within ourselves the resources for achieving amazing things if we do not allow our problems to overwhelm us.

You may know the story of a young Hungarian athlete in the 1952 Olympics who won a gold medal with his ability to shoot a pistol. His right hand and eye coordination were so perfect that he simply could not miss the bullseye. Six months after those Olympics were over that young man lost his right arm. Such a tragedy would have overwhelmed many of us. It did not overwhelm this young man. Four years later at the Melbourne Olympics he was back and he did it again. Another gold medal. This time he shot with his left hand. How much time and effort do you suppose he devoted to mastering this skill a second time?

We have in us the ability to turn tragedies into triumphs...or, as Robert Schuller put it to turn, “scars onto stars.” One of the keys to that, however, is to have a God big enough to handle any problem we may have and to keep our attention fixed on him rather than on our own circumstances. Someone said, “If you make but little of Christ, Christ will make little

of you.” We need a Christ who is Master of wind and the waves. We need Christ to whom both physical illness and emotional pain are manageable crises. We need a Christ who can make us think in terms of being victors rather than victims.

“Behold the Lamb...” says John and we need to do that. We need to look beyond our present difficulties to the one who can deliver us. We need to behold the majesty of Christ. But there is more...“who takes away the sins of the world.”

We also need to see that Christ “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross,” that you and I might be redeemed from the power of sin. Someone had said that in creation God shows us his hand, but on Golgotha God gives us his heart. There is something about the cross that has changed the world forever. It is not that the cross changed God. The cross came about in the first place because “God so loved the world...”

A young soldier was utterly humiliated by his senior officer. The officer had gone beyond the bounds of acceptable behavior in disciplining the young soldier and knew it, so he said nothing as the young man said through clenched teeth, “I’ll make you regret this if it is the last thing I ever do.”

A few days later their company was under heavy fire and the officer was wounded and cut off from his troops. Through the haze of the battlefield he saw a figure coming to his rescue. It was the young soldier whom he had treated so badly. At the risk of his own life, the young soldier dragged the officer to safety. The officer said, apologetically, “Son, I owe you my life.” The young man laughed and said, “I told you that I would make you regret humiliating me if it was the last thing I ever did.” That is God’s kind of revenge.

“Behold the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world...” Something happened at Calvary that bridged the gap between a holy God and unholy humanity.

Notice that John says, “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.” He does not say the sins of the church or the sins of the middle-class, rich or poor Americans. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” There is enough saving power in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the entire world. If only the world knew. If only our next-door neighbor knew.

The world needs to know, our friends and neighbors need to know—that they have won something far bigger than the lottery. They need to know that their name has already been selected to receive the greatest prize ever awarded to anybody—all they have to do is to claim their prize. An eternal love relationship with God through Jesus Christ is theirs—and ours—simply for asking.

So, what does all this say about our lives? We are those who are called to tell the story. Following the footsteps of our Lord, we are not sent out to condemn the world, as John tells us in chapter 3:17, but that we might tell the saving message of the great love of God.

We are called to help others to look beyond the enormity of their problems to the One who is big enough to overcome any problem. We are to finish the work begun by our Lord over 2000 years ago—the work of reconciling the world to God. “Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.”