

Title: *Taking Our Sin*

Text: John 1:29-34

I've always found it interesting that in a moment when John the Baptist expressed some doubts, Jesus said, "Of all the men born of women, there are none greater than John the Baptist." He then went on to say that the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist.

The Gospel of John is laid out and arranged differently than the other 3 synoptic gospels.

Luke gives us the full story of his mother's pregnancy and his miraculous birth. Luke tells us, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

John is written in a different style and his purpose in writing is stated in 20:31 where he says, "³⁰Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

As a part of telling that story and putting Jesus' life into context with John the Baptizer's, John says, "⁶ There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹ The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

This John was a larger-than-life figure and created quite a stir. Events in John 1 happen over several days. People were noticing John and going out into the wilderness to be baptized by him and he was certainly unlike any other so-called religious figure any of them had ever seen before.

The priests and Levites in Jerusalem thought to themselves, "We've got to learn more about this guy." They came and they peppered him with questions, "Are you the Christ? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet? Give us an answer to take back to the people who sent us to interrogate – er, interview you!

It sounds like the question that Jesus asked Peter at Caesarea Philippi about "Who do people say I am?"

Maybe one of the reasons that John was so great was that he had his head screwed on absolutely straight when it came to understanding who he was and who he wasn't and what was his role and what wasn't his role. He understood that he was a forerunner. There are some folks who would take that role and try to parlay it into something else. They might be tempted to take the forerunner to the Messiah role and parlay that into "Chief Executive Vice-President of the Messianic Operation," or some other such title.

I heard about a man who was a quite well-known pastor a few years back and was discredited in scandal. He did say one thing though that I really like. He was in a situation where he was on the church staff and the senior pastor resigned. One of the older leaders came up to him and said, “If you play your cards right, you might wind up becoming the pastor of this church.”

The man said to him, “When I became a Christian, I quit playing cards.” The point there is not that Christians shouldn’t play cards – my grandmother was adamant on that point – but that we don’t try to manipulate things in our favor. We trust God to open and close doors and put us where he wants us.

Have you ever seen a team that is an assemblage of superstars and people think on paper that team will be great? The Miami Heat come to mind. They’re very good, but they haven’t yet moved into the stratosphere of all-time great teams that people thought they would when LeBron James signed with them last summer. Great teams are teams where everyone has a role and fulfills their role with excellence.

Most people haven’t heard of the pro football running back named Tony Richardson. That’s because his primary role involves helping other running backs succeed: he blocks so they can run. Over the span of seventeen pro football seasons, teams have often paired Richardson with some of the best backs in pro football. In 2001 he was slated to be the main running back, but instead he went to his teammate Priest Holmes and told him, “It’s time for me to step out of the way. You need to be getting the ball. And I’m going to do everything I can to help you.” Holmes went on to lead the league in rushing, but Richardson never grew envious or resentful. As Holmes would report, “He used to call me up and say, “I just saw you on SportsCenter! He was happier for me than I was for myself.”

All of the running backs that Richardson helped succeed contend that his influence went beyond blocking for them. He would constantly talk to them through the game, advising, pushing, encouraging, and inspiring them. In a recent interview, Tony Richardson said, “I can’t explain it, but it just means more to me to help someone else achieve glory. There’s something about it that feels right to me.”

John said, in the words of Isaiah the prophet, “I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’ I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know.²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” This all happened on day one.

The next day, John was out there doing what John did, preaching and baptizing with two of his disciples. In some way that John knew, he was able to perceive that when Jesus walked by, he knew this was the man he had been waiting for. We presume that they may have had some familiarity with each other. They were cousins. Mary had spent most of her pregnancy with John’s mother Elizabeth. John knew that this was God the Son, the anointed one and he’s just waiting for the fullness of God’s time to emerge. That right opportune moment when he will

need to begin to reveal God's messiah to Israel.

John says, "I'm the one who prepares the way. I'm the one who opens holes for the Messiah to run through." He says this is the lamb of God! I found it interesting that in the Bible, John the Baptizer is the only one who uses that phrase "Lamb of God". It doesn't fit with the image that even John had of what a Messiah would do.

When John was having a time of doubt after being thrown in prison, I believe it was because he was waiting for judgement to come and for the axe to fall on the ungodly, the wicked and the disobedient. He warned the Pharisees, "You brood of vipers. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" He said, "The axe is already at the root of the tree and any tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

John saw the Messiah as the conquering judge. He would come and set things straight. I believe at that moment, he knew deep down in his heart of hearts who Jesus was and what he had come to do – as much as any other human being could at that point, but he was alone and confused and discouraged. Whatever a conquering judge would look like, it wouldn't look like a lamb.

But on the first time John saw Jesus, he said, "This is the lamb of God!" The whole idea of a lamb is foreshadowed in the Old Testament. We're familiar with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham had confidence that God himself would provide the lamb for the burnt offering.

We looked at the Passover a few weeks back and it was the blood of a lamb that was applied to the doorposts of the home so that death would pass over that household. Let me drop a footnote here. I hope that all of you will plan on attending the Jews for Jesus *Christ in the Passover* presentation on Maundy Thursday, April 21 at 6:30. It will be a fascinating presentation that will teach you things you never knew before and will enrich your understanding of what Jesus Christ has done for you. If you could sign up on the sheet out in the fellowship hall so our kitchen committee and special services team know how much to prepare, that would be very helpful.

There certainly is much in the Old Testament to foreshadow the idea of the Messiah coming as a lamb. The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament is built around animal sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people.

Leviticus spells out what a lamb was to be used for:

³² " If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he is to bring a female without defect. ³³ He is to lay his hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. ³⁴ Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. ³⁵ He shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the lamb of the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar on top of the offerings made to the LORD by fire. In this way the priest will make atonement for him for the sin he has committed, and he will be forgiven.

Last week we looked at Isaiah 53 which said, “⁷He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” Isaiah speaks profoundly about Jesus Christ in the Old Testament passage that is most often quoted in the New.

If you think about it, it is pretty profound that John, perhaps even without knowing all that it meant, recognized that in Jesus, the Lamb of God was passing right in front of his very eyes. What did it all mean?

First it means that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the promises of all of the ages. Paul recognized this when he said, “²⁰For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.”

John is quoting another verse from Isaiah in saying prepare the way for the LORD, Isaiah 40:1-3: “³A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” When you read your Bible and you see the word Lord in all small caps like that, it is indicating that that word is a translation of the word Yahweh – that unutterable, unpronounceable name of God that even today, devout Jewish people will not utter. John is saying, I’m preparing the way of the LORD, and quoting that verse recognizing that he is preparing the way for the one who uniquely the Son of God, the only one. The One who will lay down his life for the sins of the world.

I’ve already mentioned that John had his head screwed on absolutely straight when it came to understanding his role and his mission. That’s why it wasn’t hard for him to say that Jesus is superior to him. He could easily have developed a messianic complex.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote a book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. He described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was unique among humankind; he had been called to save the world; he was the messiah. They displayed full-blown cases of grandiosity, in its pure form.

Rokeach found it difficult to break through, to help the patients accept the truth about their identity. So he decided to put the three into a little community to see if rubbing against people who also claimed to be the messiah might dent their delusion—a kind of messianic, 12-step recovery group.

This led to some interesting conversations. One would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth."

"How do you know?" Rokeach would ask.

"God told me."

One of the other patients would counter, "I never told you any such thing."

Every once in a while, one got a glimmer of reality—never deep or for long, so deeply ingrained was the messiah complex. But what progress Rokeach made was pretty much made by putting them together.

It's a crazy idea, taking a group of deluded, would-be messiahs and putting them into a community to see if they could be cured. But it has been done before. "A reasoning arose among them as to who should be the greatest," Luke tells us about Jesus' followers. We like to argue over who's the greatest don't we?

John says, "Jesus has surpassed me because he was before me." He has always existed and he entered human history

If you go over to Scotland, or anywhere there are lots of sheep, sooner or later you're going to see a very unusual sight. You'll see a little lamb running around the field, and you'll notice this lamb has what looks like an extra fleece tied around its back. In fact, you'll see there are little holes in the fleece for its four legs and usually a hole for its head. If you see a little lamb running around like that, that usually means its mother has died.

And without the protection and nourishment of a mother, any orphaned lamb will die. If you take the orphaned lamb and try to introduce it to another mother, the new mother will butt it away. She won't recognize the lamb's scent and will know the new baby is not one of her own lambs.

But thankfully, most flocks are large enough that there is a ewe that has recently lost a lamb. The shepherd will skin the dead lamb and make its fleece into a covering for the orphaned lamb, then he'll take the orphaned lamb to the mother whose baby just died. Now, when she sniffs the orphaned lamb, she will smell the fleece of her own lamb. Instead of butting the lamb away, she will accept it as one of her own.

In a similar way, we have become acceptable to God by being clothed with Christ.

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