

I Am not Equal to the Lamb

John 1:29f

It's Christmas week! And I'm so glad you're spending more than just Christmas Eve here at Chapel Hill, worshipping together. I know I need to sing carols and remember why I'm at Costco with all-the-people. We all need a reminder that we're not alone in this world and those errands have meaning, Amen? So here we are again. God came to be with you. A baby has been born to you, and he is Christ the Lord. So let's remind our souls. It's Christmas. God came. That's the series that we're in right now, I am not God. I am not the Light, I am not the First, I am not the Christ, and tonight, I am not the Lamb.

Before we jump in to hearing that good news again in God's word, let me just say thank you. [Larry has likely already said...] Two months of rest is an incredible gift. I kept battling this feeling like we needed to complete something- the renovation of our house, some sort of huge revelation of God or the epic trip of a lifetime. But the gift of rest turns out to be a gift unto itself. We have rested, and we are so grateful. I do have a sense of being renewed, that God truly loves us.

So may you find in this hour of Sabbath rest that you have carved out—it's not two months, but it's not nothing—Let God remind us who we are. We are not slaves to this world, to this holiday, to work. So may these Sabbath minutes meet you in the same way, that as you hear this story of Christmas, of God coming, may your soul be reminded you are not God, and He is.

We continue in the book of John. There's John the author of the book and then John the Baptist, a guy who at first glance is nothing like you or me. He lived in the desert. He ate bugs and honey. He had huge swarms of people following him around all time. And yet in his heart, he is so much like us. Doing his daily work he was called to, but waiting... looking... longing for it to make sense and for it to really matter. Let's take a look at John's story.

John 1, beginning with verse 29. If you want to pick up a Bible in front of you, I think you'll find that helpful as we look at this story together. It's on page 886. John 1:29.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. I myself did not know him but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. 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.” And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

John spends his whole, eccentric life going into the Unknown... (Into the unknowooown)—Any Frozen 2 fans out there? Let’s talk later. When I was studying this passage, I was so surprised by John twice in this passage saying, “I myself did not know him...” Who was unknown for John? He knew of Jesus. Jesus was his cousin. He likely knew Jesus as the morally upright kid who liked to spend more time than usual at church. Who did he not know that he was willing to risk everything he knew for this voice calling him to go into the unknown and find?

John says twice, “I myself did not know him, but...” So who’s the “him” he didn’t know? Pastors Mark and Ellis have already told us a lot about who this “him” is—John was looking for the one who existed before Creation, who was the light, the source of the light. John’s looking for the one who is first—the one who existed before him, who is Lord, the one in charge of the whole world. John is looking for the Christ, the Messiah, the one the Jews were waiting for who would be God’s anointed and the promised King for the Jewish nation. John says, I didn’t know who this guy was going to be. I didn’t know his name. I didn’t know him, but...

Two big “buts”: The first in verse 31. “I myself didn’t know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” So John’s saying, whoever this guy was going to turn out to be, I wanted to make sure he was revealed, he was known, the light, the first, the Christ, to ALL my people, my whole nation of Israel, my whole family, all my friends. So John didn’t know who he was yet, but John dedicated his whole life, as Pastor Mark said, to preparing the way for him so that when God did decide to show himself, everyone he loved would see him.

I think a lot of us spend a lot of our lives in this same “I myself did not know him, but” frame of mind when it comes to faith, and especially here in America. A lot of us know Jesus as the morally upright, good teacher, who will teach our kids about how to live obeying their parents. But we can go to church our whole lives and not know him—the Messiah, the Light, personally—we can live without experiencing the presence of God the person.

I grew up in a Lutheran church, and I could have recited the Christmas story from years of Christmas programs. But I myself did not know him. I knew about Jesus. I knew about God. But I didn’t have a conviction that I needed God. I’m still growing in believing God when he says he loves me, and I don’t have to do anything to earn his love—that’s the concept of grace. I’m his daughter. It’s done. I’m completely accepted because Jesus chose me and came for me.

Likewise, John the Baptist knew about the Messiah who was promised, but he didn't know him personally. He'd never showed himself in real life as a person. How would John know who the real Christ is when he showed up?

Let's look at verse 33. It essentially says, "I myself didn't know him, but I knew what I was looking for." Just like Elsa knows she's looking for the place where "The North Wind, meets the sea..." Sorry, I promised I was done. Anyway, John didn't know who the Christ was going to turn out to be, but he'd been given a very specific sign. Verse 33, "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."

There was a distinct aha moment, the moment where "I didn't know him" switched to "I know him!" It happened about forty days before this moment in John 1. Jesus had come out to John to be baptized, and the Spirit descended like a dove and rested on Jesus and a voice from heaven said, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased." Ta-Dah! Sign, check! Verse 32 John says, "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him."

John found what had been promised to him, what he'd gone out into the Unknown to discover. And it took many years, but God DID Show himself. When that happened, John all of a sudden knew him, not just Jesus the moral guy but Jesus the Lamb of God. When God shows himself to John, it establishes a huge before-and-after moment. I didn't know him then, but now I do.

I feel like I've had dozens of these moments as God has revealed himself to me more and more. I had the moment that Pastor Mark talked about last week, the one that's not great theology but made sense to me as a fifth grader. An itinerant, charismatic preacher at summer camp invited me to receive Jesus not just as Savior but as Lord and let him make the decisions of my life. I think that was a sincere turning point when God revealed to me that he was in charge of my life. One of the most significant moments was when I was "caught" on a mission trip of all things, in college, really disrupting the team with gossip. I was confronted by a friend. And I realized then, that I was treating Jesus like a book that I could master and know, but I hadn't become any different of a person. I myself did not know him. God revealed himself as the one who forgives, and whose Spirit grows in us unity, kindness and truth.

At nineteen, I certainly couldn't have said I know Jesus as the Lamb of God. Why do think we'd want to know God as the Lamb? Most of us only know lambs from the petting zoo. And we don't need a cute, cuddly fuzzy lamb of a God, helpless and bleating. This is one of those moments where we have to remember that this story is being told in a Jewish world two thousand years ago. And lambs then weren't pets. They were raised to be sacrifices, and particularly on one day of the year, the Jewish remembrance of Passover, this day when God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and formed them as a new community.

On that day, God instructed a lamb be sacrificed for protection for the people. The blood of the lamb was put on the doorposts of homes and its meat was eaten in haste in preparation to flee Egypt.

Then when the Angel of Death came to slay the Egyptians, he would pass-over the homes of those with the lamb's blood on the doorposts.

I don't want to lose you here. We're thousands of years away from a religion that involved sacrifice, and I'm grateful for that. But don't lose what that sacrifice meant in the days of the Jews, the days of John the Baptist. That lamb meant protection from death and deliverance from slavery. And now, says John the Baptist, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Protection from death. Deliverance from sin.

We who follow Jesus believe that sin entered the world when people declared that they wanted life apart from God with an act of eating forbidden fruit. From then on, our hearts have been inclined away from God—that is sin. We were created for eternity, but with sin we also got death because life forever is only available with God, and a choice to live without him is a rejection of eternity. God loves us too much to live forever without us. So in the fullness of time, he came to create a way for us to live with him forever. That barrier between us and eternal life is sin. So Jesus came to show us who God is, how much he loves us, and take away sin forever.

Jesus came as the Lamb of God. The willing sacrifice who became our protection from death and our deliverance from the bondage of sin. He was the sacrifice on the cross who died for you and for me, and as John the Baptist says, not just for our individual sins, but also for the sin – singular—of the whole world. Jesus is the Lamb who came to die to protect the world from death and free it from sin.

Had Jesus died on the cross and stayed dead, he would have been another pitiful lamb of a sacrifice. But he did not! Jesus is the Lamb of God who displayed that he is divine by rising from the dead! And now he sits on the throne of God as not only the Lamb who was slain to protect you and set you free but also as the Lion who has conquered death and evil.

Can you feel the excitement pumping in my veins? Track with me here.

Remember, there are two John's. John the Baptist was the first and only one to use this phrase, the Lamb of God. The other John, John the author clung to this phrase, the Lamb of God. And he came to know so much more about the Lamb than John the Baptist would live to see. John would see Jesus die and rise again. He would see something radical about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Toward the end of his life, God gave John the author a vision of heaven. That vision is the book of Revelation at the end of your Bible. And here, John sees the Lamb of God as the one on the throne. I came to understand this picture of the Lamb just after college when Larry was teaching a college Bible study on the book of Revelation. We get to studying Revelation 5, and it changed my life. It met this incredibly deep need I think we all feel for knowing why bad things happen, why evil is allowed to persist, why the news is full of shootings and craziness, why I did a wedding and visited a friend whose wife died today. It's not right.

So may this image be the gift to you that it is to me. John says in Revelation 5:1, “Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals.” Bible scholars say that this scroll records one of two things: George Eldon Ladd says it’s the scroll of all of human history. Richard Baukham and others say it’s all of the future that gets a new ending when evil is completely gone forever. I like to think it’s the totality of our human history and all of our future that needs rewriting when evil is gone. And in the days of Jesus, when someone read a scroll, there was always an interpreter, a rabbi, close at hand to interpret it, to make sense of it. And so here we are in eternity in the throne room of God and he has the scroll of human history, past and future—everything from your life and mine, everything from our nation and world history—and let’s see what happens.

Verse 2, And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” In other words, who is worthy to make sense of all that has happened in all of human history? And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, This is the conclusion secular philosophy has come to. There’s just not going to be any meaning to any of it. And I have the same reaction John had. I can’t stand it. John says,

I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more, behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain... And when he had taken the scroll... they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

Weep no more, John is told, because the Lamb of God is worthy because with the Lamb—that ultimate Passover sacrifice—with his blood he ransomed people for God. He’s protected them from death. He’s delivered them from sin. He’s formed out of them a new family, a kingdom, a new community. So worthy is the Lamb to open up the story of your life and make sense of all that has happened to you. Worthy are you, Jesus, to read about 2019 in the throne room of eternity and help us see why it all happened, because you are the Lamb of God. We need the Lamb of God to protect us from death and take away our sin and the evil of the whole world. We need a slain lamb on the throne to make sense of it all.

John the Baptist says, once I did not know him, but now, beyond the shadow of a doubt, I know him! He is the Lamb of God. He is the Son of God. John knew Jesus was the One because God told him what to look for, he devoted his life to finding him, and when he found Jesus, he made sure God was known to everyone around him.

You can know him, too. I entreat you, please, risk that there is One out there, in here, calling you, pursuing you to discover your purpose and the why of it all. If you do not know Jesus, you’re going to have to risk listening to the voice and going out into the unknown. The first step is to respond to the

shaking inside you, the goosebumps, the hopefulness—that is the voice of the Spirit calling to you. I'll help you start talking to God with a prayer in just a moment.

I suspect many of you might be a little like 19-year-old Megan, or just today Megan, longing to know so much more of Jesus than I do now. This is my encouragement to you: ask God to reveal himself to you. You already know what to look for—the counselor, the comforter, wisdom, love, the Father. Get close enough to God on your own to see it. And I want to particularly encourage meeting God through worship. The response to the Lamb of God in Revelation was not further study of who the lion and the lamb is. What was it? A new song. Singing. So Worship God in song. Do it in yourself or with people, in the car, with a radio or singing yourself. Make the space for the Spirit to bring the aha! moment into your soul. You know, God's uninterrupted presence is a promise to you—but you have to be interruptible.

I know him. I want you to know the freedom, the rest, that comes from knowing there is already a Lamb. Already a sacrifice. Already one who has conquered. Already one who is in charge. Already one who can make sense of the history of our lives. I'm going to pray God would reveal himself to you as he did to both John's and to me. And then we will worship the Lion and the Lamb.