

SERMON TITLE: "Meditations on the Cross: The Lamb of God"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Peter 1:13-21
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 20, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

During this Lenten season that leads up to Good Friday and Easter, we've been meditating on the cross. So far we've considered the cross as the power and wisdom of God and the cross as the love of God. Last week I told you about a woman who has a big cross necklace collection. Today I've brought with me a couple of Celtic crosses. Since we just celebrated St. Patrick's Day, I thought it would make sense to talk about the cross that is commonly used in Ireland. I know these are too little for you to see, but I think you'll recognize the description. While they may have more or less decorative features, all Celtic crosses are basically the same. Besides the vertical and horizontal bars of the cross, a Celtic cross also has a circle that goes around the intersection of the cross. No one is exactly sure why the circle was used. Possibly it was a practical feature to help support the arms of the cross, so that stone crosses would stand up more strongly. Possibly the circle was a holdover from the previous Irish practice of worshipping the sun. Or, it has been suggested that the circle at the center of the cross is a representation of the saintly halo of Jesus.

Of course, the Celtic cross, like any other type of cross, is a symbol of Christian faith. As Christians, we believe that something very important happened when Jesus died on the cross. For two thousand years, biblical writers and great theologians have tried to figure out exactly how we receive salvation through Jesus' death. Those teachers of Christian faith have suggested a number of ideas rather than just one. And that's why we can spend the entire season of Lent considering different ways of understanding what Jesus did for us on the cross. Today, I invite you to look with me at the biblical text of First Peter, chapter one, and imagine how the cross helps us think about how our salvation comes through Jesus, the Lamb of God.

1—LAMB OF GOD SCRIPTURES

We see this image of Christ as the Lamb of God in 1 Peter 1:18-19 in particular. The writer of this letter indicated that the readers “were ransomed from [their] futile ways” —“not by silver or gold, but by the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.”

First Peter isn't the only New Testament scripture to speak of Jesus as the Lamb of God. In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, John declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”¹ Likewise, in the Book of Revelation, Jesus in heaven is worshiped with these words: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered, [worthy] to receive power and . . . honor and glory and blessing!”²

These ideas about Jesus as the Lamb of God were influenced and inspired by Old Testament scriptures and ancient Jewish practices. For today's call to worship, we read from Isaiah 52 and 53. That passage is about a suffering servant who bears the sins of the people. This suffering servant is described as a sheep or a lamb that is led to the slaughter. Bible scholars have never quite settled on who this suffering servant was supposed to be. Was it one person in the historical time that Isaiah was written? Or was this suffering servant meant to be a collective image for the entirety of God's Hebrew people? Or was this lamb-wounded-for-our-transgressions a prophetic hope for a person in the future? However Isaiah intended his message to be understood, many early Christians believed that Jesus was the perfect fulfillment of Isaiah's description.

The idea of Jesus as the Lamb of God also comes from the Old Testament story about the first Passover. Exodus 12 tells the story of Moses and the Hebrews preparing to leave Egyptian slavery. God had already sent nine terrible plagues upon the Egyptians, and Pharaoh still refused to let God's people go. But now, the cruel and traumatic enslavement of the Hebrews was about to come to an end. God was going to send a 10th plague upon the Egyptians, so that they would be motivated to let the Hebrew slaves go free.

Consequently, Moses instructed the Hebrews how to prepare. In order to be fortified for their escape from slavery, each household was supposed to select a lamb without blemish. Nothing but the best was called for at this critical time. Then they would slaughter the lamb, and roast and eat it. They were about to undergo a huge transition from slavery to freedom, from being the long-oppressed subjects of Pharaoh to becoming the newly-liberated followers and chosen people of God. This nourishment from the lamb would give them strength for their journey out of slavery and empower them for their new life ahead.

But it wasn't only the nourishing food of the lamb that was important for this preparation. Moses instructed the Hebrews that they also needed to smear the blood of the lamb on their doorframes. This blood spread over and around their doors would protect everyone in their homes. In this tenth plague, only the firstborn children of the Egyptian households would die, as the destroyer would "pass over" the Hebrews' blood-smear homes.

Every year, when the Jewish people celebrated the Passover, they remembered and retold this story. Instead of smearing lamb's blood on their doorframes, they drank red wine, but the annual rehearsal of this story remained powerful as an opportunity for spiritual rededication. The protective blood of the lamb and this sacred meal of roasted lamb provided a regular opportunity to leave behind any slavery to sin and embark on a journey of new life with God.

2—SALVATION THROUGH JESUS THE LAMB OF GOD

Hopefully this review of lamb-of-God scriptures helps you understand how and why Jesus' death on the cross has so often been associated with the concept of the Lamb of God. Coming out of the Jewish tradition, we Christians believe that Jesus as the crucified-Lamb-of-God is able to protect us from harm. We believe that the lamb that was slain on the cross is able to redeem, rescue, and ransom us from slavery—whether that slavery has been social and material oppression or entrapment in sinful disobedience to God. Just as the lambs were slaughtered at the start of the great exodus from Egypt, so

Jesus died in order to set us free from wrong attitudes, wrong beliefs, and wrong actions. Because of Jesus' sacrificial blood, we are protected from spiritual danger and hard-hearted death. Through Jesus' act of mercy on the cross, we are spiritually fed and nourished so that we are fortified to begin a newly liberated life in Christ.

3—LAMB OF GOD CALLS US TO PURITY TOO

Of course, every spiritual reality that is offered by God's grace is also a call for us to respond. It's like this. Moses told his people the good news that God was going to send a 10th plague on the Egyptians so the Hebrews could be set free from slavery. But they couldn't just sit around and wait for that to happen. The Hebrews had to get their unblemished lambs and obey the instructions. They had to get themselves ready for the freedom God was offering.

Similarly, we today can't just say we believe that Jesus, the Lamb of God, died for our sins. We also have to do what is necessary to embrace God's liberation of our souls from spiritual oppression. First Peter 1:13 and following explains it this way: "Therefore, prepare your minds for action. Discipline yourselves. Set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you . . . Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, for it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

In Christian faith, it isn't only the Lamb of God who is supposed to be pure and unblemished. We who are rescued from enslavement to sin are freed to a new kind of life. If David had read further in First Peter, we would have heard that this purified life comes through "obedience to the truth" and produces "genuine mutual love," so that we are able to "love one another deeply from the heart" (1:22). We would have also read the instruction to rid ourselves of "malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander" (2:1, NRSV). Or, to restate that in the words of a different Bible translation, "Stop being hateful! Quit trying to fool people, and start being sincere. Don't be jealous or say cruel things about others" (2:1, CEB).

The Letter of First Peter was written to Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. And, even in their distress and suffering, they were supposed to behave in a way that reflected positively on Christ. 1 Peter 2:24 tells us that Jesus “himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds [we] have been healed.” Through his death on the cross, Jesus the Lamb of God gives us the opportunity to start over again, fresh and new. Slavery to sin is gone, and impurities and infirmities of the soul are healed—so that we can live in purity and righteousness like Jesus did.

CONCLUSION

A well-known gospel hymn invites us to accept this good news and respond to the Lamb of God:

Just as I am, without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me,
and that thou bidst me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
to rid my soul of one dark blot,
to thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.³

As we meditate on the cross, may each one of us receive and embrace the Lamb of God.

¹John 1:29

²Rev. 5:12

³Charlotte Elliot, 1835.