

Text: John 1:19-34¹

Series: *Life in His Name* – The Message of John’s Gospel

Title: Part 2 -- “Behold, the Lamb of God...!”

Date: September 19, 2010

Location: First Baptist Church, Olds, AB

We’re beginning our journey through John’s Gospel with his story of the first witness he brings to Jesus’ side. Don’t think that I’m ignoring the first eighteen verses of the book ... I’ve reserved those glory-filled verses for the Advent & Christmas season.

Remember that last week I told you to watch for the witnesses that John would collect to support his claim that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The first witness he brings to speak on Jesus’ behalf is a man named John whom the other Gospel writers called, “John the Baptist.”

John the Baptist might seem to be a strange choice as John’s first witness to Jesus. In popular thinking, it seems to me, we sometimes have an almost cartoon-like image of the Baptist. We imagine him sunburned and lean, standing on a rocky outcrop, wooden staff in hand, preaching fire and repentance, dressed in a hair shirt with his wild mane swept back in a Charlton Heston-like hair-do.

That actually might not be far from the truth, except of course, that he probably didn’t look anything like Charlton Heston. He did dress in a robe made of camel’s hair (c.f. Matthew 3:4); his diet of locusts and wild honey probably left him pretty lean (c.f. Matthew 3:4) and he did preach fire and repentance to crowds in the wilderness (c.f. Matthew 3:7-12). But he was no cartoon character.

Why does John bring this man forward as his first witness in Jesus’ defence? Because, as Jesus himself said of John the Baptist...

“I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John.” Luke 7:28

John the Baptist was the single most respected spiritual figure of his day. I struggle to find an analogy in our day and the closest I can come is Dr Billy Graham. Dr Graham is a highly respected spiritual leader, but he’s a spiritual leader in an era that marginalizes spiritual leaders. John lived in a day and in a culture when the spiritual leaders of the community were the superstars of their world. The kind of admiration we give to sports figures or rock stars was given to the spiritual leaders in Israel. And John was the greatest!

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission, All rights reserved.

John's ministry was one of preparation for the coming of the Christ. John took his mandate for ministry from the Spirit of God that was upon him and from God's Word, given through the prophet Isaiah, who wrote...

“A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’” Isaiah 40:3-5

John understood himself to be the “voice” ... and that was all! Just “a voice” calling people to get right with God because God was about to do something spectacular! The “glory of the LORD,” the God of Israel, was about to be “revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” God was coming!

His message was very simple, “Get ready!”...

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Matthew 3:2

As preparation for what God was about to do in the sight of all the people, John called people to “straighten out” their lives, to get spiritually clean, to make things right in their lives. He invited them to repent of the sin that was twisting their lives and destroying their ability to live for God. Repentance means more than just to feel sorry about our sin. It means to change. It means to go a new direction in our lives, a direction that is obedient to God's Word and submissive to God's will and purpose for our lives.

As a symbol of their new beginning and their new commitment to follow God, John baptized the people in the River Jordan. The washing of water was intended to be symbolic of the cleansing of their spirit that had occurred when they confessed their sin and symbolic of their break with their past and their new beginning.

And the people came to him in droves! Matthew tells us...

“Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” Matthew 3:5-6

John was such a popular and influential spiritual figure that it caught the attention of the other religious leaders in Israel, too. This man in the wilderness was clearly God's man that religious leaders in Jerusalem sent a delegation to ask him the all important question...

“Who are you?” John 1:19

John knew exactly what they wanted to know. Their question was really three questions. They didn't even have to articulate the first question but their first question was really the most important question:

“Are you the Christ?”

This is the Gospel question which John's Gospel was designed to answer and we'll meet this question again and again, either implicitly as we do here, or explicitly as we do in many other places. The purpose of this book is simple and clear. John told us that he wrote his Gospel...

“so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:31

John the Baptist knew that that was what they really wanted to know. But John was clear...

“I am not the Christ.” John 1:20

“I'm just 'the voice' calling people to God,” he said. “I'm not the Christ,” John said, “I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes!” (v.27)

They actually thought he might be the One! That is an indication of the godliness of this man; learned people who knew the Word of God, priests and Levites from Jerusalem, thought he might be the Christ! That is a staggering question, but that's the kind of man that John was. There was such a presence of God in John's ministry that people really wondered, “Are you the Christ?”

Jesus even referred to the glow of God in John's ministry. Later, when the shine had come off of John in the eyes of the priests and Levites, Jesus said of John, to priest and Levites...

“He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” John 5:35

There was a glow of God in John's life. Would that people would make that same mistake about me! And you! By God's Spirit may it be so.

Secondly, they asked...

“Are you Elijah?” John 1:20

Elijah had been the greatest prophet in ancient Israel. He set the model for the life and ministry of what it meant to be a man of God. And it was prophesied by another Old Testament prophet, the prophet Malachi, that Elijah would return

when the Christ came. God, speaking through the pen of the prophet Malachi, had said...

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.” Malachi 4:5-6

John had been turning hearts back to God. Could he be Elijah? Was John Elijah? John said...

“I am not.” John 1:21

With all due respect, John, I disagree. You were Elijah, and I have no more authoritative source than Jesus himself on this one. Jesus said of John...

“if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come.” Matthew 11:14

What we have in John is a man who didn't concern himself with status or titles; he simply did what God told him to do. He was just “the voice of one crying in the wilderness... get right with God!” But he did it, as the angel who had announced his birth declared,...

“in the spirit and power of Elijah” Luke 1:17

The angel didn't mean that John was “channelling Elijah.” He meant that the same spirit that had empowered Elijah, the Spirit of the Living God, also empowered the ministry of John the Baptist.

But John didn't even claim a name for himself; he was just “the voice” calling people back to God. That was good enough for him. He would let others attach the name of Elijah to his ministry, but for John, it was enough that he was doing what God had told him to do.

Well, thirdly, the priests and Levites asked, if you're not Elijah...

“Are you the prophet?” John 1:21

Elijah was the greatest prophet of the Jewish faith but the greatest communicator of God's Word had been Moses. And Moses had prophesied...

“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—“ Deuteronomy 18:15

And of that prophet like Moses, the Lord had said...

“And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.” Deuteronomy 18:18-19

The priests and Levites wanted to know: “Are you the prophet?” Now, John was “a prophet,” (cf. Matthew 11:11-14), but he knew he was not “the prophet.”

“And he answered, ‘No.’” John 1:21

He was just “the voice” preparing the way for “the prophet” whose word would be the very Word of God himself. (cf. Acts 3:22).

“No, John said, “I’m not Elijah ... I’m just the voice calling people to God.”

“No,” John, said, “I’m not the prophet ... but the One who carries God’s Word is very close.”

“No,” John said, “I’m not the Christ, but he’s here ... he’s standing among you and you don’t even know his name.”

But the very next day, the very first moment that John locked eyes on Jesus, he knew that he was the One, the Christ, the Son of God.

This godly, humble man whose life was so full of the Spirit of God that people thought he might be the One, the Christ, the Messiah, is John’s first witness to Jesus.

Let me just stop here for a moment. I think there’s a key aspect of spiritual greatness on display here for us to see. Godly people don’t proclaim their own godliness; they just live for Jesus. Godly people don’t care about titles and praise; they only care that God is glorified. That’s why I thought about Billy Graham when I thought of a modern analogy to John the Baptist. Dr Graham was interviewed by Larry King on CNN a few years ago and King asked him...

KING: Without being maudlin, how do you want to be remembered? What do you want people to say about Billy Graham?

GRAHAM: That he was faithful to the gospel, and also I have a terrific staff of people that help me in organizing these ... crusades, and helping me with all of my work. ...

KING: Don't you feel your own importance in the world?

GRAHAM: No.

KING: You do not?

GRAHAM: No. I think that's the reason the Lord let me get sick quite often.

Because he knocked me down to teach me about my own mortality.

KING: But you know you have changed lives.

GRAHAM: I know the gospel has. I don't think I can change anybody's life.

KING: You think you're just a messenger?

GRAHAM: It's the message.²

Just “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” ... that’s Dr Graham. Calling out, “Get right with God.” That’s been his life and ministry. And what has been Dr Graham’s message over the years? How do people get right with God? It’s the same message that John declared the very first moment he saw Jesus...

“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ John 1:29

The Lamb of God – what a beautiful picture of Jesus! It’s only used of One person by one person in all of the Bible. It’s only used of Jesus and it’s only used by John.

But it’s a phrase that has come to be so powerful in our understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. One Christian writer has even suggested that the message of the entire Bible can be summed up in this one statement. It’s a phrase that even comes with its own soundtrack. Whenever I read this Scripture I hear Handel’s *Messiah* playing in the background.

What was John thinking when he called Jesus, “the Lamb of God”? Remember, last week we talked about the importance of knowing the language of the Old Testament so that we can interpret the signs that John uses to point to Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Well, John the Baptist raises a sign to Jesus here. He calls him “the Lamb of God” and the phrase is saturated with Old Testament meaning. As a prophet, John was probably speaking better than he knew about Jesus, but the Spirit of God that prompted his declaration about Jesus was drawing upon the rich “lamb” theology that the Old Testament contained.

The spiritual world in which John was raised was one in which lambs played an important and central role in the worship of God. John’s mind could have been drawing from a whole catalogue of Old Testament images about lambs.

He could have been thinking about the lamb of Genesis 22.

The lamb that God provided as a substitute

² <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0506/16/kl.01.html>

- Abraham, the founder of the Jewish race, was told secretly by God to take his only son Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah
- Abraham & Isaac journey – as they approach the mountain, Isaac asks:

“Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’” Genesis 22:7-8

- As Abraham was about to plunge the knife into Isaac, God stops him and draws attention to a ram caught nearby by its horns – **God provided a lamb!**

God provided a substitute ... every Old Testament sacrifice has this event running underneath as a subtext. Every sacrifice is a substitute provided by God’s grace.

In the fullest sense, John the Baptist answered Isaac’s question 2000 years later: Isaac asked: “Where is the lamb of the burnt offering?” John answered: “Behold the Lamb of God”

Jesus is a lamb that God has provided for us – we don’t bring our own means of mercy and forgiveness and worship to God – He provides us with all we need in Jesus!

John could have been thinking about the lamb of Exodus 12.

The lamb that provided protection from God’s judgment

- The people of God were in slavery in Egypt when God sent Moses to deliver them from Pharaoh
- On the night Moses was to lead them out, God sent a plague of death against the firstborn of every family, regardless of ethnic identity. To protect his people, God told them to take the blood of a lamb and smear it on the doorposts of their homes.

“And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.” Exodus 12:13

John said, “Behold the Lamb of God....” Paul said...

“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.” 1 Corinthians 5:7

Under the protection of his blood, no judgment of God will come against us! The blood of the Lamb of God is **our complete protection from God’s judgment and wrath against sin.**

John could have been thinking about the lamb of Exodus 29.

The lamb that atones for sin

“Atonement” is the act of reconciling two people who estranged. The word translates a Hebrew term which has the root meaning of “cover.” Because of our sin, we are estranged from God. If we are to be reconciled with God our sin needs to be “covered.” So God, in his grace and mercy, provided mankind with a means through which we could be reconciled to him. Through Moses, God decreed that he would accept the sacrifice of an animal as the “cover” for our sin. The animal would die in place of the guilty sinner and God said that he would accept the substitutes’ death on our behalf.

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.” Leviticus 17:11

- God commanded that a lamb be sacrificed every morning and another every evening as a burnt offering to cover Israel’s ongoing sin problem. (Ex 29:38-42)

“Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs a year old day by day regularly. One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.” Exodus 29:38-39

- Double offerings were made on Sabbath days (Num 28:9-10)
- Extra offerings were also made on Feast days (Num 28-29)

John the Baptist was the son of a priest. He would have been very familiar with the Temple rituals. Day after day, year after year – even in times of war and famine, the sacrifices continued! They never ended because they could never finally solve mankind’s sin problem.

It may be that John was saying: “In the Temple a lamb is offered every night and every morning for the sins of the people; but Jesus is God’s Lamb, the only sacrifice which can finally deliver us from sin.”

John may have been saying what the writer of Book of Hebrews tells us...

“we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Hebrews 10:10

The last and perfect Lamb has been sacrificed! The Lamb provided by God himself has been sacrificed and it is finished! **Sin has been dealt with “once for all.”**

And John could have been thinking about the lamb of Isaiah 53.

The Promised Lamb who would take away the sin of many

John said that Jesus was the Lamb of God who “takes away” the sin of the world. How? How did Jesus “take away” our sin?

Isaiah prophesied about the coming of One who would be a lamb for God’s people. He wrote of him...

“But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” Isaiah 53:5-7

Isaiah tells us that this lamb...

“bore the sin of many” Isaiah 53:12

God “laid on him the iniquity of us all” and he “bore” our sin. **He died in our place.** He took upon himself “the chastisement,” the punishment for sin that rightly belonged to us, and because of his death, we have been “healed,” made whole.

The Apostle Peter saw the same truth in Jesus. He wrote that ...

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” 1 Peter 2:24

Jesus took upon himself, picked up in his own divine hands and carried to the cross our guilt, our punishment, our sin-sickness.

We see in that picture a humbling picture of love and mercy – Jesus takes into his pure hands our dirty lives. He takes the awful thing away – we need never see it again because he carried it off.

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29

John could have been dipping into many different Bible streams for his picture of Jesus:

- The lamb provided by God

- The lamb as a protection from God's wrath
- The lamb as a sacrifice for sin
- The lamb who bears away the sin of many

But John, under the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, adds something to our understanding of the lamb. Isaiah spoke of the lamb taking away the sin of many, but it's John the Baptist who first speaks of the lamb taking away the sin of the **world!**

That's your sin and mine!

That's all of it!

That's all of it, no matter how ugly and gruesome it is!

And he did it because he loves us. In fact, the Lamb of God is the ultimate definition of love. John wrote in his First Letter...

“This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.” 1 John 4:10 (New Living Translation)

Brennan Manning is a Christian author whose writing always challenges my thinking. He tells the story of his friend, Ray Brennan.

While growing up, his best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while sitting in a foxhole, [Manning] was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at [Manning], smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but [Manning's] life was spared.

... Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when [Manning] asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of [Manning's] face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?" [Manning] said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of Jesus wondering, Does God really love me? And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"³

John, the writer of this Gospel, stood there with Mary that day at the foot of the cross. He points us to Jesus and says...

³ Lee Eclov, Vernon Hills, Illinois; source: adapted from James Bryan Smith, [The Good and Beautiful God](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/july/6072610.html) (IVP, 2009), p. 142 | posted 7/26/2010
<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/july/6072610.html>

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29

John the Baptist, who never saw that day at Calvary, but who knew why Jesus had come, says...

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29

He died so that you might live.

What more could he have done for you?

- ❖ **Invitation to Prayer Ministry**
- ❖ **Final Song:** Behold the Lamb
- ❖ **Benediction**