

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Ash Wednesday
March 2, 2022
John 1:29-34

John the Baptist

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." 32 And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 33 I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' 34 And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (John 1:29-34 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Sin. That's what tonight is about. Sin is all around us, this is true. But sin is also in each one of us. Our lives are marked by sin. Dig around in the basement of your life, and what do you find? Wasted years. Obsessive greed. Destructive diversions. Anger. Arrogance. Selfishness. Racial slurs. Hateful and hurtful speech. What can we do with all of our unwanted marks?

We can be defensive. When we're defensive, we don't admit anything. We tell no one. We keep the skeleton safely locked up in the closet. We seek innocence, not forgiveness. When we're defensive, we reduce life to one goal—hide the secret. Cover it up. Don't address it. Don't admit it. And whatever we do, never, ever confess it.

When we see marks of regret, another option is to be defeated. When we're defeated, we feel as though we don't make mistakes—we are a mistake. We didn't foul up—we are a foul-up. We beat ourselves up repeatedly with blame and shame. We take the role of judge, jury, and accusing attorney. The verdict? Guilty—forever!

Defensive people hide marks. Defeated people replay marks. But there is a better way. We can be delivered from all of our ugly marks.

As we begin Lent on this Ash Wednesday, we also begin a sermon series called Witnesses to Christ. And the first person who helps us follow Christ to the cross in John's Gospel is John—John the Baptist. What does John the Baptist say when we're defensive about sin or defeated by sin? "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). When it comes to all of our ugly marks of sin, we can be delivered!

“Behold.” Behold literally means “see.” The verb can be translated “Look! Gaze! Stare! Take note!” Behold means “Here is the whole point of what I’m saying!” John the Baptist says it again in John 1:36: “Behold!”

In both John 1:29 and 1:36, John the Baptist says, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” This isn’t an ordinary Lamb of God. This is the Passover Lamb of God. John uses the word Passover eleven times in his Gospel—eleven times! The entire Gospel is structured to help us behold, see, gaze, and take note of Christ—the Passover Lamb of God.

Exodus 12:5 says that the Passover lamb is a male lamb—perfect, spotless, and without defect. Exodus 12:7 says that Israelites are to place the Passover lamb’s blood on the sides and tops of their doorframes. This blood would set the Israelites free—free from bricks, free from whips, and free from Pharaoh’s countless bag of tricks!

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away.” The verb takes away is in present tense. Meaning what? Meaning that Christ still takes away. Today, He takes away. Tomorrow, He takes away. Next week, He takes away.

What does He take away? He takes away the sin of the world. And that includes our sin. Our ugly sin. Our shameful sin. Our haunting sin. Our every single sin. He takes it all away. Christ not only takes away our guilt—that’s sin done by us. Christ also takes away our shame—that’s sin done to us. Guilt is what we feel when we’ve done wrong. Shame is what we feel when someone has wronged us.

We all know what public shame feels like. Branded by a divorce. Marked by a handicap. Saddled with alcoholic parents. Crushed because of a child’s arrest. Or we feel stigmatized because we lost our job, we lost our spouse, we lost our house, we lost our life’s savings. And now everyone knows.

There’s also private shame. We’ve all felt that too. Maybe you’ve been pushed to the edge by an abusive spouse, molested by a perverted parent, seduced by a sneaky superior, or teased without mercy by other kids. No one else knows. But we know. And that’s enough to bury us in shame.

We put our hands over our ears. We splash water on our face. We go for a long drive. Nothing takes away our shame. Nothing takes away our guilt. Sin has marked us, and that’s that. End of story.

No, it’s not.

We don’t have to drink our sin away. Work our sin away. Explain our sin away, eat our sin away, cry our sin away, or bury our sin away. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

I know this may be hard to believe. Most of us have carried our ugly marks for so long that we can't imagine life without them. Maybe we can't imagine it, but God can. God does. And God does more than just imagine it. He sends John the Baptist, who says, "Behold. Look. See. Gaze. Here is the whole point of what I'm saying! The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world!" The Passover Lamb of God does it all, for the whole world. The Passover Lamb of God does it all for you!

And so we pray, "Jesus, please take it all away." Tell Jesus what you did. Tell Jesus what you said, what you saw, what you took, how you feel. Tell Jesus what you thought. Pray this prayer as often as needed. One time, two times, ten times a day. Hold nothing back. No guilt is too ancient or too recent. No shame is too evil or too insignificant. No marks are so malicious that they can't be completely removed. "Jesus, please take it all away."

We're tempted to say, "Jesus, take it all away. I'm such a louse." But that doesn't work. For one thing, we're not a louse. We're God's baptized children, and He loves us. For another, marks are removed only when they are exposed to grace.

What do you need grace for? For being a bad person? That's too general. For losing your patience at a meeting and calling your co-worker a creep? There, you can confess that. Confession isn't punishment for sin. Confession names sin so it can be exposed to God's amazing grace.

Be firm in this prayer. Satan traffics in guilt and shame. He won't give up without a fight. Say to Satan, "I left my sin with the Passover Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

It's time for a clean start, a fresh slate, a new beginning. That's what Lent is all about. We don't need to be defensive or defeated. Today, we can be delivered.

And we do that by looking at God's marks. Yes, God has marks on His hands. Behold. Behold! Look, see, gaze! Here is the whole point of what I'm saying. "I have engraved you on the palms of My hands" (Isaiah 49:16). Jesus has your name written where He can see it. Your name is on His bloodstained hands. Yes, Jesus loves you that much!

If you've ever wondered how God reacts when guilt and shame have you cornered and are ready to swallow you whole. If you've ever wondered how God feels when you're lost, abandoned, and helpless. If you've ever wondered what God would do if He ever found out about it all—then frame these words and hang them on your wall. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Trust these words. Believe these words. Stand below these words, and trust Jesus to take it all away.

Jesus took the nails. On a cross. On a God-forsaken cross, Jesus took the nails. And taking the nails, Jesus takes away all of our sin and shame. He hung there, for us. Jesus still says, "I have engraved you on the palms of My hands." In the end, in the end, these are the only marks that matter! These marks on Christ's hands will never be erased! Ever! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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