

ADVENT SERMON SERIES
CALL HIS NAME JESUS:
(2) BEHOLD, THE LAMB OF GOD

Exodus 12:1-7, 13

1 Peter 1:17-21

John 1:29-34

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SCRIPTURE

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. . .The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (Ex 12:1-7, 13 NRSV).

If you invoke as Father the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God (1 Pet 1:17-21 NRSV).

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this

reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1:29-34 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Christmas is a time for traditions. We all have them – family traditions, personal traditions, things we have to do a certain way because that is what we did last year, and the year before that and probably the year before that. The Christmas tree, at home and at church, has to be decorated the way it has always been decorated. Decorations are carefully placed on shelves and tables, very likely the same shelves and tables those exact same decorations occupied last year. New decorations and new traditions do find their way into the mix, and slowly those new things become new traditions. It isn't wrong to have our Christmas traditions. They are comforting and they fill us with delight, year after year, as we celebrate Jesus' birth.

The people of Israel had traditions too, most of them not simply invented or developed over time, but given to them by God. One of these traditions, one of the most important, was the festival of Passover. The first Passover took place centuries before Jesus lived, when the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. In one final, mighty act of deliverance, God led the Israelites out of slavery into freedom. To demonstrate his mighty power and force the Egyptians to release their Israelite slaves, God was going to kill all the firstborn of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh to the firstborn of the Egyptian cattle. The people of Israel were to celebrate their deliverance on that night by killing and roasting and feasting on a lamb. Each household was to take the blood of their lamb and paint it on the lintels and doorposts of the home. Wherever God saw that blood marking the door, he would "pass over" and spare the firstborn of that home. So on that night, the firstborn of Egypt were struck down and the Pharaoh ordered the Israelites to leave.

Scripture says of that Passover, "It was a night of watching by the Lord, to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations" (Exodus 12:42). Year after year, the tradition of Passover would preserve the memory of the night the people were set free. When children asked the meaning of the ritual feast, the families were to answer, "It is the sacrifice of the Lord's Passover, for he passed over the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt, when he struck the Egyptians but spared our houses" (12:27).

Passover was a tradition, handed down from generation to generation. It was a

remembrance of deliverance, but it was also more than an annual reminder of the past miracle. Passover was a picture of the future, a picture and a prophecy of a greater act of deliverance, of a greater sacrifice to come. In this act of deliverance, God would not strike down the firstborn of an enemy nation. In this sacrifice, God's own Son, "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), would die.

When Jesus began his public ministry, John the Baptist announced the arrival of the Savior with the words, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The Lamb of God had come. Just as the Israelites in ancient Egypt were to choose a lamb "without blemish," the Lamb of God was the perfect sacrifice, the innocent sacrifice "without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:19). This Lamb was "destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages"(1 Peter 1:20) for us, and born in Bethlehem.

Jesus, the Child of Bethlehem, whose birth we will soon celebrate, is the spotless Lamb of God. He offered up his life on the cross, suffering the penalty of death that we earned through our sin, through our rebellion against God our Creator. Because our sins are washed away in the blood of Jesus, the wrath of God against sin "passes over" us as surely as the Lord long ago passed over the blood-marked doors of the Israelite slaves. On that night, the slaves went out through those blood-painted doors, out of Egypt and into freedom. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Lamb, we too are redeemed and set free from our slavery to sin, death and the devil.

Jesus, the Lamb of God, was born in Bethlehem for this purpose – to take away the sins of the world, to take away our sins. On the cross he did exactly that. Jesus set us free from sin and death, paying the price that we could never pay. Long before Jesus was born, the psalmist wrote about that impossible price to be paid: "No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough—so that they should live on forever and not see decay" (Psalm 49:7-9). A few verses later, the psalm provides the answer to the puzzle. The impossible cost can only be paid in one way: "But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me to himself" (Psalm 49:15).

Only God himself could pay the price; only God himself could set us free. The blood of the Lamb born in Bethlehem has washed away our sin. The blood of the Lamb now marks us as God's holy, redeemed people. We are called to freedom, but it is not a freedom to follow our sinful and selfish desires. We have been set free for service, to live for others as our Lord lived, and died, for us. As the apostle Paul wrote, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another" (Galatians 5:13). We

have been led out of slavery into freedom, and now through Advent, into Christmas, into Easter, and until our Lord comes again, we are free to live and serve others in the name of the Lamb who was slain for us.