

**John 1:29-42a    January 15, 2015**

John the Baptist is part of our Gospel text again today. When you think about it, he's kind of a lonely figure, living out there in the desert. By his own admission, he is the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." His voice is a lonely voice but it won't be for long. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People heard his call to repentance and they came. Confessing their sins, they were baptized in the Jordan River.

John was sent by God to announce that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. His message about sin might sound like bad news, but he came to bring forgiveness, and that was good news. But wait, there was more good news. God had remembered His people and remembered His promise. After me comes one, the thongs of whose sandals I am unworthy to untie. I baptize with water. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. For all that good news, there was even better news coming. That better news was summed up in the words he proclaims in our text today: "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" And in this short sentence he revealed to his followers not only who Jesus is, but what he has come to do.

That's what this green season between Christmas and Lent is all about. Epiphany this year is a long season, almost two months. It will take us through most of January and all of February. Ash Wednesday isn't until March. The altar colours that have been white since Christmas Eve, now have changed to green. White was the colour for the holiness of God and His Christ. Green is the colour for the kingdom of God and the growing church. The growing garden of the church points us to the reasons for this season. The first Sunday after Epiphany was the baptism of Jesus, and it sets Jesus onto His mission. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem has begun. It will take Him on the road to the cross. It will take Him to Calvary where He will die for the sins of the world. It will also take Him to the tomb where He will rise again.

As we set out on this journey, we will start to see today that He has something else to do along the way. Jesus is going to bring as many people along with Him as He can. This season of Epiphany has two points of focus. The first is that the reality of who Jesus is and why He has come is being revealed more and more. It was there in the testimony at Jesus' baptism. It's there today as John directs our attention to the Lamb of God who will carry away the sins of the world. It will be there as Jesus performs miracles, signs, and wonders. In the time to come the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will walk, and the poor will have good news preached to them. Who Jesus is and why He has come will be there as Jesus preaches and teaches on the mount. Who He is and why He has come will be there as He teaches the people from the boat, and as He feeds the multitudes, and as He stills the storm, and does all those other things that only the incarnate one, Emmanuel, God in the flesh, can do!

All along the way, everyone will be asking the same questions: Who is Jesus? Who gave Him the authority to forgive sins? Who is this that even the wind and the waves obey Him? One after another, they will get their answer during this green season we call Epiphany. At either end of this season of revealing, there are a pair of matching bookends. At one end there is the voice of the Father at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, whom I love." At the other end there is the voice of the Father at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son." Peter understood it, not because of his keen observational skills, but because the Holy Spirit revealed it to him. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

As we set out to walk during these weeks, we pray that it will be revealed also to us just who this Jesus is and why He came. When you talk to people about that very question, you get a strange mixture of answers. For some He is a good man, a prophet, a wise teacher. For others He is a fraud, a con man. For still others, Jesus is the invention of an ancient story writer who only exists in the simple minds of those foolish enough to believe it. If you are willing to let God speak to you through His Word, you will find a far different answer. In the beginning was the

Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us and we have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father.

But there is more to who He is, and today we have the testimony of John the Baptist before us. Jesus is none other than the Lamb of God who carries away the sin of the world. We need to unpack that carefully chosen turn of phrase, or it won't mean very much to us. To unpack it, you need to know something about Old Testament history and Old Testament sacrifices. In the spring of the year there was the Passover and the Passover Lamb. From the time of Moses the tenth plague was the angel of death who would claim the firstborn in every household unless that household was covered by the blood of the lamb. God instructed Moses to tell the people to select and prepare a perfect lamb. They would sacrifice it, roast it and eat it, but first they would paint some of the blood on the doorframe of their house as a sign to God's avenging angel. The angel would spare, or pass over, every house so marked and the firstborn inside would not die. They would be saved by the blood of the lamb.

In the fall of the year, there was the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, or the day of covering. Every year there would be two lambs. One would be sacrificed in the temple. Its blood would be divided in half. Half would be sprinkled in the most holy place, on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The other half would be sprinkled on the people, to atone for their sin. When that was done, there would be another lamb, the lamb for taking away. The high priest would place his hands on the head of that lamb and transfer the sins of the people from the people to the lamb. The sins of young and old, great and small, rich and poor would be placed on it. That lamb would be led out of the camp, or out of the city to die in the wilderness. This lamb for taking away is the sacrifice to which John the Baptist is pointing us. Sinners cannot stand in the presence of a perfect and holy God unless something can be done about their sin. It has to be atoned for. It has to be washed off and taken away. How can that happen? The answer is clear. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

This season of Epiphany, the season of "I get it now" is here so that the light might come on in our hearts that we might see who Jesus is with the eyes of faith. Then, as we walk these weeks, there is another focus. It is a mission focus. It is an outreach focus. It is a share your faith focus, to share with others around us the same message that John had for Andrew and John that day, to point other people to Jesus and say, "He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Jesus' mission throughout His ministry is twofold. It is to make the journey to the cross and to gather up as many people along the way as He can and bring them along with Him. The journey started out there in the wilderness with the lone voice of John the Baptist. But that voice doesn't stay alone for very long. Soon two are added, then a few more, then a few more after that. The circle looks small at first, but in the end Revelation says it will have grown into a multitude that no one can count, from every nation and tribe and people, all gathered around the throne of God and around the Lamb. It will be like this: In Luke 13:18-21, Jesus describes the kingdom of God this way:

*"What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches." And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened."*

This is a mission season. It is a time for telling others. In Acts 5, Peter and some of the other apostles had been preaching in Jerusalem, and more and more people were believing in the Lord and the community of believers was growing. People were bringing the sick into the streets so that Peter's shadow might pass over them so they could be healed. Crowds gathered from the towns around Jerusalem. As a result, the high priest and all his associates were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail in order to put them on trial before the Sanhedrin the next day. When the next day came, they weren't in the jail any more. An angel of the Lord had brought them out and they were back preaching at the temple. The temple guard brought them before the

Sanhedrin and they were ordered to stop preaching and teaching in the temple. But they would not stop. They could not stop. We can't not preach. We must obey God rather than man. Afterward, Luke tells us that the disciples rejoiced because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. The next verse says, "Day after day in the temple courts and from house to house they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ."

What gives a person that kind of spiritual energy to share their faith? It was there in the two disciples who met the risen Saviour on the road to Emmaus that first Easter. They had already made the long journey home, but now they were excited to run back to Jerusalem to tell the others, "We have seen the Lord." Yes, we have already heard the news too! This was the joy of salvation. It was there in the heart of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well. She ran to her neighbours and said "He told me everything I ever did." Yes, He exposed all my sin. And yes, He forgave all my sin. She had discovered the joy of salvation. The man possessed by a legion of demons on the far side of the Sea of Galilee who when Jesus rescued him and set him free, wanted to go with Jesus. But Jesus left him there to be an ongoing witness to the great things that God had done for him.

In Psalm 51 David prays create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and uphold me with Your Spirit. Then will I teach transgressors Your ways and sinners will come back to You. Are you getting a picture here? The joy of salvation is contagious. At least it's supposed to be. The season of Epiphany in the church year is an exciting one. At least it's supposed to be. But maybe you have used up all your excitement and energy over Christmas and New Years, and there's no excitement left. So how do you get it back? When David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation," he already knew that it had to come from God. You have to come to the cross. You have to come to the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You have to see the love of God in Christ Jesus who carried your sins to the cross.

What is the basis for John's excitement in our Gospel today? He knew who Jesus was and what He had come to do. Every year at the temple in Jerusalem the day of Yom Kippur would come along. Every year there would be the blood of the lamb half sprinkled in the most holy place, half sprinkled on the people, to cover their sin. Every year there would be the other lamb, the lamb-for-taking-away. The sins of young and old, great and small, rich and poor would be placed on this one, and he would carry them all away and die in the wilderness. Next year, they would do it all again ... and the next ... and the next. But now God had fulfilled His promise. The real Lamb, the one sent by God, had come. He would take away the sin of the world for real. He would take the burden of your sin and mine to the cross and die in the wilderness.

Your sins are forgiven. They have been taken away, as far as the east is from the west, never to be remembered again. The joy of salvation is here at the cross. It is here in God's Word. It is here in the baptismal font. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!