

Sermon: The Lamb of God
Scripture: John 1:29-42
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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“This is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Is this a statement you have heard before: Jesus takes away the sin of the world or another way it is said is that Jesus’ blood washes away the sins of the world. Jesus died for you. Through Jesus you have been forgiven of all your sins. You are saved by the blood of Jesus. Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. These are central Christian affirmations but what do they mean exactly? I mean for one thing there is a lot of evidence in this world that the sins of the world have not been taken away or eliminated, and I’d say there is a lot of evidence that even Christians who have received the blood and body and forgiveness of Jesus Christ still do quite well in the sin department, no? Jesus died for you to wash away your sins.

Usually when these words are quoted, the speaker is referring to one particular interpretation of these words that you are probably familiar with. By saying Jesus takes away the sins of the world, many Christians are usually assuming the atonement theory, which says that humanity had come to mess things up so bad that the only way to rectify things and bring things back into order was for God himself to send his son to pay the penalty due to humanity for all their sins. So God sacrifices Jesus at the foot of God’s own immutable justice in order to free humanity from the consequences of their sin. Thus, Jesus takes away the sin of the world. He takes them onto himself and suffers the consequence giving humanity a free pass to heaven. It’s directly related to the Hebrew practice of scapegoating, when the Hebrew people would ritually heap their sins on a goat and then drive the goat out of the town and to his death, thus freeing themselves from the consequences of their sins against God. Other religions of the time used human scapegoats and so the Hebrew people were ahead of their time in using animals instead of goats.

So then in certain Christian theology that depends heavily upon atonement theory, if you accept that Jesus did this for you, bore your sins unto his death, then your way to

salvation is payed, or your way to heaven is paved with the blood of the sacrificed lamb, Jesus Christ. This is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But again that is one particular theory of what this death and resurrection is all about, but there are others. And in my mind the problem with atonement theory is not only the harshness of God as demanding the sacrifice of his son but it also has been interpreted to “save” those who are Christians, those who have “accepted” Jesus and condemns those who are not. It’s that polarizing, that setting up of us against them, that strikes me as antithetical to so much of what Jesus taught and demonstrated with his life. For one thing he was hardest on those people, specifically certain religious leaders, who were assured and self-satisfied that they were the clean and the pure and others the unclean and impure. Everywhere you turn in the gospels Jesus is striking at that kind of posturing. So it’s ironic that then we would turn around and use Jesus himself and our acceptance of him to lift ourselves up as the saved, the pure, the righteous ones and those others who don’t accept Jesus or aren’t Christian as the lost and condemned among us. In general it’s the religious right who tows that line of thinking that I am challenging and it is no surprise that I, from the religious left, you might say, would challenge their perspective. But I would say that I’m also not convinced that the religious left has it right either at least in so far as the religious left can downplay the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and reduce him to a great sage and teacher; our great example rather than our great savior.

But there are other more nuanced ways of considering Jesus Christ and what he did in and for the world. “This is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” doesn’t have to mean that Jesus was the sacrifice that God demanded for human sinfulness. We can also understand it this way if you’ll take a moment to follow me: humanity’s fundamental sin is its violence, the way that the human being believes and acts out of the belief that its well-being, its safety, its promotion of self must come at the expense of the other. I cannot get ahead, I cannot be fully safe, I cannot be fully myself unless I am establishing me over and against you, whether that “you” is other humans or the earth herself. And so the other becomes the scapegoat that we need to carrying away our sins so we can be the beautiful mare or stallion. This is what we have done since time immemorial and primitive religion itself sprung up around this very practice of scapegoating some to justify the group. It’s why there were sacrifices of virgins and first

born and the enemy tribe, to put humanity right with the gods, to clear our name at the expense of others. The theologian Gil Bailie makes the interesting point in one of his talks that the very word conviction means the taking of a convict, someone who is declared guilty. Our absolute certainty of our right-ness, our righteousness, usually comes at the expense of someone else. It's the sin of the world. But key to the sin of the world is the fact that we've been thoroughly unconscious of this dynamic running through our individual and collective psyches.

But then a virus, you might say, entered into the mainframe of this neat, unconscious, but rather violent system of the way things are. And do you know what the virus was? It was a moment in time that was seared into human consciousness unlike any other single moment in the history of the world and that was the moment that an innocent man, full of love and with disciples devoted to love, was hung on the cross as a criminal. Somehow that one image of a purely innocent victim sacrificed on a cross for the sake of others awakened human consciousness like nothing else had ever done or has ever done since then. And we can't shake it. We can't shake the image of what we as human beings are capable of doing in the name of our own rightness, our own righteousness. And you see slowly over the centuries and across the ages the sin of the world has begun to unravel for one thing because we are no longer unconscious of it. Because of Jesus, humanity has had, over the course of history, a harder and harder time justifying itself at the expense of others and fully getting away with it. We in the West are still trying to sell it, of course, but gradually buying it less and less when we are told that the answer to our problems is the defeat of some enemy out there; be the scapegoat Iraq or the Taliban, Muslims or the Chinese. We are having a harder and harder time selling the scapegoat system (which demands that our good must come at the sacrifice of others) to a population of people nurtured at some level or another by first the Hebrew scriptures and then the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So to say this is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is to say - this is God's beloved son, God's lamb that humanity took and offered to the monster of the sacrificial system but in so doing God forever began to unravel that human tendency towards justifying ourselves at the expense of others. Over the course of human history, much less earth's history, 2000 years really isn't that much time. To say that God's

creative unraveling of humanity's tangle is taking some time is not surprising! But occasionally we catch a true glimpse of what this unraveling looks like in action.

Martin Luther King's leadership of the Civil Rights Movement is one of these glimpses. He was a man whose heart was convicted by the gospel of Jesus Christ and it led him to address the grievous injustices in our country without creating scapegoats, without needing to punish the other but rather with an approach of brotherhood, love and nonviolence. The great South Africans too, Bishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, were also convicted of heart by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in response to Apartheid, when Apartheid was finally ended, developed the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions instead of exacting vengeance or punitive justice upon even the worse perpetrators of that regime. Those examples are something of what the unraveling looks like, such situations where the good, the uplift of one person or one side is established not at the expense of the other but in concert and along with the other. That is the eradication of sin from the world. Maybe it has some other-worldly connotations of salvation to come which we won't know until we die, but right now it is a transformation of immediate human relationship that transcends the rivalrous enemy divide and through the power of love reaches towards a higher plane of existence that we all know is possible just rare. It's really not pie in the sky, warm and fuzzy, dreamy sort of love but rather love as a force that is an exacting, powerful and at times – note the cross or MLK's assassination - a harrowing presence in this world, but a force that is having its way nonetheless. The question for us is do we want to be a part of its unfolding in the world or not... either way it is happening, either way it is something that we are invited to know and experience, this gradual taking away of the sin of the world....

“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.”