

THE LAMB WE NEED

Our text is the Gospel for today. From the 1st chapter of John we listen again to verse 29.

*The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said,
"Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! . . ."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Many years ago the legend states, when the great cathedrals were being built in what is now Germany and France, there was a gifted stonemason, a stone carver, who was working on scaffolding high up on one of the towers of the new church. Suddenly he lost his footing. He slipped and fell all the way to the ground below. His co-workers rushed down, expecting to find the stone cutter dead. But to their surprise and joy, he was alive and only slightly injured. How did he survive? A flock of sheep had been grazing on the grass in the churchyard beneath the scaffold at the time of the accident. When the stonemason fell, he landed on top of a lamb. The unfortunate lamb was killed. But the poor creature had broken the worker's fall and saved his life. To commemorate that miraculous escape, the stonecutter chiseled the figure of a lamb in stone on the tower of the cathedral at the exact height from which he had fallen. As the story goes, tourists to this day can still see the lamb carved in stone on the tower. And when they ask, "What's that lamb doing up there?" they are told the story of the lamb that died and the stonecutter who lived.

I don't know if this story is simply legend or if it is true, but it illustrates an important fact. We too need a lamb for our survival, and Jesus is the lamb we need.

The Lamb We Need.

1. To Pay the Penalty for Our Sin,
2. To Restore Us When We Fall, and
3. To Point Others To Salvation.

It was John the Baptist who first called Jesus the Lamb of God, and it happened this way. One day while on the bank of the Jordan River, John saw the very person whom God had revealed to him as the Messiah, the long-promised Savior. He saw Jesus. He directed the attention of the crowd to Jesus and he said, "Look, the Lamb of God." John knew without a doubt that this was the Messiah.

³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

"Son of God" yes, but why the term "Lamb of God"? I don't suppose most people would consider it a compliment to be called a lamb. After all, lambs are weak and helpless creatures. They're born virtually defenseless. Lambs also tend to be awkward and clumsy. They seem to have a knack for getting into trouble. Why in the world would John refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God? Could it be that he was implying that Jesus was weak or helpless? No. John's intent was not to insult Jesus. The opposite is true. This was actually an honorable title, which John the Baptist used.

To appreciate the significance of this name, you need to understand how the Jewish people of Jesus' day perceived the lamb. God had given the lamb a special place in the mind of all Israelites. For the Jews, the lamb carried a special meaning, a religious significance. Lambs played an important part on the night of the original Passover in Egypt. It was the blood of a lamb, smeared on the doorframe, which caused the angel of death to pass over that household and spare those inside. Each year, when the nation of Israel commemorated how God had delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, it was a lamb that was slaughtered and prepared for the Passover meal.

During those 1,400 years from the time of Moses until the time of Jesus, God had commanded his people to sacrifice lambs (along with other animals) for their sins. God did this to teach his people that he does not deal with sin lightly. The punishment for sin is death. Accordingly, the lambs offered for the sins of the people were killed. They were slaughtered, butchered and burned up. In a culture that sacrificed lambs twice a day in the temple, John's words were a kiss of death. "Here is the Lamb of God" also means, "Look, everyone, here's the one that is going to be sacrificed."

To convey the seriousness of sin, the sacrificial lambs were not just locked up in a barn or a corral, their lives were taken from them. In the same way Jesus came to give up his life to pay the penalty for our sins, not just spend a few years away from the glories of heaven. He had to do this because the lambs sacrificed during Old Testament times couldn't really pay for the sins of the people. Animal sacrifices were only I.O.U.'s that put off paying the real debt of sin. Human sin can only be paid for with human blood. That's why God's Son became Mary's son so that he had the right currency, human flesh and blood, to pay for our sins.

There's additional significance conveyed in the term 'Lamb of God' as John applied it to Jesus. All the lambs sacrificed to God during Old Testament times were to be without any physical defect. This was because God wanted his people to know that he would only accept a perfect sacrifice for sin. Jesus was that kind of lamb. His life wasn't even smudged by one sin. He was the perfect sacrifice. Jesus' perfect life covers our imperfect lives, our many sins, and protects us from God's wrath. This is how he could be the Lamb of God whose work was to take away the sin of the world. He is the Lamb we need because his sacrificial death really does pay the penalty we owe for our sins.

And Jesus is the Lamb We Need to restore us when we fall. The stonecutter of the legend, whose fall was broken by the lamb, was probably much more careful each time he worked on a scaffold from that day on. Although you and I may not think that we're in danger of slipping and falling to our death as that stonecutter almost did, the truth is it happens to us everyday.

Whenever you worry yourself sick about what the future holds, whenever you get angry at the other driver who just cut you off in traffic, whenever you make fun of the way a classmate dresses, whenever you roll your eyes when your parents ask you to do something, whenever you use God's name as an expression of surprise or anger, whenever you gossip about somebody, whenever you complain about your lot in life, whenever your dislike for someone turns to hatred, whenever you grumble about how tough you've got it and how easy it is for others, you sin and fall from God's heights. Each fall should kill us, but it doesn't because we land on the Lamb of God. The prophet Isaiah actually says, ". . . *he was crushed for our iniquities.*" Isaiah 53:5 (NIV). The Lamb of God was crushed for our sins.

But can you really be sure that you land on the Lamb of God whenever you sin? In the legend, the stonecutter was fortunate that a flock of sheep was grazing under the scaffold when he fell. What if only one lamb had been below, would he have landed on it? Or what if all the workmen had fallen from the scaffold, would one sheep have been able to break their fall? Probably not. But you can be confident that Jesus has taken away the sin of the world,

because he is not only the sacrificial Lamb of God, he is the almighty Son of God who has the breadth and strength to bear the sins of the whole world.

And that's why you can be confident that every time you, a believer in Jesus, fall from God's heights you land on Jesus and are spared God's punishment for sin. Hebrews 7:25 (NIV) *Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* Jesus is there "at the right hand of God . . . interceding for us" (Romans 8:34), pleading your case to God and restoring you, forgiving you, through faith, whenever you fall.

You can also be certain that there is room for more people, for all people on Jesus' back. That's why you won't keep Jesus to yourself, but like John the Baptist and Andrew the disciple enthusiastically point others to him. I don't think the stonecutter of the legend needed to carve the lamb into the stone of the tower to remind himself of the incident. That's probably something he carried with him for the rest of his life. But thankful that the lamb had given its life for his, the stonecutter wanted to leave a lasting memorial. That's why he carved a lamb into one of the stones of the tower. It was the stonecutter's way of saying to the world, "Look at the lamb that saved me!"

That's not only what John the Baptist did, it was also done by the disciple Andrew.

⁴⁰ *Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.* ⁴¹ *The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ).*

You have opportunities all the time to point others to the lamb that saved you. Just last Friday evening I had a conversation with the cashier at Walmart. She had been raised in Utah, the daughter of a Mormon bishop, and when she was old enough, she left Utah and left her father's religion and hasn't had a thing to do with God for the past 25 years. Sensing an opportunity, I briefly shared with her the simple gospel message. It's the least I could do, point her to the lamb that saved me. And it's something you too can do.

Keep looking to the Lamb. You won't take Jesus for granted if you keep reminding yourself what it is he did for you. And keep pointing others to the Lamb. Because he is the Lamb they need, too. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.