

*John 1:29–45 (Common English Bible)*

<sup>29</sup> The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! <sup>30</sup> This is the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is really greater than me because he existed before me.’ <sup>31</sup> Even I didn’t recognize him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be made known to Israel.” <sup>32</sup> John testified, “I saw the Spirit coming down from heaven like a dove, and it rested on him. <sup>33</sup> Even I didn’t recognize him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘The one on whom you see the Spirit coming down and resting is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>34</sup> I have seen and testified that this one is God’s Son.”

<sup>35</sup> The next day John [the Baptizer] was standing again with two of his disciples. <sup>36</sup> When he saw Jesus walking along he said, “Look! The Lamb of God!” <sup>37</sup> The two disciples heard what he said, and they followed Jesus.

<sup>38</sup> When Jesus turned and saw them following, he asked, “What are you looking for?”

They said, “Rabbi (which is translated Teacher), where are you staying?”

<sup>39</sup> He replied, “Come and see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon.

<sup>40</sup> One of the two disciples who heard what John said and followed Jesus was Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. <sup>41</sup> He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which is translated Christ). <sup>42</sup> He led him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

<sup>43</sup> The next day Jesus wanted to go into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.” <sup>44</sup> Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

<sup>45</sup> Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.”

*John 15:1–8 (CEB)*

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. <sup>2</sup> He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything. <sup>6</sup> If you don’t remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

*If you were going to introduce Christianity to someone who knew absolutely nothing about it, where would you start?*

Every month, our church offers a program called *Starting Point*. It is a three-week course that meets the first three Sundays of every month. It is exactly what the name implies, the starting point for getting connected into deeper fellowship and growth here at St. Andrew. For the next three weeks, we are going to be following the themes of the *Starting Point* curricula. And where must we start? With Jesus, of course.

*The starting point*

It was about 27AD, and John had gone out to the Jordan River, preaching the coming of God’s kingdom and urging his fellow Jews to come out to the river to be washed in the river’s water, symbolizing their repentance of sin and their cleansing of its stain. Since the time of Joshua, more than a millennium before, the Jordan had been a potent symbol of Israel’s freedom and the people’s allegiance to the LORD God.

Not surprisingly, John attracted a lot of attention. So much so that the High Priest sent some representatives out to see John. The Baptizer willingly told them that he was

neither the Messiah nor Elijah. Rather, he was the one spoken of in the scroll of Isaiah, the one who would prepare the way for the coming of the LORD (see Isaiah 40:1-11). John told his questioners that he was not even worthy to tie the sandals of the one who was coming. The questioners left and the next day, John saw Jesus of Nazareth coming to him. John stopped what he was doing, pointed at Jesus and said for all to hear:

“Behold! The Lamb of God,<sup>1</sup> who takes away the sin<sup>2</sup> of the world.”

How did John know that Jesus, a relative of John’s, was the “Lamb of God”? Apparently, John had baptized Jesus in the Jordan River some time earlier; for John went on to tell the crowd what he saw when he had baptized Jesus. John told them that this man, Jesus, was the reason John had called people out to the river. John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the Jordan river and remain on him. Further, God had revealed to John that Jesus was “God’s Chosen One.”

The key element in John the Baptizer’s testimony is that Jesus is the “Lamb of God,” with all its layers of meaning. Making better sense of this has to begin with a look at the place of sheep and lambs in the story of God and his people.

*“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 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Here, the psalmist even speaks as a sheep. Sheep will not drink from

#### 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).

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.<sup>3</sup>

This recurrent theme of a good shepherd and his flock make all the more poignant God’s command to the Israelites that they were 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). The notion of animal sacrifice wasn’t new to the Israelites; God’s covenant with them provided for the slaughtering of lambs on several occasions each year. For us however, few parts of the Old Testament seem more foreign than this business of sacrifice.

#### *The Lamb of God*

Few topics are more perplexing and disturbing to modern-day Christians than the biblical perspective on sacrifice. Sure, we can

<sup>1</sup>The phrase, “Lamb of God” is found only twice in the Bible, here and in 1:36. John certainly intends it to refer to both the sacrificial lamb of the Passover and the lamb led to slaughter in Isaiah 53.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that “sin” here is singular not plural. “Sin” here is not just the individual transgressions nor even their sum, but the beast that imprisons us and holds us in bondage (see Genesis 4).

<sup>3</sup> from John Miles’ entry, “Lamb,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Doubleday, 1992.

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. 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.

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 beginning of John's Gospel, upon seeing Jesus, John the Baptist exclaims "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Then a few years later, Jesus' last week before his death is Passover week. At the Last Supper, sharing the bread and cup set the stage for the breaking of Jesus' body and the shedding of his 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 left unbroken (Exodus 12:46); hence, Jesus' legs are not broken by the soldiers (John 19:36).<sup>4</sup> As the writer of Hebrews puts it, Jesus death is the final and perfect sacrifice to which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed.

In this single sentence uttered by John the baptizer, we come to the heart of the Good News. That by Jesus' sacrifice, his faithfulness all the way to death, even death on a cross (see Philippians 2), we have been made right with God. Thus it is that every Christian begins and ends with Jesus. But this claim, this truth must be proclaimed to the whole world. And by the river that very day, Jesus launches the proclamation project.

### *Come and see*

Earlier in John's gospel (John, the gospel writer, not the baptizer) we learned that Jesus is the Word-in-the-flesh, the creator and source of life (John 1:1-5). We've heard John the Baptizer proclaim Jesus to be "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." But now, we begin to meet some people with whom we can really identify. Ordinary people, like you and me. Here is N. T. Wright on the early encounters with Jesus:

Now here, it seems, are ordinary characters, people on a quest, looking for something. The chances are that you're reading this book because that's been true of you, and perhaps still is. Someone has suggested, as John the Baptist suggested to Andrew and another disciple, that you give Jesus a closer look. So here you are.

You approach, polite but a bit cautious. John translates the conversation into your language so you can make it your own. 'Rabbi' means 'teacher'. 'Messiah' means 'anointed one' (the word 'Messiah' is Hebrew or Aramaic, the word 'Christ' is Greek, meaning the same thing). 'Cephas' was the Aramaic word for 'rock' or 'stone', which in Greek is 'Petros', as in our name 'Peter'.

There are four things going on in this quick-fire conversation. Andrew and Simon (and the other, unnamed friend) are looking for the Messiah, and they think they've found him. Jesus is looking for followers and, when he finds them, gives them a new vocation (Simon becomes 'the Rock', an important but dangerous name). John's readers, out there in the Gentile world, would sense Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

calling and renaming them too. And we, reading this book in the hope of finding out more about Jesus, may discover that he is simultaneously coming to find us. And perhaps to give us new names.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is gathering disciples.<sup>6</sup> “Come and see” he says. Andrew and the other disciple (probably John the gospel writer) may think they are looking for Jesus, but, in truth, it is Jesus who finds them. At this point the pair know only what they have learned from John the Baptizer. But they are drawn by this man from Galilee and they go to spend the rest of the day with him.

What’s the first thing Andrew does? He runs to get his brother, Simon, excitedly telling him that they have found the Messiah. It is “go and get” so Simon can “come and see” for himself. So it is still. We must “go and get” so others can “come and see.”

But once we’ve come and seen, what’s next. Where do we go from that first encounter. It is probably best to begin by acknowledging that “seeing” is only a beginning. Jesus calls us to change our hearts and lives, to be reborn in him, to undertake a new path – but still fully and completely embedded in Jesus. Later in John’s gospel, Jesus uses the imagery of a grapevine to illustrate the nature of our life in him.

### *The vineyard*

Our second passage from John’s Gospel is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse (John 14-16) with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. Jesus’ hour has finally arrived and he tries to help his disciples understand what is about to happen. Here, Jesus draws upon the much-used metaphor of the vineyard.

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn’t be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-2, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan. There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard turned bad (Isaiah 5:5-7) and God will come to judge and destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there are images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

In his last meal and talk with his disciples, Jesus reshapes the vineyard imagery around himself. He is the true vine.<sup>7</sup> He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, exists in enduring relationship with the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine’s branches.

Step back from the words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch. It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, T. (2004). *John for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-10* (14–15).

<sup>6</sup> “Disciple” can be an intimidating word for some. But all it really conveys is the idea of an apprenticeship. Disciples of Jesus are those who are actively striving to be like Jesus, to be more Christlike. Can a person be a believer but not a disciple? I guess so, at least for a while. Can a person grow in his or her faith without being a disciple? I think not. What does God want from us? To be disciples and to make more disciples. It is God’s job to save souls. Our work is to cultivate more and more apprentices of the Master.

<sup>7</sup> When Jesus says, “I am the true vine,” it is one of seven “I am” statements in John’s Gospel. “I am” is a way to translate the name of God (YHWH) revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Thus, each of the “I am” statements in John are taken to be a claim to Jesus’ divinity. For example, earlier during his farewell discourse, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). For any Jew, it would be God who is the way, the truth, and the life. There are seven “I am” statements because seven is the number of wholeness and completion; God created the cosmos in seven days. Like the other gospels, John’s is carefully constructed. He uses many means to convey his main theme – that Jesus is God. “In the beginning the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1).

vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit. Thus, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide/remain in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life.

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship. This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*. A way to see it is that *being* is the true starting point!

### *Producing fruit*

Jesus' disciples are to bear fruit, but they can do so only by remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us. Without that, there is no point in going past the starting point.

But what is this fruit that Jesus has in mind? Gail O'Day writes, "When John 15:2 is read in the light of 14:1-31, 'bearing fruit' emerges as another way to speak about the works of love that are required of Jesus followers (14:12, 15, 21, 23). The unproductive branches of which v. 2 speaks are those people within the Christian faith community who do not bear fruit in love."<sup>9</sup>

Further, O'Day writes, "The intermingling of the branches in the vine and the gardener's attentive care to the fruitfulness of the branches create the quintessential visual image of the life of the Christian community that is shaped by love and grounded in God's presence." It is this life to which we are called as a community of disciples. Jesus' metaphor of the vine teaches us yet again that there can be no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his church. . . . Let's start here.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Jesus' disciples are ordinary men, Galilean Jews of no particular note. Yet they all find themselves drawn to this man from Nazareth. One, Nathaniel, proclaims "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel." Likewise, Andrew has told his brother, Simon Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah.
  - a. Andrew and John, presumably, are the first two disciples. They hear John the baptizer's own testimony about Jesus' identity. But what is it about Jesus that draws them to him and makes them stay? Why do you think Andrew is so willing to accept Jesus as Israel's Messiah?
  - b. Why are these men ready to drop everything and follow Jesus? Are we?
2. In your own words, explain what you think it means to abide in Christ? What do you think I mean by the "being of discipleship?" How is this different from the doing of discipleship? How does our abiding in Christ and him in us lead to the production of abundant fruit? For many people, John is the most challenging of the Gospels. Often, we have an idea what Jesus means but it still seems elusive or ambiguous, like this business of abiding. It is a bit like Jesus is drawing us into a world that we are scarcely equipped to grasp. Perhaps it takes a little more imagination and a little less analysis, knowing that in the effort, we can be transformed.

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<sup>8</sup> John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking.

<sup>9</sup> from O'Day's commentary on John in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. A copy of this 12-volume commentary is in the St. Andrew library.

## 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.

<b>Monday, Exodus 11:1-12:28</b> The final plague and the Passover lamb.	<b>Tuesday, Isaiah 42:5-6 &amp; 49:6</b> Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.
<b>Wednesday, Ezekiel 34</b> God and the shepherds of Israel.	<b>Thursday, Matthew 5:13-16</b> Jesus is the true light that banishes the darkness. We are to be the light of the world, shining the light of Christ into every dark corner.
<b>Friday, Ephesians 5:6-20</b> We are children of the light and we are to live accordingly.	<b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b>

### Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

#### Monday Evening Class

**We are studying Paul's letter, 1 Corinthians**

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

#### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

**We are studying the book of Judges**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

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### Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

### Sermon Notes

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