

The Lamb of God

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 13, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Exodus 12:5-8 (NRSV)

⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

Isaiah 53:7 (NRSV)

⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

John 1:29 (NRSV)

²⁹The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared,
“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Today, we conclude the nine-week sermon series on the symbols in the Rose Window. Our ninth symbol is the lamb, signifying Jesus as the victorious Lamb of God.

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep” (Ezekiel 34:15)

Sheep have been domesticated for more than 8000 years and need humans more than any other farm animal. Indeed, they are hyper-domesticated. Even more so than other animals, sheep need human care for food, water, and defense from predators. There are no known instances of domesticated sheep surviving in the wild. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that one of the dominant biblical portraits of God is the Good Shepherd. The most famous reference to this portrait is the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Here, the psalmist even speaks as a sheep. Sheep will not drink from streams, only from pools; therefore, “he leads me beside still waters.” Sheep will not lower their heads into buckets or troughs; thus the shepherd ensures that, “my cup overflows.” Sheep are an ideal surrogate for human weakness and the helplessness of innocents – in dire need of a loving shepherd.¹

This recurrent theme of a good shepherd and his flock make all the more poignant God's command to the Israelites that they are to spread the blood of a slaughtered lamb on their doorways so that the death coming for the first-born of Israel would pass over the households of God's people (see Exodus 12, from which one of today's passages is taken). The notion of animal sacrifice isn't new to the Israelites; God's covenant with them provided for the slaughtering of lambs on several occasions each year. For us, few parts of the OT seem more foreign than this business of sacrifice.



The Lamb of God

This triumphal depiction of the Lamb of God, *Agnus Dei*, is the most complex of the symbols in the Rose Window. The lamb, which had long been used in sacrificial rites by the Jews, came to represent Jesus Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross.

The standing lamb, holding the banner, with the golden circle around its head represents Christ's sacrifice and his victory over death. Perhaps the New Testament passage that best captures this depiction of the Lamb of God is from Revelation 5:

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Indeed, this praise of God's worthy Lamb is the closing chorus in Handel's *Messiah!*

¹ from John Miles' entry, “Lamb,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992.

Each winter, I teach *Introducing the Old Testament* in the Bible Academy. I've found that few topics are more perplexing and disturbing than the biblical perspective on sacrifice. Sure, we can handle talking about sacrifice in the sense of giving something up but all the stuff about blood and animals and death can be very upsetting to many Christians. We want to relegate it to an ancient time and culture that has little to do with us. Yet, unless we confront blood sacrifice, much of the Bible simply won't make sense! You see, it isn't an overstatement to say that the New Testament is an extended reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in light of the Jewish scriptures. Why did he die? More to the point, why didn't he save himself? Who was he – really? Was anything accomplished by his horrifying and humiliating death on a Roman cross? What do we really make of this Lamb of God? What does Jesus' death, symbolized by the cross, mean for us?

From the beginning, Jesus' followers used and expanded upon the Jewish imagery of blood sacrifice. God's covenant with the Jews provided several rituals in which the sacrifice of an animal was used to deal with sins in such a way that the people could be restored to right relationship with God and their consciences healed. With Jesus though, all this becomes something new. At the

Old Testament Sacrifice

N.T. Wright suggests that there are two keys that can lead us to a better understanding of sacrifice in the Old Testament.

First, when we bring a symbol of God's creation to God, we are acknowledging that this is God's world, not ours. There is no more potent symbol of God's creation than life. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the practice of animal sacrifice has been common to human culture.

Second, the practice of sacrifice is rooted in the deep human awareness that things are not right – that we do the things we shouldn't and fail to do what we should. Sacrifice is a way of putting things right and healing the human conscience.

But, of course, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Rather, "it is by God's will that we have been sanctified [made holy] through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10).

Truly, the Lamb of God takes away the sins of the world!
Hallelujah

beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Jesus' last week is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the shedding of Jesus' body and blood. Like the silent lamb of Isaiah 53:7, Jesus won't even defend himself (John 19:9). The legs of the Passover lamb were to be unbroken (Exodus 12:46); Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).² For the writer of Hebrews, Jesus death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the OT sacrifices pointed.

The meaning of sacrifice

The first Christians understood that Jesus' character extended downward to encompass the sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament and upward to encompass God himself, giving us this paradox of a lamb who is God and the mystery of God's victory over sin and death being won on a cross – a victory symbolized for us in the center of our Rose Window.

Jesus' followers understood that Jesus' sacrifice, the death of this innocent, was to set the pattern for their own lives. Paul would write about sharing in Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10), being given up to death for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:11), and bearing one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). Richard Hays writes, "Jesus' death is consistently interpreted in the New Testament as an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines."³ The point is this: our discipleship, our very imitation of Christ, necessarily entails self-giving sacrifice. As God has done for us, in Christ's sacrifice, so we are called to do for others. As God loves us, so we should love others – even when there is a price!

² Roman execution squads would often, mercifully, break the legs of those being crucified in order to hasten their death. The broken legs would prevent the person from being able to push themselves up on the cross to keep breathing. Typically, suffocation was the cause of death on a cross.

³from Richard Hays' book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, HarperCollins, 1996. Hays contends that there are three principal images through which the NT ought to be read: community, cross, and creation.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Exodus 11:1-12:28 The final plague and the Passover lamb.</p>	<p>Day 2 Isaiah 1:11-17; Micah 6:6-8 What does God really want? Our sacrifices or our hearts?</p>
<p>Day 3 Ezekiel 34 God and the shepherds of Israel.</p>	<p>Day 4 John 10 Jesus teaches that he is the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep.</p>
<p>Day 5 Hebrews 10 The old sacrifice is contrasted with the new, the perfect, sacrifice of Jesus Christ.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

