

**Sunday, January 19, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon**

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“Look, here is the Lamb of God!”

How do you respond to a testimony like that?

Especially when someone who is currently commanding tremendous spiritual authority in the community delivers it.

Just imagine if someone came up to you today, someone you held in high regard, and said, “I’d like to introduce you to Jesus!”

Would you be receptive?

For the people who were gathered on the banks of the Jordan that day, John’s choice of words appealed to their heartfelt desire for a savior to come.

They had been waiting centuries for a messiah.

They had hoped it might be John.

They trusted that he was ‘a man sent from God.’

John statements about Jesus are all rooted in Old Testament scripture.

First he says that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The Passover lamb, from the Exodus story, was a sign of God’s love and faithfulness.

As the story goes, the Hebrews had been warned that an angry YHWH was going to pass through Egypt taking the firstborn animals and human beings. They were instructed to kill a lamb and smear the blood on doorposts as a sign that Israelites lived in this house, so they would be saved from death.

The Hebrews who displayed the lamb’s blood were passed over and spared destruction.

The ‘Lamb of God’ became known as the divine power that provided protection and sustenance to believers.

The Baptist testifies, Jesus is this lamb-one who possesses divine power.

Second, John refers to Jesus as ‘Son of God.’

In the Hebrew Bible, “Son of God’ describes the king as one faithful to God’s will.

In John's gospel (writer John, not Baptist John) the 'Son of God' is one who reveals God's loving nature.

This title also explains what John the Baptist meant when he said that Jesus ranks ahead of him, because "he was before me."

Remember that John's gospel starts with the declaration that

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him and without him, not one thing came into being."

For John, Jesus has been with God, since the beginning of creation – he is God incarnate.

Third, John said that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and that the one on whom the Spirit descended would be the one to redeem Israel.

John testifies that Jesus was this one.

He witnessed the "Spirit descending like a dove from heaven and alighting on Jesus and the voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

John the Baptist is the first person to proclaim, out loud, that Jesus is the messiah.

His message was powerful enough to convince Andrew – one of his followers, to exclaim to his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah!"

Jesus is the one that they have been waiting for.

This passage is a pivotal point between Old Testament theology and New Testament Theology.

I tend to characterize this transition as movement from external spirituality to internal spirituality.

The Old Testament stories are primarily about people's reactions to external events – events that they attribute to God's actions.

They try to exercise some control over these events by offering sacrifices, such as lambs and doves to God.

Their baptism is in water, plunging their bodies into the Jordan River, coming out renewed and perhaps recommitted to a virtuous life.

Jesus, however, brings us baptism by the Holy Spirit.

He reminds us that all the external work in the world will not change us, if we do not open our hearts and let the joy and love of God into our being.

Stories abound in our culture of people who have made sweeping external changes, winning the lottery, losing 200 pounds, making it big in Hollywood and yet they feel an emptiness; a longing that is not fulfilled.

External events can certainly bring us joy, but we must have the perspective of blessedness, an understanding that we don't get what we want because we sacrifice a lamb, or say a prayer.

Faithfulness requires an element of surrender and gratitude.

When we are baptized by the Holy Spirit and welcomed into the community of faith we commit ourselves to a belief that is intangible, internal, often beyond our own understanding.

Writing in *Christian Century Magazine* this week, theologian William Willamon stated:

“Humility is at the heart of Christian mission because this faith must be received from another. No one is born into this faith.

Nobody stumbles upon it after walking in the woods or rummaging around in one's ego.

Christians are recipients, never initiators.

Here is truth that can be had only with receptive, empty, open hands.

Someone had to love us enough to show and to tell the story.

We know what we know only through epiphany—that is, witness, testimony.

Christianity is training in receptivity, learning to be gratefully dependent on the testimony of others.”

The disciples in today's passage trust John the Baptist's testimony that Jesus is in fact the one for whom they have been waiting.

Willamon wrote that if he could ask one question of prospective ministers it would be

“Have you seen or heard anything from God worth testifying to another?”

How about you?

Are you able to articulate your faith to others?

To share your own experiences?

Is your faith real to you?

“Faith,” Alan Lightman wrote, “in its broadest sense, is about far more than belief in the existence of God. Faith is the willingness to give ourselves over, at times, to things we do not fully understand. Faith is the belief in things larger than ourselves.

Faith is the ability to honor stillness at some moments and at others to ride the passion and exuberance that is the artistic impulse, the flight of the imagination, the full engagement with this strange and shimmering world. “

One writer pointed out “even when circumstances are out of our control, it does not mean that there is no control.

It just means that the control is not ours.”

All of the people in today’s passage are called upon to make tremendous sacrifices to respond to God's call.

John the Baptist, who had lived very simply, and had taken his role as the forerunner very seriously, now had to step out of the limelight and make space for Jesus.

He watched his disciples walk away.

Jesus, of course, embraced the call to be the sacrificial Lamb of God, not just in his death, but in the compassionate, serving and generous way he lived.

And the disciples left behind livelihoods, homes, families and comfort in order to participate in Jesus' mission.

Trust, faith, humility, sacrifice...these are the elements of a Christian life.

We may also be called to step aside and allow others to take center stage.

Or, we may be called to support and share in someone else's ministry as they serve God's purpose.

Or, we may be called to leave our comfort zones and give our lives for a specific task to which God calls us.

Whatever form our discipleship takes, we are all called and we will all need to make sacrifices as we embrace the values, priorities and purposes of God.

What is God calling you to do today?

More importantly, when you encounter that person who introduces you to Jesus – are you ready and willing to follow?