

“Behold the Lamb of God”

John 1:19-39
January 13, 2008

John the Baptist is one of the great characters in Scripture. He is fun to describe, Matthew says “John wore clothes of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. He gives a great sound-byte, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” He was talking to the religious folks at that point; speaking truth to power. He must have been a charismatic figure to have drawn the kinds of crowds that came out to see him.

But as colorful as he is, the writer of the gospel of John tells us much less about John the Baptist than the other three gospel writers. The writer opens with a delegation from the religious authorities approaching John the Baptist to ask who he is and by what authority he is making such a stir. They ask him a series of questions, trying to determine his angle.

What do the questions reveal?

Are you the Messiah? The question was not spurious. The delegation of priests and Levites sent from Jerusalem was a real question, “Who did ‘the Baptist’ think he was?” He was most likely from the Essene community, a movement not popular in Jerusalem. The establishment thought of the Essenes like an NRA militia in Wyoming or Idaho: highly conservative, radically religious, and likely to follow a zealot in revolting against Rome. So if John was claiming to be the expected Messiah, trouble was brewing with the Romans. “No, I am not the Messiah,” is John’s response.

Are you Elijah? Now, this may seem like a strange question, what with Elijah having lived some 850 – 900 years before the conversation with John. However, 2 Kings 2 describes how Elijah was taken up into heaven – alive. It’s a good story, so let me just read a bit of it,

...Elijah said to Elisha. “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” He responded, “You have asked a hard thing; yet if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not.” As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended into a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, “Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!”

Because Elijah had been taken up into heaven alive, there was a part of the Messianic expectation that he would return. Part of this expectation was fueled by Malachi 3:1, “See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple.” Later, in Malachi 4:5, Elijah is specifically mentioned in a role similar to that describing the “messenger”: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” Again, the coming of the prophet Elijah would signal the coming of a divine intervention – and the religious leaders and general consensus was that it

would be a time when God would judge the nations and restore Israel to a privileged position. Again, the delegation is asking John whether he is *predicting or proclaiming* a revolution against Rome. No, John says, I am not Elijah.

Are you the prophet? This, too, seems like a strange question unless you understand what were the expectations for God's restoration of Israel to its privileged position of covenant partner. "The Prophet" was more than just *a* prophet. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses is giving his final address to the people as they prepare to enter the Promised Land. He is instructing them to not be like the nations they will dispossess; they should not consult with soothsayers and diviners. Instead, in chapter 18:15, Moses says, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet." After Israel went into exile for breaking the covenant and becoming like the nations that were dispossessed, the understanding was that restoration would come after "a prophet like me" – that is, a prophet like Moses. The shorthand for "a prophet like me," became "the prophet." So, this delegation is asking John the Baptist whether he thought he was the prophet like Moses who was signaling the coming divine judgment on the nations and the restoration of the supremacy of Israel. "No," says John.

Then, who? This is where John responds with the "voice crying out in the wilderness."

There are a couple of things to note about these questions and answers. First, they were the correct questions; even if asked by adversaries. Second, the problem was that the delegation was not listening to the answers.

Think about it: the delegation was asking the Baptist who he *thought* he was. Their assumption was that he was crazy, a con man, or a revolutionary – "real prophet" was very low on their list, if on it at all. God had not raised up a real prophet in hundreds of years; though there had been a number of people who had been thought to be the Messiah who had fallen terribly short.

If we were to paraphrase the attitude of the delegation in today's language, I wonder if it would be, "It's great to go to church and have faith. They are helpful stories to raise children with good values and morals. But don't be one of those people who believes that crazy stuff about how God is active today; that's just weird."

In other words, they did not expect God to show up. I wonder if we do. Do we really believe that Jesus is coming back? Do we really expect that God's kingdom will be revealed fully at some point – today or some day far into the future?

I do. Here is part of why: if I consider my life today, it looks a lot different than I would have imagined it to be two years ago, ten years ago, or twenty years ago. One day is very different than the next, even when in the midst of the daily grind it may not seem like it. I remember when I was in college, I tried to imagine myself at age 50 (it seemed a lot father away then). I tried to imagine looking back on my life to see, "what would be the things I was disappointed I never got to try." (There's a new movie coming out called the "Bucket List," where the lead characters identify all the things they want to do before they die; same concept, a little different application.) Anyway, I made that mental list and have watched as God answered that prayer in

ways very different than I expected. What amazes me is that God has fulfilled every dream he has given in a way better than if I had tried to plan it out when I was 21 years old.

The same is true if I look at Scripture and look to see how God has been faithful to the promises made in Scripture. Because God has done what he said he would do, I have confidence that God will continue to do the things he said he would do – including Jesus' coming again and including the fulfillment of the kingdom of God.

Hard times do not change that hope. In fact, hard times clarify and intensify that hope. This past week the world reflected on the life of Sir Edmund Hillary, the first man to summit Mount Everest. In an interview later, he said, "I am a lucky man. I have had a dream and it has come true, and that is not a thing that happens often to men." For many years, people had tried to make the climb – some died trying. Despite the struggle Hillary persevered.

Faith can be like the challenge of Mount Everest. The description of the Baptist is a pretty harsh lifestyle, yet his hope and watching for the One who would follow never wavered. He was obedient while waiting in expectation. He watched. The writer of Hebrews would say it this way, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Paul says in Romans 8, "For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

So we watch. I try to pursue God's call for my daily life with obedience while at the same time carrying the hope of seeing God do amazing things. I pray to have a heart of joyful anticipation rather than skeptical cynicism, which John the gospel writer seems to attribute to this delegation and the religious leaders who sent them. For what it's worth, in my own life, and in the lives of others I have been blessed to witness, God is actively building the kingdom and his children right here, right now, in miraculous ways.

How about you? Do you have any expectation that God will do what he says he will do? What do you hold onto when times are difficult or when things do not seem to be working out? Do you look to see the miracles in your midst?

Let me give you just one example of a miracle in our midst for those with eyes to see: today is the one-year anniversary of beginning the Adoracion service; our Spanish language service. Many of the people who are attending and worshiping are new to this community and new to this campus. Yet they are the result of the prayers, anticipation, and hard work of following God faithfully. God has raised up leaders, raised up interest, raised up resources, and raised up the opportunity to see something new that brings God glory.

Back to our Scripture text: the culmination of the encounter with the delegation is John's statement, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This is a statement of judgment. It is a condemnation of their hypocrisy; the delegation was asking about the Messiah in order to condemn him, not realizing that the Messiah was right there in their midst.

Boy, could this be the church today! Correct doctrine is important, but only insofar as it edifies our love for God and our love for each other. The point is to know Jesus and to be known by him. If we have all the right answers and yet do not recognize Jesus, we have missed the whole point.

The delegation was asking John the Baptist about his message in order to assess his theology, orthodoxy, and the political ramifications of his prophetic ministry. They used the language of the coming Messiah, the coming judgment, and the coming redemption of God's people. But because they did not recognize God – they did not recognize Jesus – they were mistaken about all of the rest. And thus, the delegation is dismissed without realizing what had been revealed.

Over the next two days, John the Baptist re-shaped and revealed more about what God was going to do. He did so by declaring that Jesus was the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” This was a title that had a heritage and meaning for the Baptizer's audience. For us, we will see that Jesus would fulfill those prophecies in ways very different than what the religious leaders expected.

“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

Both days, John declared that Jesus is the Lamb of God. For many of us, this is a term that we grew up hearing in reference to Jesus. It describes his identity as the sacrifice on our behalf (the Passover lamb), his peaceful character, his friendly demeanor.

Yes and no.

We have that impression because we are looking back.

For John the Baptist, this term was a specific reference to an agent of God's judgment. In the Apocalyptic literature of the day – the non-Biblical “Revelation” that had developed between the time of the last prophet and the birth of Jesus – the Lamb of God was a conquering figure who would destroy evil in the world. In the other gospels, we get a bit more of a flavor of this when John talks about “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” (Matthew 3).

The Baptist was saying, “Look and see;” previewing the mission that Jesus would take. Yet the way Jesus undertook that mission looked very different than how we would have anticipated. Jesus did accomplish that judgment. His obedience to God's will, his completion of God's mission for him, his atoning death on the cross – these happened through events that seemed to display Jesus' weakness, but it was in fact the power of God on display.

This apocalyptic imagery of the Lamb of judgment is similar to how many of us think about the book of Revelation. That book is filled with wild imagery and scary judgments. However, look at how the scary judgments revealed by the Baptist found their manifestation – grace and salvation. The judgmental Lamb is consistent with the Old Testament sacrifices of the lamb – even though

it seems like the opposite. In Exodus 29, lambs were offered as an invitation to communion with God. In Leviticus 4:32, a lamb was offering as a sin offering. Jeremiah described how his life was threatened by those who opposed God and the message that God had commanded him to convey, “But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter.” All of these are aspects of God’s judgment; judgment which is *good* news. Judgment is restorative. It purifies. It washes us clean in a way we are unable to do so for ourselves. Truly, the Lamb of God does take away the sins of the world.

Here’s what I want you to see in this: before Jesus has spoken in the gospel, God has revealed his identity and mission. God is consistent in acting for our redemption and salvation *through* judgment; and that is grace. It is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

“And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Briefly on the Baptist’s identification of Jesus as “the Son of God” or “the Chosen One”: most of you have a footnote indicating that some manuscripts say, “the Chosen One.” John the gospel writer does not describe the event in which Jesus was baptized, instead, the Baptist declares what he saw. The Spirit descending and remaining on Jesus was the marker, the identifying sign, of the one for whom the Baptizer was preparing the way.

The imagery was a reference to the Isaiah 11 passages we read during Advent, “

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots, the spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD, His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

What follows is a description of how this Chosen One will rule and judge the nations.

Conclusion

The account of John the Baptist is every bit as convicting today as it was when it happened. We are confronted with our own expectations and hopes – do we really trust God to be God? Do we

really trust Jesus to be the Lamb of God? Do we believe the witnesses who bear testimony in Scripture?

The truth is that Jesus is the One who takes away the sins of the world. The truth is that God is trustworthy and he does the things he promises. The truth is that Jesus is our hope, our life, our redemption and salvation.

“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” It was the Baptizer’s message, it was the gospel writer’s witness, and it is our testimony today.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:45 prayer and offering

(Much of the background material for this sermon was drawn from the Anchor Bible Commentary on the Gospel According to John).