

"Behold, The Lamb of God"

John 1:29-42a

January 16, 2011

2nd Sunday After the Epiphany

In athletics, whether high school, college, or professional, the practice of giving nicknames to teams based on an animal is fairly common. Here, in Montana, we have the Grizzlies and Bobcats. The NFL teams in the playoffs this weekend are called Falcons, Seahawks, Ravens, and, of course, Bears. These names are chosen because they want to convey a sense of power and might. This inspires athletes to go out and not only be victorious, but crush their opponents into submission.

When my sons played high school sports in Nebraska, they told me of Benson High School near Omaha. Their athletic nick name is "the Bunnies." I don't know about you, but, as an outsider, I wonder how inspirational that name is, say, for the football team. Do they chant, "Let's go Bunnies!?" I went to their website and saw that they have added the word "mighty" to their name. Does the name "Mighty Bunnies" create a picture of power, might, and crushing opponents into submission in your mind? Mine, either.

This whole idea of imagery and how it plays into the notion of strength and victory helps our understanding of our Gospel reading for today. Times were tough then. The people were oppressed by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire. Taxes were high and hated. Many people were ill, poor and suffering. Yet expectations were also running high. There was talk of the Messiah coming. God would intervene and rescue His people with His power and His might. If the Messiah was going to have a nickname, people would expect it to be something like "the Lion" or "the Bear", symbols of strength and power.

Much is the same today. War and terrorism oppress us. The economy is bad. Taxes are high and income is low. Many people are ill, poor and suffering. People look to God to intervene. They crave a demonstration of His power and His might. You hear talk of "expect a miracle". Some Christians sing about experiencing God's glory, His holiness, His power, and His strength. They want to see God do something great thing to rescue us from the evil of this world.

But there's a problem. We are weak, sinful, yes – rebellious human beings. We cannot see God in His holiness and live. We will die. We cannot meet experience God in His glory and remain alive. He will destroy us. If you remember the movie, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when those who found the ancient ark of the covenant opened it, they were ground into dust by the power of God. Although there was a lot of Hollywood special effects to jack up the story, I think its portray was essentially true. Sinful rebellious people who come into contact with a holy and mighty God will be crushed to dust as this movie portrayed.

John the Baptist knew that his cousin, Jesus, was the Son of God and Messiah. In our Gospel reading, John notes how he saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus at His baptism. This is Him! This is the Son of God, the Messiah, the One who has come to rescue His people. When John sees Jesus coming toward Him, he “introduces” Jesus to his disciples with an animal nickname. But it is not the Lion of Judah or the Mighty Bear. Instead, John says, “Behold, the lamb.”

To me, a lamb has all of strength, ability to intimidate, and power to conquer as a bunny. Imagine any athletic team being called the Lambs. Would they strike fear into the hearts of their opponents? Would they win the game? Would they bring their opponents into submission? It doesn't sound that way to me. So, how can Jesus, as a lamb, be a source of confidence and hope for victory for us?

We think that, because our enemies and our problems are big and strong, that our deliverer must be bigger and stronger. Yet, as “big and strong” as war, terrorism, poverty, evil, oppression, destruction, and even death are, none of them is our real problem. These are merely symptoms. Our problem is much worse. It is much bigger and more powerful. Our problem is sin from which come all these other terrible things.

Jesus came, not to merely take care of the symptoms, but to overcome this root cause of them, sin. The lamb was the perfect image for this task. In the Old Testament worship life of Israel, lambs were killed by individuals or families to atone for their sin. An innocent life was sacrificed for the guilty. The blood of the lamb would purify them from their sins.

Now, you may say, lambs (nor any other animal) have the power to wash away sin. That is true. Yet every lamb which was slain in Israel pointed forward to the One who would be able to wash away sin and purify a people for God. This is the One baptized by John and presented by John to his

disciples to the world, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John sure said a mouthful here.

John attracts his disciples' attention, not to just any old lamb, but *THE* Lamb. It is not the lamb which belongs merely to an individual or a family. This is the Lamb "*of God*". This would not be a Lamb who would symbolize atonement for sin or stand for purity. This is the Lamb of God "who takes away sin". Literally, it means to "lift up" or "carry away". Far from being a weak and powerless little lamb, the Lamb of God would bear the heaviest load ever conceived: sin. It would not be the scattered sins of a select few. Jesus would bear the weight of sin in its totality for the totality of the universe – all sin of all people for all time. Jesus would bear that immense and weighty load to a cross where He would suffer the massive and heavy judgment of God. Being the Lamb of God was not for sissies. Only in the beaten, bloodied, dead body of the Son of God is transgression atoned for and sin washed away completely.

If you want to look for the power and might of God, it's there – just not where you expect it to be. It's not in a military victory for the Messiah or the establishment of an earthly kingdom for the Son of God. Rather, the power of God is found in the beaten and bloody, crucified and dead body of Jesus of Nazareth on the cross. As weak as this scenario may seem to the casual observer or even to some miraculous minded Christians, it is the power of God. As God said to Paul when Paul wanted a demonstration of His power, "My power is made perfect in weakness." The cross doesn't bring world peace, solve world hunger, or do away with disease, poverty or strife. Yet the cross takes away sin - the root cause of all those difficult problems

If you want to experience the holiness and glory of God, you can – just not in the way you expect to experience it. It won't be through the warming of your heart, a small voice from within, or an emotionally laden spiritual experience of some sort. The holiness of God is given to you in water splashed on your head in Holy Baptism and bread and wine placed on your lips in Holy Communion. Your sins are washed away in Holy Baptism. Christ's body and blood delivers forgiveness in Holy Communion. The glory of God is given to you in the reading, preaching and teaching about the Lamb of God upon the cross.

It's all here before our very eyes, just as it was before the eyes of the people in John's time. So they would not miss it, due to misunderstandings and misguided expectations, John had to cry out, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" I am given the same task. As

you contemplate the world's problems and look for hope, I say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" As you mull over your own problems, physical and spiritual, I say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" As you deal with guilt and depression, I say, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" In the Lamb of God, there is forgiveness. In forgiveness, there is restoration. In restoration, there is salvation. And in salvation, there is hope, no matter what. Amen.