

Behold the Lamb of God

Dear friends for whom I give thanks, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: I don't know if they still do it, but I'm guessing that some of you can relate to this. In my youth there was a widespread marketing technique that targeted children. On the back of a box of Frosted Sugar Bombs, say, or Double Chocolate Cheerios or some other sickly sweet kid's cereal there'd appear an offer for a really cool toy or some other device designed to appeal to a child's imagination like a pen that wrote in invisible ink or X-ray glasses or a secret decoder ring, something along those lines. All you had to do was collect a certain number of box tops and send them in (along with a nominal fee which was supposedly for postage and handling) and you could be the proud possessor of this spectacular item that was guaranteed to amaze your family and friends, and, very likely, launch your career as the next James Bond.

Well, the reason the technique was so used widely is that it worked – and for two reasons. First, it sold cereal. You had to eat a lot of sugar bombs to get your twenty box tops. And you made sure that mom had it on her grocery list every time she went to the store. But secondly, it built up suspense. You had all those weeks and months of collecting the box tops to increase your sense of expectation until that day finally came when you could stuff them into an envelope (along with a check) and send them off. Then came the interminable waiting period, checking the mailbox every day, and, as the weeks wore on, wondering if maybe your mail was misdirected or if the official chief box top inspector at General Mills had counted only 19 in your envelope or perhaps rejected one of them – that one was a bit torn.

And then, about the time when you were about to abandon all hope, the package would arrive. Oh, the joy! Oh, the rapture! And oh, the crushing disappointment when you opened the package and discovered that it contained a cheap piece of junk that did none of things it was supposed to. *What? This* is what I was looking forward to? You gotta be kidding me. Be honest now: who's been there?

I anticipate that the disciples of John the Baptizer experienced a letdown about a thousand times worse. Looming large in the imagination of every faithful Jew living in the first century was the figure of the Messiah. First promised to the parents of us all when by their sin they put our human race under the curse, and then through long ages spoken of by the Lord to patriarchs and to prophets, expanding the promises, providing more information, filling in details, building up the hopes, dreams, and expectations of a people oppressed, a people longing to be set free, a people eager to receive and to welcome the Savior sent from God who would restore the Kingdom to Israel and usher in an endless age of peace and prosperity. Too good to be true? No. The Lord has promised it. It has to come. *He* has to come.

And now John is preaching that he's here. "Among you stands the one of whom the prophets have spoken", he tells them, "the one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. It's for this reason that I have come calling you to repentance and baptizing: that you might be ready when he is revealed to all Israel."

Among those who have come to hear John and who have attached themselves to him as students of his ascetic disciplines are Andrew, the brother of Peter, and John the son of Zebedee, the younger brother of James. They have been captivated by the Baptist's

enthusiasm. They firmly believe his message. They know the Messiah is finally here just waiting to be revealed. Their suspense is palpable. Any moment now ...

And then it happens. They are standing with John who is performing his ministry. A crowd is gathered around them listening as John preaches and baptizes. Others folks are coming and going. And here comes Jesus from the east. He's just completed forty days of fasting and temptation in the desert. Let's just say that after that experience, he's not looking his best. But even at his best he looks like what he is: a typical Galilean peasant, completely indistinguishable from any other person standing around in the crowd. The difference now is that he looks like a typical Galilean peasant who's been pulled through a knothole. He's gaunt, gritty, disheveled. He looks like he needs a meal and a long soak in a hot bath.

The eyes of the Baptist suddenly widen when he sees Jesus approach. A look of awe spreads across his face. Andrew and John see the change in the Baptist and they know that the moment has come. John points and declares, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The two disciples turn their heads simultaneously in the direction the Baptist points expecting to see ... see what, exactly? Something astounding. Something spectacular. What we would call today a super hero: a guy with glory and might written all over him, exuding charisma from every pore. But that's not what they see. That guy? Really? *He's* the one we've been waiting for? You gotta be kidding. Maybe John's been out in the sun too long. This has to be a mistake. Evidently they think something like that because Jesus just walks on by and they stay right where they are.

But then late the next day, they're standing with John and it happens again. Presumably by this time Jesus has bathed and had a meal, so he looks a little bit better; but still far short of what the disciples have allowed themselves to imagine. As Jesus walks by John points and says to the two, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" No mistaking it this time. John means he's the one. You can picture the two baffled disciples staring at each other, shrugging their shoulders. "What do you think we should do?" "I don't know. Follow him, I guess. Let's check it out."

They fall in behind him, following not too close. They are still far from certain about this mysterious stranger. Besides, if John is right about him, how exactly does one start a conversation with the Lord God's Messiah? Jesus solves the problem for them by initiating the conversation himself. He turns and asks, "What are you seeking?" Now, the real answer to that question is "We want to know who you are, if you are indeed who John says you are." But that would be an awkward question to ask: "Excuse me, are you the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of God's people?" So, instead they ask, "Rabbi [a safe title of respect], where are you staying?" Jesus replies, "Come and you will see." And I'm pretty sure he means more than you will see where I am staying. He means, you will come to see the truth about me.

But it won't be by seeing with the eyes. It will be by hearing through their ears. They spend the rest of the day with him, hearing him teach them long into the evening hours. And it's listening to the words that Jesus speaks which convinces them of the truth of who he is; convinces them so thoroughly that the first thing they do is go out and bring others to hear the words of Jesus.

This is key: our Christian faith is not primarily a visual thing. It's an aural thing. The source of our faith is not in what we see with our eyes, but in the words of God's truth that Jesus speaks. At no time will this be proven more than when three years later these same two disciples will see something else they had not expected to see. By then they will have both seen and heard many amazing things that Jesus said and did. They will be certain that he is

who John said he was: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And yet when he actually does that – take away the sins of the world by his suffering and death on the cross – they will lose faith in him. What they see will overcome and cause them to lose faith in what they heard him say.

And later they are taken to task for it. The angels at the empty tomb rebuke the women: “He’s not here. He is risen. Don’t you remember what he *told* you?” Jesus similarly rebukes the Emmaus disciples, “Oh, foolish ones and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” He also chastises Thomas, “You believe because you have seen? Blessed are those who believe without seeing.”

This, of course, applies to us. We are among the blessed that Jesus spoke of. We have not seen. But we do hear. And by our hearing the Holy Spirit works in us the gift of believing. This is true in a general sense: the Creed of faith we confess together about the Triune nature of God, how he created and sustains us, how in love the Son became flesh, suffered and died for our sin and then rose again, and how the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us by the Word of truth and so gives us eternal life – all this comes to us by hearing.

But what I’d like to highlight today is that this being blessed by believing without seeing is also true in a very specific sense. I am referring to the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There comes that point in the Communion liturgy when the words of Jesus are spoken, “This is my body. This is my blood.” Then, holding the sacramental elements before the eyes of the congregation, the pastor speaks Christ’s word of peace: “The peace of the Lord be with you always.” That is not simply a liturgical way to say, “I wish you well. Have a nice day.” No. The point is that the pastor is displaying before your eyes the very thing by which God gives us his peace: the body and blood of Jesus given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. The congregation responds, “Amen!” Yes. We believe – not by what we see, we see only bread and wine. But we believe the words of Jesus, that we are looking at his body and blood given to us under bread and wine.

And to emphasize this, the congregation then sings the ancient hymn called the Agnus Dei: “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, grant us your peace.” You will recognize those words as those spoken by John when he pointed Jesus out to his two disciples: “Behold the Lamb of God”. They turned and saw a ragged peasant. But John’s words were true. And this is what the congregation is saying by singing this hymn. The words are true. That it is Christ’s body and blood we’re looking at because Jesus says so – even though it doesn’t look like it to our eyes. And believing what we hear rather than what we see, the Lord does indeed bless us and grant us his peace – his peace that passes all understanding. So may he bless us all, now and always, and give us his peace. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!