

Year A, Epiphany 2

[Isaiah 49:1-7](#)

[1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#)

[John 1:29-42](#)

[Psalm 40:1-12](#)

Lord, shine the light of your Word into our hearts and minds. Amen.

John the Baptist points to Jesus and says 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'

This is a really central part of how we understand who Jesus is and what he does for us. Jesus is the Lamb of God and he takes away the sin of the world.

But it's kind of a complicated idea, and it requires some background to get a grasp on what it means and how it works.

I want to look at three things mainly:
What does 'Lamb of God' mean?
What is sin?
How does Jesus take it away?

First, what does it mean to say Jesus is the Lamb of God?

It's an image that takes a lot from the context of the society in which Jesus and John the Baptist lived. For many thousands of years, people have made their living raising animals for food and other benefits. In the area where John and Jesus lived, many people raised sheep, which were a key component in that society's economy. It might be like the buffalo for the Plains Indians or whales for people groups living around the Arctic. Or it might be like oil or timber for this area.

Many people during the time of the Hebrew scriptures raised sheep, so there are a lot of stories relating to shepherds and sheep. Back in Genesis, Abel, one of Adam and Eve's sons, brought a lamb to offer God. It represented the return on his work, and he was giving it to God. We still do that; it just looks a little different. We don't bring live animals up here and put them on the altar, but we do bring offerings to God from the return on our work - and in a money-based economy, what we usually bring is some form of money. It's even still called an 'offering'.

This idea of an offering of thanksgiving was one association John's disciples could make when John pointed at Jesus and said, 'Here is the Lamb of God...'

Depending on the kind of offering, sometimes the priests and the people who brought it would eat part of it. Today, a lot of people brought food also to celebrate another year at St. John's and hear what the church has been able to do with its resources and time, so if someone brought deer sausage, that would maybe in some way be similar.

Another association is that of a sin offering. Later Jewish laws for worship included an

elaborate system of sacrifices to pay for sins. For one kind of sin, if you were the king, you'd have to bring a cow; if you were a prince, you might have to bring a male goat. If it was for a sin you did on purpose, intentionally, you'd probably have to pay extra for it, along with a sin offering. If it was a sin you did unintentionally or just by being careless, the penalty would be less. Under this system, a lamb was one type of offering made to pay for sin.

So, when John pointed at Jesus and said, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,' this was part of the meaning.

Another very important story relating to Jesus as the Lamb of God is the Passover story in Exodus. The people of Israel became slaves in Egypt for a long time until God sent Moses to lead them out of slavery. The only problem was that the Pharaoh didn't want to let them go. God sent 10 plagues on Egypt to diminish Pharaoh's attachment to the Israelites. Part of the story of the plagues is the story of the Passover, when God sent the final plague, which caused the first-born of every household to die.

God instructed Moses to tell each family to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the door of their house, and they were protected from the destruction of the plague. On that night, Pharaoh let them go, so they were protected from death and also freed from slavery. For more than three thousand years now, since about the 13th century BC, the Jews have celebrated Passover each year, re-enacting and remembering God's deliverance. This story is also part of our story as Christians.

When John pointed at Jesus and said, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' his students who heard him could relate it to many things: an offering to God, a sacrifice to pay for sins, and a reminder of God's deliverance from slavery and death.

So, on to the second question - What is sin?

Sin is a kind of slavery and also a kind of death, and Christ's sacrifice delivers us from these. But thankfully few, if any of us have any direct experience of slavery, and though we have experience with death, it's still very hard to understand on this side of it. Sin has also been described as a separation - separation from God. It's a broken connection, a missing relationship that ought to be there, an estrangement.

Sin can be defined in many ways.

One way to think of it is that sin is a kind of debt.

What is a debt?

A debt is when you owe something, like when you borrow money or finance something, or when somebody buys you something and you promise to pay them back.

Now, I should clarify that I'm not saying that debt is a sin. I'm saying that sin can be thought of as a kind of debt. Debt is one metaphor to understand what sin is.

So, if you're in debt, I'm not saying that makes you a sinner. A lot of people are in debt,

including me. Probably almost everybody either currently is in debt or has been at some point. That's partly what makes it a good metaphor, because people can relate to what being in debt means. We know what causes it, what results from it, what it feels like to be in debt and hopefully also what it feels like to get out of debt.

So, sin can be thought of as a kind of debt. And a debt is when you owe something. On a ledger, it's a negative number. It's negative both in the sense that nobody likes it and also in the sense that it's the opposite of a positive number. To cancel it out, you have to put an equal or bigger positive number in there.

Because what is a negative?

It's a lack - an absence - something is missing - it's like a hole.

Here's another way to think of it.

This glass is empty.

How do you get it not to be empty? Do you remove the emptiness? Take away the emptiness?

No, but you can put something in, and when you put something in, it's not empty anymore.

A few weeks ago in Sunday school, we were talking about evil, and there's one idea that says maybe evil is a kind of lack - a kind of emptiness or a kind of nothing - where there ought to be good, there's not. It's similar to the way darkness isn't exactly a thing itself - it's just how we describe where there isn't any light.

How do you get rid of darkness? You bring in a light.

So to get rid of evil, you don't exactly take it away; instead, you put something good there.

How does Jesus take away sin?

He puts himself in the place of the sin - and even after all that the payment of sin takes out of him, Jesus is still infinitely good.

Infinite good minus the sins of the whole world is still infinite good.

What is happening when Jesus 'takes away' the things where we're lacking?

Something positive happens.

How does he remove a separation? By making a connection.

How does he take away emptiness? By filling it.

How does he subtract a debt? By paying it.

Sin is a debt, and Jesus pays the debt of the whole world by becoming a sacrifice. He takes away what's lacking in us by filling it with his Spirit. He dispels our darkness by making himself a light that shines inside us.

Like the Psalmist, who was lifted out of the desolate pit - pulled out of a depressing hole - and God put a new song in his mouth. 'Great things are they that you have done, O LORD my God!...Oh, that I could make them known and tell them! But they are more than I can count.'

And also similar is the way Paul describes God's grace given to the members of the church in Corinth.

'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind -- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you -- so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.'

In a minute, we're going to re-enact a lot of this story by telling it again. We do this all the time - every week, because it's important and we need to learn it and remember it. So pay attention.

It's a good story.

Jesus is the Lamb of God and he takes away the sin of the world.

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