

JESUS: THE LAMB OF GOD

Our opening scriptures are found in John 1 as we hear the testimony of John the Baptizer.

John saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, God's lamb who will take away the world's sins." (John 1:29)

On the next day John was once again standing with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus walking by, John said, "Behold, God's lamb." When his two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. (1:35-37)

Many of us are familiar with Jesus as the Lamb in the book of Revelation, where the Lamb is mentioned 31 times. But the two passages I read contain the only references to Jesus as Lamb of God in the Gospel of John. These limited appearances, when combined with the tendency for this gospel to merge images, can lead the modern reader to ignore or forget John the Baptizer's description. Yet this image remains critical for understanding Jesus, since his identification of the Lamb of God portrays Jesus as one who should be followed!

The idea that I would like to consider with you today is this: **"Why is this image so important?"**

Lamb Image 1: Cute

If I were to ask you about a poem that included a lamb, many of you would start to say,

*Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow;
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go.*

*It followed her to school one day,
Which was against the rule;
It made the children laugh and play
To see a lamb at school.*

*And so the teacher turned it out,
But still it lingered near,
And waited patiently about
Till Mary did appear.*

*Why does the lamb love Mary so?
The eager children cry;*

*Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know,
The teacher did reply*

But you may not be as familiar with the longer version **Lamb image 2: rural with kids**

*Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
And every where that Mary went
The lamb was sure to go;
He followed her to school one day —
That was against the rule,
It made the children laugh and play
To see a lamb at school.

And so the Teacher turned him out,
But still he lingered near,
And waited patiently about,
Till Mary did appear.*

*And then he ran to her and laid
His head upon her arm,
As if he said — "I'm not afraid —
You'll shield me from all harm."

"What makes the lamb love Mary so,"
The little children cry;
"O, Mary loves the lamb you know,
The Teacher did reply,
"And you each gentle animal
In confidence may bind,
And make them follow at your call,
If you are always kind."*

Many of us may not know the author, **Sarah Josepha Hale**, who lived, worked, and published in the 1800s in the Eastern US. You may even be less aware of another poem about a lamb written by British author William Blake in the late 1700s. **Lamb image 3: English or Scottish setting**

*Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!*

*Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!

He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.*

*Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee*

*Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.*

Why do I emphasize these poems about lambs in this chapel message? **Lamb image 4** Well, I am glad you asked! Too often we take images created in other situations and apply them to the Bible as we read it, especially when we read from the New Testament writings. Today, I am exploring the question, “what images were prevalent in the minds of these two of John’s disciples that may have caused them to follow Jesus, the Lamb of God?” In other words, “**Why is our image of a lamb so important?**”

In the Old Testament

In order to gain information about the ancient Jewish sacrificial system, a person must be willing to encounter the ***Great and Terrible Book of Leviticus*** **Oz like Photo**. There one finds descriptions for the various sacrifices and instructions for carrying them out appropriately. Leviticus 4 & 5 provide a basic explanation of the sin offering or, as it is referred to in many current writings, the “purification offering.” This offering was given to recognize unintentional violations of the covenant with God. Three examples are specifically listed: failing to come forward with testimony, 2) touching a dead animal, and 3) thoughtlessly swearing to something with an oath.

The social status of the individual determined the animal to be utilized for this offering. Only those of low status, for individuals referred to as “a person of the land,” is a lamb allowed, a female lamb, and only as an exception to the preferred “nanny goat.” For those living in or near poverty, birds or even a small amount of grain would suffice for purification.

Later in Leviticus instruction is given for a leper cleansed of the skin affliction that had distanced him from his community. On this occasion a male lamb was offered as a sacrifice and the former leper is described as “cleansed from his sin.” (Leviticus 14:19, LXX) At the harvest of the first fruits of the field a male lamb is also offered as a burnt

offering, after which one may now eat bread made from the newly harvested grain.
(Leviticus 23:12-14)

Outside the book of Leviticus, the Old Testament describes male lambs being used as offerings to the Lord: **classical painting** Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22:7-8, Moses and the people in Egypt at the first Passover in Exodus 12:3-21, **image** and as a twice daily offering at the Tabernacle in Exodus 29:38-46 (also in Numbers 28). The last example is designated as a continuous offering throughout the generations so that the Lord will meet with the sons of Israel.

The description by John the Baptizer of the Lamb of God does not reflect any single, direct teaching from the Old Testament. Any suggestions regarding the image behind his description of Jesus as the Lamb of God are just those, suggestions. So then, **“Why is our visual image of the Lamb of God so important?”**

Back to John

John also says about this “Lamb of God,” that he will “take away the world’s sins.” Examining when the two words, sin and world, are combined in this gospel proves beneficial. They appear together in only one other place.

*Now when this one [the Spirit] comes, he will confront the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment; concerning sin first because the world does not believe in me, (John 16:8) **On Screen 1***

When we accept the same image for sin provided here, namely unbelief, then we might see in his identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God a continuation of John the Baptizer’s message and testimony recorded at other points in the Gospel of John.

*John came as a witness whose testimony concerned the light, so that everyone would believe through John. John was not the light, rather his testimony concerned the light. (1:7-8) **On Screen 2***

*John testified concerning this one as he heralded, “This one is the one of whom I spoke, ‘one will appear after me who has always been before me, because he is of greater importance than I am’” (1:15) **On Screen 3***

“I am a voice crying out in the wilderness; Make straight the Lord’s pathway,”
(1:23) **On Screen 4**

*“I baptize with water; someone is standing in your midst whom you do not know,
the one who comes after me, I am not worthy to even remove the sandals from
his feet.”* (1:26) **On Screen 5**

John the Baptizer’s words incorporate a variety of teachings known to first century Jews from their Scriptures, from teachers of their Scriptures, and from expectations which developed in their culture. However, for those who heard the Gospel of John as it was read, teachings concerning John the Baptizer from other places may also reside in the back of their minds. **On Screen baptism**

I baptize with water for repentance, the one coming after me is stronger than me so that I am not worthy to untie his sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matthew 3:11)

John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

And he [John] came into the region around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Luke 3:3)

Although the image of Jesus as “God’s Lamb who takes away the world’s sins” is introduced in the first chapter our understanding is not solely dependent on John’s two statements. In the back of our minds, the identity of Jesus as God’s Lamb may even be forgotten or set aside as we hear more stories about Jesus. However, when you and I hear Jesus presented as the Lamb of God at the beginning of the Gospel, we are already familiar with the end of this Gospel’s story.

During Jesus’ passion, Pilate has the final spoken word, but his word is not the most important word. Just before Pilate gives his verdict concerning Jesus’ fate, the Evangelist inserts a brief, yet powerful, chronological description. *“It was the sixth hour on the preparation day for the Passover.”* (John 19:14) **On Screen Pilate** In other words, it was time to slaughter the lambs for the Passover celebration. This event, when drawn

to our attention, overwrites all other images in our mind when we hear John say, “Behold, God’s lamb who will take away the world’s sins.”

Brief Summary

Before we allow our image to be shaped by a single event like Good Friday, we should recall the various qualities wrapped up within the sacrifice of a male lamb.

- A male lamb was offered in sacrifice to represent an outcast’s cleansing and **return** to fellowship within the community.
- A male lamb was offered at the time of the first harvest of the field so that one could begin to **enjoy** the new provision of God.
- A male lamb was offered daily at the Temple. Regarding this practice God indicates, *“I will sanctify the tent of testimony and the altar. (Exodus 29:43, 29:42 LXX)*

These images have one main thing in common, beside the male lamb! Each time a male lamb was directed to be offered as a sacrifice it resulted in a restored religious state of connection with God. **Image of Restoration (furniture?)** When John the Baptizer proclaims the identity of Jesus, he communicates far more than that Jesus is merely a sacrifice. John indicates ***in the life of Jesus something greater is happening than ever occurred in the past, something extraordinarily greater than even John’s own prophetic message.*** Two of John’s disciples choose to follow and become part of this much greater event. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Word at the Beginning with God, celebrates a ***restored relationship with God*** by anyone and everyone who desires to approach and worship. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is worth following because he represents this restored relationship.

As I have mentioned several times today, the question for you and for me is **“Why is this image so important?”** I’d like us to view a music video some of you may not be familiar with, since it is from 1986. The words from the chorus are important, so I want you to hear them once.

"Daddy Daddy *On Screen* What will we see there? There's so much that we don't understand" So I told them of Moses And Father Abraham And then I said dear children "Watch the Lamb"

Watch the Lamb Video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_RsKXePm9GI

Take 5 Minutes More

Jesus' death represents much more than a simple sacrifice for our sins. Indeed, Jesus' sacrifice celebrates God the Father acting through God the Son to restore relationship with his creation. As God's Lamb, Jesus exceeds any comparison we might have with descriptions from the Old Testament. Indeed, as God's lamb Jesus represents the sacrifice God offers, once for all, to insure those who worship him may worship him by faith.

As we close, Let's take a few moments. I ask you to consider the following question, "What reasons do you come up with to excuse yourself from worshipping God?" Let's pause a few moments so you can think. *On Screen* Now, write these reasons down. Compare your reasons with God's activity in and through Jesus to restore you to a right relationship with him. *On Screen* What remains on your list to keep you from worshipping the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? *Final Image*

Do you have an answer to the question, "**Why is our image of God's Lamb so important?**"