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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Epiphany 2

John 1:29

BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD!

Imagine you are John the Baptist. Jesus has not yet gone public. The first 30 years of His life were quiet. Now all that is about to change. It is your official job to introduce Jesus to the world. What would you say? How would you start? You know that in our current culture you'd get about 2.4 seconds before people would tune you out and scroll to the next thing, right? So whatever you'd say had better count, had better be succinct yet loaded with meaning, and it had better draw people in to want to find out more.

What would you say? How about: Behold the Lamb of God! It's doubtful you and I would have come up with that – Gentiles of the twenty first century in the faraway land of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Why did John use this odd expression? Why not simply say, "Here is Jesus. Here is your Savior?"

Even to our twenty-first-century ears the words "Lamb of God" say so much more. You may well have noticed, the lamb is a prominent symbol in church art and décor. Usually we think of Jesus being the shepherd, and us the sheep. But the Bible also depicts Jesus as a lamb.

That might seem strange. We come to church wanting to be edified and encouraged. We want to walk out ready to take on the world. And what is our motivational hero compared to? A lamb. Why not a ferocious bear, a charging bull, or at least a soaring eagle?

Because the most important thing Jesus did for us He had to do like a lamb. A lamb was not a new concept to John's original audience. For 1500 years God had set up an elaborate system of worship for the Jewish people. The heart and core of all their worship rituals was the sacrifice. A person would place their hands on the head of a year-old lamb and confess their sins, like they were transferring their guilt onto the lamb. Then the priest would slaughter the lamb and burn it on an altar like a gigantic barbecue grill. The smoke would go up and dissipate into the air just like their sins. It was God's giant, real-life object lesson to teach the people every time they worshiped that sin has to be atoned for, and it can only be atoned for by shedding blood, and that God provided a way for sin to be atoned for by a substitute.

Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of lambs had been sacrificed down through the centuries. But they didn't take away sins for real. The writer to the Hebrews says, "*The same sacrifices made year after year can never make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats (and*

we might add lambs) *to take away sins. But now Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.*

For this reason, John the Baptist was careful not simply to call Jesus a Lamb of God, but the Lamb of God. Only by sacrificing Himself, only by shedding His own blood, only by making Himself our substitute could our sins be atoned for. No one else could do it. No other payment would be sufficient.

Does it seem brutal that God would have harmless, innocent lambs butchered in place of people who are the opposite of harmless and innocent?

But that's how Jesus is like a lamb. He was totally innocent –no sin. He was harmless like a lamb doing good and healing all kinds of sicknesses. Last Sunday we heard it said about Him that a bruised reed He would not break, nor a smoldering wick would He snuff out. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Though Jesus was totally in control of all things, He willfully went to His own slaughter without resistance like a lamb. It seems unfair and unjust. We are the sinners. We are the ones responsible. We are the ones God should have slain. But instead of slaughtering us, God sacrificed the innocent lamb as our substitute.

And yet this was God's will. It was no mistake. For Jesus is the Lamb *of* God. Another way of saying that is that He is the Lamb *from* God. This Lamb was not from the field or from the sheep pen. This Lamb was provided by God. This was the one God appointed from eternity to be the Lamb. He did it deliberately – sent Him to this earth for sacrifice.

What's more is that we find God was even delighted about it. Remember what He said last Sunday at Jesus' baptism: This is my Son, whom I love. With Him I am well-pleased!" Just chew on that for a second. God – delighted to sacrifice His Son – for me?

When Jesus was born, lived, suffered, died and rose again, step by step He was carrying out God's full intentions for you. The forgiveness of sins and salvation are not something God is hesitant or reluctant to give you. He doesn't give it to you bit by bit. You don't need to pry it from Him. It is yours. He is the Lamb from God.

From God. By nature we're inclined to think, "There must be some reason in me why I'm saved –something about me that makes the difference." But Jesus shakes His head. It is not from you. It is from outside of you. You are saved not because you feel it, or decided it, or because of the good in you. Thoughts like that are wrong. They rob God of His glory. No the Lamb came from God. Our salvation came from God. Jesus changed God's relationship to us by redeeming us. God the Holy Spirit changes our relationship to God by creating faith in us. We don't reach up to God. Jesus comes to us from heaven through His Word and Sacraments. And through Word and Sacrament He also sends to us the Holy Spirit to create faith in our hearts.

The Lamb of God also can be said The Lamb who is God. It was no less than God the eternal who suffered and died on the cross. So John said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the

sin of the world!” We sing John’s words right before the Lord’s Supper because they teach the most important truth in the whole Bible. Christ atoned for the sins of the whole world. Are you part of the whole world? That’s how you can be certain He has atoned for your sins too.

This Lamb was God. Think how valuable you must be in His eyes –worth as much as His own life! If you had enough money in your bank account to pay off the national debt, \$31 trillion, you’re worth more to God than that.

The Lamb of God, yes, a lamb –but a powerful Lamb, a Lamb that gored a dragon and crushed a serpent’s head, a raging lamb who swallowed death whole and blasted open the grave, a fierce lamb who shakes the earth with His roar and smashes earthly governments and reduces them to dust, a triumphant lamb who laughs at his enemies, who whisks away all His believers and then leaps up to the highest heavens carrying them all on his back.

Keep your eyes fixed on this Jesus, this Lamb. Watch Him in live action through the viewing screen of His Word and behold him as He materializes before you in real time in the Sacrament. And one day you will approach a grand event going on –a white-robed multitude numbering thousands upon thousands and ten-thousand times ten-thousand with Him at the center, and you will be absorbed in the thrill until you can’t contain yourself, and you will shout out with angel armies, “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and thanks and honor and glory forever and ever.”