



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 18, 2026
ISAIAH 49:1-7; PSALM 40:1-12; 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9; JOHN 1:29-42

WHAT ARE WE LOOKING FOR?

John 1:29-42 [John 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.” The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, “What are you looking for?” They said to him, “Rabbi” (which translated means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).]

Talk about not reading the room. What happened to the flame spraying John the Baptist we’ve come to know and love – you know, the one who likes to name call and fuels the fire of our outrage? There’s something gratifying about that radical priest’s kid of the other Gospels – the one who picks fights with the religious and

political leaders of his day for the sake of making things right. As long as they’re not directing their fire at us, we rather like when our prophets’ words are sharp swords or polished arrows. In the face of evil, we want them to hit their targets. So then, what do we do with this more deferential, defanged version of John the

Baptist in today's Gospel? More to the point, is the "lamb of God" really what we're looking for?

I've wondered what John the Baptist thinks he's doing here for Jesus by calling him "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Let's start with this lamb business. We can tell the truth. No one wants their Savior to be meek or mild. Cute, fragile, and docile are never on the list of desirable leadership traits. Moreover, in the religious symbolism of 1st century Palestine, lambs were primarily known either for their purity or their passivity. And let's face it - neither seem like useful traits now. Don't we want someone who can fight dirty for us if that's what's needed to win? Or does that just make us the mirror image of those we oppose? Hold that thought for a moment.

To be fair, the biblical symbolism around lambs is more complex than initial impressions imply. The Passover lamb is fundamentally a reminder of the Israelites' deliverance from slavery.

Its presence evokes freedom from oppression and the downfall of the

violence of empire. In that light, it's an image of liberation. Later, in the book of Isaiah, the prophet evokes the lamb image again. This time, it's a lamb who's led to the slaughter - who suffers for the sake of justice but is vindicated at the end. Eventually, the image of a conquering lamb takes hold. In this view, as Episcopal Bishop Craig Loya from Minnesota pointed out at a prayer vigil earlier this week, we don't necessarily need to be bigger or stronger or meaner than the empire to win. We need to be on the side of love - actively standing alongside those targeted and scapegoated among us.

That sounds difficult but doable so far. What about "taking away the sin of the world"? On one level, if that was Jesus' job, he was abysmal at it. Evidence of broken relationships with God and one another abound to the point of heartbreaking certainty. What's meant here though is that, in the love of God made flesh in Jesus, the power of sin and death to define what we're capable of has been broken forever. The power of God's love for healing and forgiveness, made known to us in Jesus, opens doors that would

otherwise remain locked. It frees us from being locked permanently into the worst of our mistakes and cowardice and releases us into a future that has not been written yet. Seen in that light, no wonder disciples start to follow.

What does all this have to do with us now? How might the prophets of our day help us in this season after the Epiphany to know what to look for? On this weekend, it's perhaps inevitable that we look to Martin Luther King, Jr. Earlier this week at Cathedral Commons, Dean Steve invited us to look again at Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" – familiar words, yes, but ones that can help reorient us in these disorienting times. In it, Dr. King responds to "liberal" clergy, including the Episcopal Bishop of Alabama at that time, who are asking his movement to stop their sit-ins, marches, and other forms of nonviolent resistance.

Among other things, Dr. King points out the reality of unjust laws. In his view, any law that degrades human personality, that gives some people a false sense of superiority and others a false sense of inferiority, is unjust. Any law that is just

on its face but unjust in its application, that targets people based on the color of their skin, is unjust. And those who break such unjust laws by offering aid and comfort to the targeted and who do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty are, in fact, expressing the highest respect for the law.

What this looks like in our day could differ for each of us. We need to be guided by those most affected and what they say they need - so that our good intentions don't just endanger them more. In the meantime, Dr. King reminds us that, in his words, "right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant." He then ends with a prayer that "the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."

I know it's tempting to verbally flame spray those we oppose - or cheer on those who will do it for us. But that is not the light we carry within us as followers of Jesus; it's not what we're called to look for.

Our light is gentler and harder to see at first, but it is no less revolutionary, and it's ultimately far more powerful. After all, we follow the Lamb of God, the One whose presence means freedom from oppression and the downfall of the violence of empire

– and because of his death-defying love, no one else's power can define what we are capable of. We have been released into a future that has not been written yet. May we make the most of it. Amen.



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