

Karen Hollis  
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John 1:29-42  
Pointing to Jesus

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus, we pray, Amen.

My guess is most people don't have a neutral reaction to this text. Perhaps for you, these are powerful words that profess faith in Jesus' identity as saviour of the world; or you might read it at arm's length, trying to get past the images of sacrifice; maybe you are one who wonders 'what does that mean, anyway, Lamb of God'?

John the Baptist points to Jesus and proclaims: here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! Whatever your response to it, the statement is quite theological – whenever I hear these words, they take me Catholic Mass . . . I attended Mass a lot during seminary. For someone coming from the United Church of Christ, which is very similar to the United Church, the Mass is a lot to take in. Right before receiving the Eucharist, the priest proclaims, "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb." I had never heard these words before coming to Mass, and didn't particularly know what they meant . . . but I trusted that the priest knew what he was talking about. Indeed, traditional atonement theology says Jesus is the sacrificial lamb who paid the debt with his life for the sin of the world.

Since Jesus' first followers got to know him through his life, death and resurrection, those who have heard the story have been trying to figure out what it all means. We are eternally asking questions like, what did Jesus do for the world in his life, death and resurrection? And what Jesus' relationship is with God? The ways we understand Jesus today took years to develop and gain resonance, and thanks be to God, theology is still emerging and evolving. You can see the evolution of theology in the Christian scriptures, from the earliest of Paul's letters through the gospels. The Gospel of John in particular, is

dedicated to building a theological case for Jesus, the Messiah, come to save the world at a time when people believed the world was run by the forces of good and evil.

John writes about 70 years after Jesus' resurrection, asserting that Jesus is God's Son, and as such, brings God closer to the people and makes God more available to the people than ever before in history. Before Jesus came into ministry, forgiveness from sin was a transaction. One had to purchase a sacrificial animal, first by exchanging the correct currency with corrupt money changers (who John has Jesus driving out of the temple in chapter 2), then one had the priest at the Temple perform the correct sacrifice to save the individual from their sin and gain access to God. "According to temple theology, certain kinds of sins and impurities could be dealt with only through sacrifice in the temple. Temple theology thus claimed an institutional monopoly on the forgiveness of sins"<sup>1</sup> and access to God. It required having money, coming to the temple, and being at the mercy of their system. So when John writes, "here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," not only is it a theological statement about who Jesus is, it is an anti-temple statement. It is "to deny the temple's claim to have a monopoly on forgiveness and access to God; using the metaphor of sacrifice, it subverts the sacrificial system."<sup>2</sup> To our modern ears, the statement "Lamb of God" ranges from devotional to challenging, but for a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian, it means, whoever you are, whatever your suffering, come . . . here you will find the life you've been dreaming of.

But that's not all . . . John takes the Lamb of God image and puts it together with another theological image that is used extensively in the gospels. When the followers of Jesus refer to him as the Messiah, they are expecting him to pull together an army and defeat the Romans. They do not expect him to show his power by absorbing the sin of the world and responding in love. They do not expect him to pray from the cross, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." This Messiah confounds expectations; he turns images of power and royal majesty on their head, saying the first will

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<sup>1</sup> Borg, Marcus. *The Heart of Christianity*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2004). 94.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 95.

be last and the last shall be first; he offers himself for the sake of the world, as the Lamb of God who takes *away* the sin of the world.

The combination of Messiah as Lamb of God is a bit dizzying . . . it destabilizes belief in political power and offers a firm foundation in God, that while subtle at times, is truer than what we can see . . . it is eternal and impossible to shake. This message resonates with the people and draws them in.

John the Baptist turns to his followers, and pointing to Jesus says, “Look, here is the one who challenges corruption and offers himself for the life for the world. He is offering you closeness with God, asking nothing in return.”

I’m not sure John’s disciples can articulate what they are looking for when they walk the way John is pointing and draw close enough to Jesus for him to notice. “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. What a fabulous question . . . what are you looking for? It’s one of those questions that hits initially in one way, but as you let it hang there in the air, the question penetrates us. John’s disciples actually don’t attempt to answer, instead inquire, “Teacher, where are you staying?” Their primary concern is being with Jesus. Andrew even finds his brother and brings him along. They can’t possibly know the direction John the Baptist has pointed them, but they know they are with the one who challenges the forces that oppress them and brings life to the people . . . the disciples want to be there; they want to remain close to Jesus, and they want to learn what the Rabbi is teaching. Thanks be to God.