Epiphany 2B
Sermon 1.15.23

Isaiah 49:1-7
Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the LORD, and my reward with my God." And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength— he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus says the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, "Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you."

John 1:29-42
The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is 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 ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God." The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter). (562)

John was out at the river baptizing. Some priests came out to press him as to why he was doing this, who he was to do this. He told them he wasn't the messiah, and he wasn't Elijah, or a prophet. No, he was just doing this in anticipation of the one who was coming.

And the next day he came, just walked on by. So, John could finally declare it, though it doesn't seem anyone was there much to hear. "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

The day after that, two of John's disciples were there, and when they heard John say it again, but just a portion of it, their response was immediate. They turned to follow Jesus.

It's as if they knew what Lamb of God meant. It's as if they knew what the sin of the world was, and it being taken away was inviting, or at least intriguing.

As for us? John's gospel isn't going to make it easy. This gospel narrative, more even than any other, isn't going to make it easy for us. There's a certain clubbishness about John's writing. It's as though this gospel was written for a particular and even closed group, a specific sect maybe of early Christians.

Now referred as the Johannine sect or the Johannine community, indeed of them the theory is that this gospel, along with the three letters of John and the Revelation to John, make up a body of literature produced or especially valued by a sect of Jewish Christians. Exiled from their original communities and synagogues, "Their common life included ritual actions known to other followers of Jesus, but they insisted on the unique spiritual value of those rites." So says one encyclopedia on the matter.

"Disputes eventually divided the community.

"By the middle of the second century some representatives of the Johannine tradition achieved a respected role in the emerging 'Great Church,' the interconnected web of believers throughout the Mediterranean that provided mutual support and maintained fellowship under the leadership of an emerging [church structure.]"

And when the Johannine community did become more connected to the emerging Great Church, their literature came along. It would eventually become dominant in the development of later Christian orthodoxy. And so it would remain, until even now when it's full of phrases even the least of the church-goers might know. But the clubbishness remains in spite of that familiarity. There are, so many of them, coded words. There are all these significant references.

Do you know the phenomenon of Easter eggs? Not the kind with candy in them that you hide for kids on Easter morning, but the kind in video games or movies of a certain sort, these are little details that would be easy to miss if you weren't in the know but, if you are in the know, they serve as an in-joke, which then strengthen the bonds among the knowing.

I'm almost never in the know about any such things, but Jess and the boys tell me it's very cool.

John's gospel is full of these sorts of things—words, phrases, theological imaginings. And the trick in reading this gospel is to see in each of these the hyperlink of meaning that runs under each occurrence.

Lamb of God, this phrase that we're so familiar with or might be so familiar with. It's embedded in the Catholic mass—"*agnus dei.*" It's embedded in the Episcopalian mass. It's part of the libretto for all the great musical masses, from Machaut's mass of the 14th century to Penderecki's of fourteen years ago. This most orthodox phrase for naming who Christ was, what he did: it only shows up in the Gospel of John. So foundational for naming what function Jesus served in the world: the Lamb of God: it shows up but twice in all the Biblical witness, just here in this reading. It's important. It's known. But what does it mean?

Lambs, of course, were animals used for sacrifice, indeed were the sacrificial animal *par excellence.* They featured prominently in the annual celebration of the Passover, the springtime festival commemorating the people's exodus from slavery in Egypt. Then, every household would need a lamb, the first born of its flock and without blemish. As many as 250,000 sheep were needed every year.

It's interesting to note that the newborn lambs set aside for future sacrifice would be swaddled in special temple cloths, and they would be laid in a manger to keep them contained while examined for blemishes.

Such were the ones considered for God. Such were the ones considered holy *for* God.

But what might it mean, a Lamb not *for* God but *of* God?

It turns the whole process of sacrifice on its head. Here, in what John is saying—John the witness featured in John the gospel narrative—the sacrificial mechanism isn't a function of God's making for human atoning. It's a function of human-making but which is so powerful in its urge and effect that it feels as if it must certainly come from God.

For this, according to John's bizarre, shocking assertion, God deigns to it so to demystify it, so to call it into question.

But the God of the Hebrews had been saying for centuries through the prophets, through the Psalms, that God doesn't desire sacrifice but right living. God doesn't desire even the most majestic sacrifice; God desires justice for the poor, the widow and the orphan and the otherwise forgotten about.

Primitive religion, particularly at work in small societies, sacralizes the human compulsion for creating scapegoats. Humans encounter something they fear, something we can't make sense of

or have no context for. It moves us to disgust, this most primitive religious impulse, the worry that we've come into something unclean, corrupting. We must get rid of it. We must distance ourselves from it or somehow contain it, tame it, bind it, and cordon it off from us.

And this impulse can dangerous, not to mention wildly off the mark—if the strange isn't actually dangerous, if the feared thing isn't actually a threat. It can also be dangerous for its being arbitrary and for its catching us by surprise.

So, it becomes ritualized, sacralized—to put the impulse in a frame, a container, and thus put it at some remove from the immediacy of fear and the unknown. We can take all that's filthy and threatening and put it symbolically on some *thing* for sacrifice, this *thing* standing in symbolically for the more elusive emotion or dynamic.

And, you know what? It works! The sacralization of the scapegoat: it works. It actually makes people *feel* better. It makes them feel safer, feel more in control. And by this, of course, they are, as this is a feedback loop. I mean, if the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, then any manner by which fear is put to rest must be good, to some degree anyway.

And so, it was deemed good. And so, it was felt to be as a commandment from God, blessed by God, the scapegoat in Greek even called the *pharmakon*, as in "pharmacy," that which is medicinal and makes for healing, makes for cleansing and restoring.

And it was considered progress. Because time was that the *pharmakon* was human, some poor soul chosen by means of a group unconscious from time immemorial, which is to say some mysterious urge taken to be of the divine. But then the *pharmakon* come to serve could an animal, a valuable animal, a treasure even. Now, in the Hebrew tradition at least, the first-born son wouldn't be offered up, but a lamb or a dove. God's commandment seemed to have morphed with time, long time. Indeed, this is what the story of the binding of Isaac is thought to be all about, that Isaac, the first-born son, would be unbound and a ram would take his place, and that Abraham would have heard it all rightly: "Do this thing. Don't do this thing. Instead, do this other thing."

Which leads to one critique Jews have put forth of Christian thinking, that the sacrifice of God's son seems to be a regressive move, seems to re-sacrilize something that is actually a gross misunderstanding of God's will. In Abraham and Isaac, God corrects the commandment as to what God requires. In Jesus on the cross, God is felt as moving backward, to when human blood spilt was the only way human sin could be washed away.

It's sick, some might even say—and I wouldn't argue.

As for what John would say, John according to John: he would say that Jesus isn't a lamb for God or even *the* lamb for God but is the lamb *of* God. In Jesus, God has deigned to the human compulsion to kill off what scares us, deigned to it in order to reveal of it that it is humankind that demands blood sacrifice, not God, and who thus puts the whole matter to rest in raising Jesus back to life and returning him to us with but this to say: "Peace be with you."

For what it's worth, Nietzsche knew as much. Frederic Nietzsche, the great hater of Christianity and the Church, at least knew well what he hated, better than many Christians even. In thinking through the difference between myth and gospel, he focused on the two stories, the one of Dionysus and the one of Jesus. In both, a man born of a woman was understood as conceived also by a god, Dionysus the son of Zeus and Jesus the son the Lord of the Jews. Both were killed by a mob. Dionysus was torn apart by a frenzy who, once he was dead, felt a lot better, while Jesus was crucified by a joining together of religious and imperial authorities, and also the will of put-upon people yelling, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

It's of all this that Nietzsche wrote in *The Will to Power,* "It is not a difference in regard to their martyrdom—it is a difference in the meaning of it. [In Dionysus] Life itself, its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence, creates torment, destruction, the will to annihilation. In the other case, suffering—the "Crucified as the innocent one"—counts as an objection to this life, as a formula to its condemnation."

In other words, here's Adam Erickson, pastor and director of a religious educational foundation, "Nietzsche clearly saw the alternatives: either we live by Dionysian myth that justifies the use of violence to maintain life's 'eternal fruitfulness,' peace, and order, or we live by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that refuses to create peace through violence but offers another way: peace through forgiveness."

For this is how it plays out these days—at least among the likes of us. We don't really believe in sacred violence. We don't *really* believe that killing anything will make us safer in the sight of God, or redeemed in the judgment of God. We're a disenchanted people, after all. We're rational moderns, reasonable and demystified.

That being said, please notice tomorrow in our remembering the life of the Rev. Dr. King that with him we've gone through this cycle once again. While alive, Dr. King was perceived by people like me as a threat, a dangerous man who needed to stop or at least to slow down. In our memory, though, he's become a beloved figure, the *pharmakon* who made us better. Meanwhile,

understood rightly, he was more akin to the crucified one, the one whose living was done with little obeisance to the powers of death.

You could argue that making his birthday a national holiday, we write him into a Dionysian myth. I aim each year when it comes around again to remember him as a follower of Christ, even unto death, and me as someone who'd aim also to follow but might well have been as one of those yelling, "Crucify him! Crucify him."

For the most part, though, when it comes to the magical effect of the scapegoat, what arrived among premodern people, and still does among some of our more regressive co-religionists, comes to us rather as justification, or as simple practicality, just facing the facts. In this life, for some to benefit, others must suffer. For some to live well, others must be exploited, though with the promise before them that, if they work hard enough, they might eventually find themselves in the position (the lucky position!) to exploit more than they are exploited. Really, Caiaphas had it right, Caiaphas the high priest who oversaw the crucifixion of Christ. He knew well and said it well: "It is better for one man to die than for a whole nation to suffer."

That's just practical good sense.

That's just the way it is.

And that is the sin of the world—which those in Johannine community would have known well, as they had each perhaps been the scapegoats of their communities. Felt as dangerous for their new confession of faith, they were driven out into a wilderness of which they then made the Church. They had the view from below, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—this perspective from which most reliably to witness an unveiling of the truth.

To have been put there, though: that is the sin of the world. And it is inescapable. There is simply no way to function in the world without including some while excluding others. There is simply no way to operate in the world without doing this calculus all the time. For there to be anything that one might be in, there must people who are cast out. And we can't live without an "in," without a home, without a village, without a parish or kingdom or state or nation. And the fact of one necessitates the other. Our need for a nation makes for borders beyond which some remain, must remain. Our need for family makes for tight bonds beyond which most people remain as less loved.

There's no other way to do this.

There's no other way to do this.

Except in church. Except in the *local* church.

That is what we're doing here—gathering as church not so we can get into heaven but so we can get heaven into here, into now, that promised reign where all is peace, where all enjoy flourishing, a flourishing of joy. That's what we're doing here—not attempting to count ourselves as righteous but aiming to be righteous for in this are blessing and abounding joy and abundant life. We gather not for some reward later but because in our gathering might be the reward. Our gathering is as a wheel with a center which is Christ, and many spokes which are each and all of us, but no outer edge—a wheel in a wheel, as the vision came to the prophet Ezekiel to see; a wheel in a wheel, as the Negro spiritual dared to proclaim, claiming for the enslaved proximity to the beloved of God.

Welcome to church. Bless us that this is indeed what we're doing here.

Thanks be to God.