

“Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

A Homily delivered by Len Friesen at WNMC (Matins Service)

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A homily on John 1:29 from today’s Gospel reading (John 1: 29-34).

Today’s gospel reading begins with a verse that is at the heart of the Christian faith. It proclaims news that is both glorious and the greatest of consolations. By itself, this single verse makes plain why we have nothing better to call ourselves than to call ourselves Christians - for that single word contains a confessional declaration both of who we are and who God is. The verse is this one, from John 1, 29: *“The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”*

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Indeed, if anything puzzles me about this verse, it is that I spent a chunk of my life rather embarrassed by its simple proclamation. That includes much of my time on Ministry Team at Waterloo North, and I say this with contrition. There were two things that I didn’t really like about John 1, 29: the first half of the verse - and the second half; though I was most embarrassed by the second. Both halves, I should say, were foundational in the church and faith of my youth. I could ponder what it was that prompted me to move so starkly away from that faith. I do know that there were years in which I gave entire sermons without a single reference to our sinfulness; and I only confess that this morning because I expect I’m not alone in my past aversion to that bit about sin. I was in very good company wasn’t I? The problem, looking back, is that my refusal to acknowledge who I truly was also stopped me from being open to who God was, and who He wanted to be in my life.

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But rather than dwell on what I long avoided, I want to highlight two great gains that I have realized as I, by the Grace of God, have returned to the faith of my childhood, which happens also to be the faith of the larger church over two plus millennia. I now, again, embrace this verse, and I prepared today’s homily with

Handel's stunning iteration of it ringing in my ears. For starters, John 1: 29 contains in simplest form the truth about who I personally am and who we collectively are. My life, our lives, are marred by sin. Now according to Susan Martin, the very first person I ever dated, sin is nothing more or less than that which separates us from God. It doesn't have to be something so big we can be impeached for it. Nor is sin something which God has created. We created sin, and willfully so.

As Genesis makes plain, God created us with minds of our own, and the ability to choose death over life. As bizarre as it sounds, that's exactly what we did. We still do. I don't have to go back decades to see where I have fallen short of the glory of God. Just the last 24 hours will do nicely for examples of where I chose thoughts and words and actions which have not drawn me an iota closer to the One who knit me together in my mother's womb. Nor are these merely individual matters, because I don't think that any church will have anything useful to say about global warming unless it first acknowledges that global warming is a willful sin against the One who created us.

So, ironically, the truly good news of John 1: 29 is this: we are sinners, It is what we have repeatedly chosen to be, and do, and in January of 2020 we find ourselves trapped in cycles of sin that make death their ultimate endpoint, including the threatened death of our planet. As Bruce Cockburn once put it: *"It could have been me put the thorns in your crown." Rooted as I was in a violent ground. How many times have I turned your promise down?"*

But why do I call this good news? I do so because of what I have reclaimed after decades of theological chasing after false gods. I now happily accept that the confession of my sinfulness carries with it the confession that I cannot save myself... that I, that we, need a Savior. I sometimes think that I should go back and read those sermons from Ministry Team days to see what I actually said about Jesus in my "See-no-sin" phase. He was there, but I expect it was more Jesus the Boy Scout, not Jesus my Savior. After all why would anyone, most of all me, need a Savior? I now think that I mainly made Jesus into my image as a good Mennonite; and that I picked out just those verses that made it possible. It helped that I avoided anything written by the Apostle Paul. So under my watch Jesus became the poster-child of every good cause which I first determined and then applied to him.

That has now changed, thanks be to God. I now happily accept that we cannot save ourselves much less our planet through good four part singing, potlucks, and recycling. Here's where that delusion-shattering awareness so often leaves me. It leaves me in the wilderness desperate for a way out, something worth dying for. In front of me is this half-crazed person dressed in camel hair and wearing a leather belt. He's eating locusts and wild honey. Then one day he looks up. He sees someone coming. He points to Him and declares:

"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

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In a few moments we will hear words something like, "*For this is my body, broken for you*" and "*For this is my Blood, poured out for you.*" Communion will follow. Even if it is for Mennonites only a symbolic body and blood, even so, in coming forward for blessing or bread we acknowledge that we are sinners who can't possibly save ourselves, let alone our planet.

But that's only half of what draws us forward, for in the confession of our sinfulness lies the Way, the Truth and the Life. For our God is not simply some abstract non-entity without even a pronoun to His name. In Christ – to borrow from the magisterial opening of 1 Corinthians – In Christ our God and Father has revealed himself to us in flesh and blood. Like a lamb led to slaughter, Christ again today, and eternally, offers us a Salvation that is His alone to give.

For "*behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

Alleluia, amen.