

Rod Ferguson - Jan. 19/20 (Epiphany 3)

Scripture: Philippians 2: 5-11; John 1: 29-37

HAVE YOU SEEN HIM?

“Behold the Lamb of God” – John 1: 29

We have recently celebrated Christmas, a 2000 plus year-old birthday party, for one named Jesus, whom we also call Emmanuel, God-with-us. It was a festival of light in honour of Christ, the “light of the World.”

We are now in the season of Epiphany which follows Christmas. “Epiphany” means “manifestation” or “showing forth.” It demonstrates that amazing new reality that Christmas brought of Divine presence, God with us. It begs two questions of us all. 1. “Who is this?” A question of identity. 2. “Have you seen him?” A question of reality. Is this true? In others words, is the Christmas promise real?

The author of the Gospel of John has a unique unique understanding of the identity of Jesus. No angel visitation, no shepherds, no manger, no wise men. How does this Gospel begin? “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1: 1-5)

Have you seen the light? The significant difference between the Gospel of John and the other three, is that John’s Gospel is largely a theological treatise, told mainly in stories that suit his theological interests - who Jesus is, and what he means, what theologians call “Christology.” Hence a theological sermon today.

To “see” him, to come to know him, requires a witness, one who has seen and knows him and is willing to point to him. And so here comes John the Baptizer, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness...” Our reading from John this morning continues the seasonal theme of manifestation. The Baptizer, a highly regarded figure in Judah, thought by many to be a prophet, drawing thousands, apparently, to his wilderness, water baptisms. But now he subordinates his work and his own self so that the focus might be on Jesus so “that he might be revealed,” as we read in verse 31, a subtle but significant point for the Gospel of John. The purpose of ministry, of witness and testimony, to this day, is to make known the One who has come to dwell among us in the flesh... incarnate God. A gift, but also a mystery. One I will try to unwrap, at least partially, for you today.

In verses before our reading, John had been baptizing in the Jordan. The next day, **he sees** Jesus approaching and immediately recognizes him as “the Lamb of God.” There is no indication that Jesus himself is baptized, or that the two of them (cousins, according to the Gospel of Luke) even know each other. Nonetheless, when the Spirit descends and remains on Jesus, it confirms for the Baptizer (as the One who sent him has told him) that this one is the “Son of God” who will baptize others with the Holy Spirit.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit does not appear to be connected with any kind of emotional state, nor the bestowal of any particular gift or ability, although later the reader is instructed that the Spirit will “guide you into all truth” in chapter 16. As with most things in the Gospel of John, baptism with the spirit is about “**seeing**.” It is to be born anew/ from above, which enables one to see that Jesus is the One sent from God, the one who has “words of eternal life”, which for the author is less about the quality of life in the hereafter and more about the quality of life in the here and now.

However, note here that Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit is connected with Jesus’ own identity. In the other gospels, the true identity of Jesus is something that gradually unfolds, and is not fully confirmed until his death and Resurrection. In John's gospel, we are met almost immediately with several titles for Jesus in the first chapter: the Word, Son of Man, Son of God, the Messiah, the King of Israel. By the time of the writing of John, around the end of the 1st Century or beginning of the Second, much Christological thinking has happened and a number of titles have been created to help explain the phenomenon of Jesus and who he is. In our verses this morning, we encounter the intriguing phrase at verse 29, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” No doubt this is an expression that has very early worked its way into Christian consciousness. Further, even though eucharistic (communion) imagery is rich throughout the Gospel of John, particularly in chapter 6, the author seems to have no specific reference in mind other than a general allusion to sacrifice. Hovering over this expression, however, is the larger question of what it means, for the author and for us, to say that the Lamb of God takes away human sin.

43 1/2 years of pastoral ministry has confirmed for me that a close second to questions of theodicy (Why, God? Why is there evil? Why do bad things happen to good people?) Those sorts of questions are about the atoning work of Christ. They are not articulated as such, but they are there. Exactly “how” does the death of this man Jesus on a cross take away human sin? What does that sacrifice really mean beyond an act of heroic love? New Testament theology in general certainly connects the death of Jesus with the forgiveness of sins and salvation, but is not explicit about how exactly one affects the other. Of course, theologians throughout church history have offered several theories about the atoning work of Christ, and the more popular and well-known ones include (1) the satisfaction theory, associated with Anselm, which sees Jesus’ death as “satisfying” the righteous demands of God offended by human sin; and (2) the substitutionary view, attributed to the Reformers, which understands Jesus’ death as the death of God's innocent son, offered on our behalf or in our place. Another well-known theory (3) is often called the moral influence theory, associated with Peter Abelard which sees the death of Jesus as the ultimate expression of the depth of God's love, saving us in so far as the realization of that love transforms us and our world.

The Gospel of John offers a unique perspective that might be called (4) an “incarnational theory of the atonement.” That is to say, the Incarnation, Emmanuel, God-with us, Christmas, as we understand it, is at the heart of the Christology of the Gospel of John and of the theology of the author. I think this is very important. The death of Jesus on a cross is not unimportant, obviously, but it is the uniting of the Divine and the human in this man Jesus that makes salvation possible. Possible because the Divine life has entered human life and now the possibility of new life exists for all, for **all**, and it means **ALL**. To **see** the light and truth the Word-made-flesh reveals, to **see** and believe, is to participate in this new life. Further, the Christology of this Gospel reminds us of something often neglected in discussions about the atoning work of Christ. Most theories of the atonement reflect rather ghastly images of God. In them, God and Jesus are two independent agents with God either

offering the Son as the innocent scapegoat to be brutally killed or actually doing the punishing in what seems like a kind of cosmic child abuse.

For the Gospel of John, however, the Lamb who is sacrificed, the one who suffers and dies on the cross, is not something or someone independent from God. This is the death of the “Word, the eternal *Logos*, [that] became flesh” - quoting vs. 14. Much like the notion we heard in Philippians, Jesus’ death is a divine self-emptying, God’s giving God’s own self, put to death by those who are too blind **to see**. Hence, rather than saying Jesus died “for” our sins as an innocent substitute or to appease the wrath of an angry God, it might be more fruitful to believe with this Gospel’s Christology to the effect that Jesus died “because” of **our** sins. If blindness is indeed the great spiritual sin of the world, then the Lamb that takes away sin does so by shining light into our spiritual darkness and making new life possible...as if one were... born again!

(COULD END HERE)

John the Baptist came by Divine appointment to bear witness to the Christ. “A voice of one calling in the wilderness,” the wilderness of a broken world. He came to bear witness to the “life that was the light of all people.” According to John, in seeing Jesus for the first time, the Baptist points to him and says, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

Do we see him? Do we see him present in our broken world. If John’s assertion is true, that Christ is present, then the church, the body of Christ, must embody this presence. The church is called to be the incarnation of self-giving love that has the power to overcome the sin and violence of this world. The Church must invest its life on making the world a better place for all - the broken, the down trodden, the oppressed, the poor, the sick, the war-weary, the refugee, the left out. Do we see him in these? And do we witness to that seeing? Do we reach out the hand of love? And do we dare to speak truth to power as did John the Baptist to Herod

Our text also invites reflection on John’s example of humility and challenges posed by a “me-focussed” culture. “It is not about me,” quips the popular motto, but experience suggests that egocentricity is alive and well, in the church as elsewhere. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio’s choice of Francis as his papal name understands and highlights the need for church renewal in light of this basic Christian value of humility.

From a theological standpoint, faith teaches a primary identity beyond our families of origin. In 1998, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted a study catechism for children entitled “Belonging to God.” The first question of the catechism is the same question posed to John the Baptist earlier at 1:19: “Who are you?” There are many possible responses within the life of faith. Some Christian traditions teach that the appropriate response to the question is, “I am a sinner.” Defining self in such a way can have tragic consequences, distorting self-understanding in very unhealthy ways. The catechism offers a different and better response: “I am a child of God.” “I am a child of God.” That is our primary identity, beyond any worldly category, beyond family function or dysfunction, beyond even our own self-understanding.

Of course, we live in between these realities; between the world as it is and the world as it shall ultimately be. Life seldom offers the clarity of identity John demonstrates in this Gospel reading.

There are moments when self-definition is clear and concisely stated. More often than not, life is lived in the tension between who we are and who we are not, who we have been and who we hope to be. In the midst of such a wilderness world, facing the realities of today, people of faith are ultimately called to join John in pointing, pointing to the hope that is God's tomorrow. Amen.