

Isaiah 49:1-7
John 1:29-42

Second Sunday After Epiphany, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 15, 2023

John the Baptist's Declaration

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson is the second of Isaiah's Servant Songs and speaks of the servant people of Israel. But the servant also has a mission that extends beyond domestic affairs. They are to be "a light to the nations." The church has easily heard the song as a prophecy fulfilled in the coming of Jesus—"The Light of the World." (Jn. 8:12) Listen to these words from Isaiah 49:1-7. . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel reading for today is very much an Epiphany text. At his baptism Jesus is revealed to John as the Son of God. And the next day as Jesus walked by, John proclaims him to be the Lamb of God who takes away, not only the sin of Israel, but the sin of the world. Though Jesus is revealed to Israel, the scope of his liberating activity is worldwide. Listen to these words from John 1:29-42. . . .

Sermon

As you can see from the heading of our bulletin, today is the Second Sunday after Epiphany. Friday, January 6 was the Day of Epiphany, or Three Kings' Day, a Christian festival that celebrates the revelation of God in his Son Jesus Christ, as a light to the nations. Epiphany recalls the Magi, the Wise Men from the East, and their star-led journey to Bethlehem with costly gifts for Jesus, now about two years old.

For Christmas this year a church member gave us a little book entitled, "*On This Holy Night.*" In the second chapter on "Seeing the Christmas Scenery," Bill Hybels writes of the star

that God provided a travel guide for the Wise Men from afar, to guide them to the location of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. And there they worshipped him and presented the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And Hybels says that God always provides spiritual travel guides for those who seek him. They may be found in a neighbor, a friend, a relative, a Sunday School teacher. And I might add that we can find him as we study scripture, as we worship and celebrate the sacraments, and as we care for the least of our brothers and sisters.

On February 7 this year the President of the United States will deliver the State of the Union Address. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the United States Government come together in a joint session of Congress. There will be dramatic announcements and entrances. Members of the President's Cabinet, and the Supreme Court, and finally the President himself. The introductions by the Speaker of the House. Everything sets the stage for a message by the most powerful person in the free world.

Biblical stories teach us that the more important the message, the larger the messenger. The great herald of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus was the Archangel Gabriel who brought the good news to Mary in Nazareth. However, the greatest messenger born of woman was John the Baptist. While John has been thought by some to be the greatest of the prophets, he maintained his humility in the presence of Jesus.

This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." (Jn. 1:30)

John prepared the way and announced the coming of the Lord to his people. He set the stage for Jesus' ministry.

Now today I want to note three points we find in our Gospel Lesson: **Revelation, Expanding Witness, and Confession as to the Identity of Jesus.**

With regard to *revelation*, consider that twice John the Baptist says of Jesus, “I myself did not know him.” (1:31, 33) Not that he did not know Jesus at all, but that previously he had not come to a full realization of Jesus’ messiahship. The Gospel of John presents the baptism of Jesus as an occasion of revelation. And revelation is not something we achieve all by ourselves; it is a gift of God’s grace. Revelation occurs to bring about recognition and witness, whether the revelation comes suddenly as it did to Paul on the road to Damascus, or comes as a steady progress of illumination, like the dawn scattering the darkness of night. Jesus was revealed to John the Baptist.

Secondly, *revelation* takes on the character of *expanding witness*. Note that John the Baptist says, “I myself have seen and testified.” (v. 34) And the next day when John was standing with two of his disciples, Jesus walked by and John exclaimed,

“Look, here is the Lamb of God.” The two disciples heard him say this and they followed Jesus. (vv. 36b-37)

So the revelation that John received did not remain his own private possession. The revelation was not given merely to nurture John’s faith and experience. It was to be shared with others. And Andrew, one of John’s disciples who left him to follow Jesus, goes and tells his brother that, “we have found the Messiah.” And he brought Simon to Jesus.

Thus did John bear witness to the long-awaited Messiah. He pointed people to Jesus. Today many people are looking for someone to give them hope, purpose, and peace. Our job is to point them to Christ—the light of the world; the way, the truth, and the life.

And note how little John has to say about himself. There is no elaborate biographical information or details of his personal experience. What we learn about is the person of Jesus, not the person of the witness. What happens has not so much to do with John, as it has to do with Jesus. John speaks, and his disciples hear him, but they follow Jesus.

Revelation, Expanding Witness, and finally...Confession as to the Identity of Jesus.

Then he identifies Jesus as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (vv. 29-30)

To be sure there is wonder in this phrase “Lamb of God.” It echoes the Passover Lamb of Exodus 12— the lamb that was slain, the blood of which then protected the houses of the Israelites on the night when they left Egypt. The lamb that delivered them from death. Also, there were the lambs that were sacrificed in the Temple for the sins of the people. In Isaiah and Jeremiah there is the vision of the lamb whose suffering and sacrifice, meekly and lovingly borne, would redeem his people.

But William Barclay tells of another picture that emerged in the time between the Old and New Testaments, in the days of the great struggles, in which the Maccabees, who were the leaders of a Jewish rebel army, fought and died and conquered. In those days the lamb, especially the horned lamb, was the symbol of a great conqueror. Judas Maccabeus, and also Samuel, David, and Solomon were so described. It may well be that when John spoke of Jesus here in chapter 1 as the Lamb of God, he had in mind, not a vision of gentle and helpless weakness, but of conquering majesty and power. So that Jesus was the One who engaged sin, fought with it, and yes, mastered it. Remember that immediately after his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan, but overcame. (Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13) This Lamb, who gave his life for us and our salvation, now reigns in the heavens. And one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Phil. 2:11)

All of these images of the lamb may be seen in John’s vision. And together they are the foundation of our belief in the victory that our Lord won over sin. They point to the love, the sacrifice, the suffering, and the triumph of Christ. The One who loves us and by his blood has

freed us from our sins. (Revelation 1:5) John Calvin said there are other favors which Christ bestows upon us, but this is the chief favor, upon which all the rest depend.

No less than twenty-nine times the writer of the Book of The Revelation used this phrase, “Lamb of God,” as the primary title for Christ.

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!” (5:11-12)

As the great hymn writer Charles Wesley proclaimed in “O for a Thousand Tongues to sing:

He breaks the power of reigning sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean;
His blood availed for me.

In place of bondage and rejection the Lamb of God brings freedom and belonging. Not just for the people of Israel who have longed for the Messiah, but for the whole world. And the church’s mission is not just to care for its members, it’s mission is to go unto all the world that God so loved, near and far, with “good news of great joy.”

Truth is, we can’t save ourselves. But thanks be to God, for he has taken decisive action in Jesus Christ to save us—not only us, but even the whole world.

“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away
the sin of the world.” (Jn. 1:29b)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.