Behold the Lamb of God
John 1:29-42

Over a week ago, one of my favorite authors made a confession. Philip Yancey, famous for books such as What's So Amazing About Grace? and The Jesus I Never Knew confessed that he had been unfaithful to his wife. He confessed that he had been having an affair for eight years. Because of that, he was ending his public writing career and focusing the rest of his life on rebuilding his relationship with his wife. Someone who was a positive example of a life of faith now is a negative example. What a mess.

We live in a messy world. On the news, you can see the continued fallout of the abduction of Venezuelan President Maduro. You can see unrest and accusations in Minneapolis. You can hear about protests in Iran. You can hear about the continued war in Ukraine, violence in Africa, the list goes on and on. We live in a messy world, and sometimes our biggest problem is realizing that we can't fix it.

The world in the New Testament time was messy, too, but in ways we aren't used to. Killing animals, people too, was more a part of community life than we can imagine. Now, offensive images can be blocked on social media, but back then, there was no blocking it away. Temples were places of sacrifices, and the animals kept coming in and the smoke kept rising. That's really the message of the whole Old Testament, and something those other temples and sacrifices to false gods and idols are trying and failing to get at. That something needs to be done to balance the scales. Something needs to be done to right a wrong. And when it's impossible to do it yourself, you follow the rules set up for you. The gods needed to be bribed, placated, with sacrifices to turn their wrath away.

Into that brutal world where life was expendable, a message came, a message they could understood, a sacrifice to change forever how we live. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Throughout the Old Testament, that's how God handles sin. When Adam and Eve are forced out of the garden, they are clothed with animal skin, the first sacrifice, the first blood shed because of sin. The blood of the innocent was shed to cover the shame of the guilty. It wasn't the man or the woman who shed this blood to make these coverings. This was the work of the Lord. And by the blood of the calf or the lamb, the man and woman would come out of hiding and stand again before their God.

When Isaac is about to be sacrificed, God provides a substitute to be sacrificed in his place. When God sends the final plague on the Egyptians, the people are saved by the sacrifice of a pure, unblemished lamb, whose blood makes the angel of death pass over them. The angel of death would see blood glistening on the doorpost and count it as a sign that blood had already been shed in that home—that the people in that house had already surrendered to God what the angel had come to collect.

For many centuries it was the rule that in art, in paintings, beside John the Baptist, there would be a lamb. Sometimes John is pointing to it; sometimes it's simply sitting there looking thoughtful. Sometimes the point is made more obvious by blood pouring from its side, perhaps being caught in a chalice. Perhaps the most famous one is the Isenheim Altarpiece, which shows John the Baptist with a lamb pointing to Jesus on the cross, even though John himself had been executed and was not at the crucifixion.

John the Baptist is famous for many things, but the central and most important role he has in the New Testament is to point away from himself and towards Jesus. In particular, here in John's gospel, he points him out as the Lamb of God. And with that he indicates, at the very start of the gospel story, how things are going to end, and why. Jesus is to die a sacrificial death for the sins of the world. By the end of the story, John (the gospel-writer, not the Baptist) has made the meaning clear. The death of Jesus takes place, in this gospel, on the afternoon when the Passover lambs were being killed in the Temple. Jesus is the true Passover lamb. John, like many New Testament writers but in his own particular way, wants us to understand the events concerning Jesus as a new, and better, Exodus story. Just as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, so God was now bringing the whole world out of slavery to sin.

In the original Exodus story, Israel is rescued from the dark powers of the world, which in that case meant the Egyptians under Pharaoh. But now, according to John, God's lamb is going to take away the sin of the world itself. This can only mean that God's rescue operation is moving out, wider than just Israel, to embrace the whole of creation.

More than that, the other lambs in the Bible weren't sufficient in and of themselves. There needed to be a new Passover lamb every year. There needed to be a new sacrifice in the Holy of Holies on the day of atonement every year. The daily, weekly, yearly sacrifices were never enough to actually take away the sins of the image bearers of God. Would there ever come a perfect, lasting, atoning sacrifice—one who could take away the sins of the world? If so, that lamb would have to be divine.

Pastor Robert Newton's first call out of seminary was to be a missionary in a tribal area in the Philippines. Despite coming out of the seminary full of energy and enthusiasm, the results of his work were minimal at best. He faced cultural challenges, such as the fact that the people group he worked with didn't have a word for guilt in their language. After two years, he had nothing to show for his work. But then one day there was a funeral. After the funeral, a series of bad events happened, and so there were a series of sacrifices to try to appease the spirit of the dead man. After each sacrifice, the pig's liver was taken to the pagan priest to see if the sacrificed was accepted. Each time the priest said it wasn't accepted, they'd sacrifice another pig. The village sacrificed 25 pigs that night. The next morning, the head elder of the village invited Pastor Newton to breakfast, and told him that they had to wait for three years before they'd know if the sacrifices had been enough. Pastor Newton, though, told them that the moment they sacrificed the second pig he knew the first wasn't enough, and the second pig and all the others wouldn't be enough either. He used that opportunity to point them to the one sacrifice of the lamb of God, for the sins of the whole world.

We, too, are rescued from the dark powers of the world, safe behind the blood of the lamb, "for Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed," as Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The book of Hebrews is all about those connections to the temple and the sacrifices there and how they are fulfilled in a better way in Jesus. His blood is sprinkled on our hearts (Hebrews 10:22) in a new and better covenant. The life of the flesh is in the blood and that life-giving blood of Jesus is on and in us. We are safe behind the blood of "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Sacrifices aren't usually a part of our world anymore. But as Hans-Joseph Klauck writes in his book *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, Jesus' "death on the cross explodes the already existing concepts of sacrifice…and did in fact entail something that amounts to the end of all sacrifices. This should lead us to reflect further on what the spiritualization of sacrificial terms…really means. What does it mean to 'sacrifice' money, or what does 'the sacrifice of one's life' mean? How far is this metaphor, how far reality?"

Our sacrifices can't come near to doing what Jesus' sacrifice has done for us. Through Jesus, though, our sacrifices are transformed. The sacrificial worship of God's people, that glory of the temple in Jerusalem, is suddenly transformed. God's people become sacrifices, outside the temple, outside Jerusalem, hidden inside the small house churches gathering in the heart of the large empire of Rome. These people are God's people, transformed into sacrifices, living, holy, acceptable to God. Paul knew that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ put an end to temple sacrifices. His death was the perfect sacrifice. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By his sacrifice, God's people were freed from offering sacrifices for sins. Now, they became sacrifices of praise, their lives poured out in self-sacrificial service in the world.

The world is still a messy place. We can't fix a broken world. We can't even fix our own brokenness. But thanks be to God that Jesus, the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world. We live in a broken world, but have a God greater than that.

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