

**Romans 6:1-11**  
**The Baptism of the Lord**

**John 1:19-34**

**January 9, 2022**

**AGNUS DEI**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

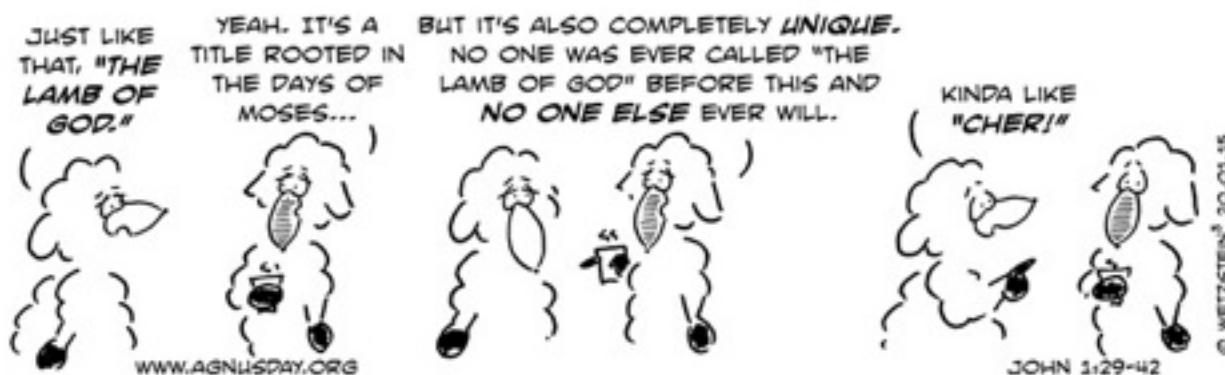


Agnus Dei

Do you know how to pronounce those Latin words? The preferred pronunciation is Áh-nyoos Déh-ee.

Do you know what Agnus Dei means? The picture above the words, combined with the gospel reading today, should give you a big hint – “Lamb of God.”

Several years ago, I subscribed to a weekly email called “Agnus Day – The Lectionary Comic Strip.” It is drawn and written by Pastor James Wetstein, a Lutheran pastor who serves as University pastor at Valparaiso University in Indiana. In each cartoon, two sheep named Rick and Ted discuss one of the assigned readings in the weekly lectionary, which is a schedule of four scripture readings for devotional use and worship planning and preaching. Even though I don’t always preach from the lectionary, I enjoy seeing the weekly conversations between Rick and Ted. Of the two sheep, Ted often asks the opening question while Rick seems to be more knowledgeable. To date, Pastor James has drawn five cartoon strips about the “Lamb of God.” One of my favorites is from two years ago this week. Ted says, “Just like that, The Lamb of God,” to which Rick replies, “Yeah, it’s a title rooted in the days of Moses . . . But it’s also completely unique. No one was ever called “The Lamb of God” before this and no one else ever will.” Ted says, “Kinda like ‘Cher!’”



Another good one, which really does describe the Gospel of John pretty well, has Ted exclaiming, “Jesus sure has a lot of nicknames!” Again, Rick explains, “They’re old titles. But Jesus will fill them with new meaning – you have to read the rest of John to understand.” “Or look them up on Wikipedia!” suggests Ted.



Don’t worry if you’re not familiar with “Agnus Dei.” The term itself is not commonly used in our Presbyterian liturgies and worship tradition, but the idea and meaning of “The Lamb of God” are very important for John’s gospel, for John the Baptist’s mission and ministry, and for our understanding of salvation and our own mission and ministry.

If you were to attend a Roman Catholic Mass or receive the bread and cup of communion in a Lutheran worship service, you would hear these words when the bread is broken: “Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us. Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.” Also, in the Catholic liturgies for different seasons of the church year, John the Baptist and the Lamb of God are referred to:

- The invitation to communion: “This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are we who are called to share in his supper.”
- The preface to worship on the first Sunday of Easter: “. . . when Christ became our Paschal sacrifice. He is the true Lamb who took away the sins of the world. By dying, he destroyed death, by rising he restored life.”
- and these proclamations on days recognizing and celebrating John the Baptist: “You chose John the Baptist from all the prophets to show the world its redeemer, the lamb of sacrifice. May the prayers of John the Baptist lead us to the Lamb of God. We celebrate the feast of John the Baptist, who foretold the coming of the Lamb of God.”

On the church calendar, today is designated as The Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Typically, on the second Sunday of January, I preach from Matthew 3, Mark 1, or Luke 3, all of which describe the actual event of Jesus’s baptism in the River Jordan and tell us about Jesus coming up out of the water, the heavens opening up, the Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and a heavenly voice saying to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (although in Matthew’s story, the heavenly voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”).

As usual, John’s gospel is different. His baptism story has the same two main characters – John the Baptist and Jesus – but John the gospel writer doesn’t describe the event itself. Instead, John the Baptist gives an eyewitness report: 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.’” (John 1:32-33) And then John the Baptist fulfills his destiny. He is faithful to his calling. He does the job God sent him to do. (John 1:32-34) John the gospel writer begins today’s story with these words, “This is the testimony given by John . . .” and ends today’s story with JB saying, “And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.” (John 1:34)

You know the old saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” In that spirit, let me show you a painting that interprets this story from the beginning of Jesus’s life and ministry through the lens of Jesus’s crucifixion. On the screen you see a 1515 painting by Matthias Grünewald. He was commissioned to paint this scene for the chapel of St. Anthony’s monastery in Isenheim in northern France. The monks there specialized in treating victims of the plague and a disease called ergotism, a painful skin disease.

The patients, for whom there was no physical healing or relief, would be taken to the chapel to view the life-sized figures in the painting, in order to find spiritual comfort by realizing that Jesus Christ shared their suffering.



Although it might be hard to see, in addition to the wounds of crucifixion, Jesus's body is also marked with the same kind of sores the patients had. On the left-hand side of the picture, you see three figures. The woman kneeling and worshipping is Mary Magdalene. The woman in white is Jesus's mother, Mary. She isn't dressed as a first century Jewish woman would have been dressed; instead, she wears clothes like the nuns and nurses in the monastery wore as they took care of the patients who were suffering.

Mary is being comforted by the apostle John, who is referred to as “the beloved disciple” in the Gospel of John. Do you remember how Jesus said from the cross to John and Mary, “Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother,” and John took care of Mary from that day forward?

But it’s the figure on the right who bears the most powerful testimony. That’s John the Baptist, who shouldn’t be in the picture, because he certainly wasn’t at the foot of the cross, since King Herod had ordered him to be beheaded long before Jesus was crucified. But there John is, just the same. And look at what he is doing – he is pointing to Jesus hanging on the cross – he is bearing witness, he is testifying, he continues to be true to his calling from God! Behind John there are some Latin words written on a wall, which say, “He must increase, but I must decrease,” which is what John the Baptist said to the people who told him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” (John 3:26)

Of course, there is one more image in the painting – the lamb standing at John’s feet. The lamb’s side is pierced, just as Jesus’s side was pierced, and the blood that pours out is being collected in a chalice. This image of the lamb is an ancient symbol for the Lord’s Supper, the feast of the Lamb.

It’s a different baptism story in John’s gospel, but it reminds us of the meaning and importance of our own baptisms. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 6:3-4, 11)

Two weeks ago, on Christmas Eve, we heard about a little child reminding us, “Look! It’s the baby Jesus!” and we heard about the shepherds “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:20) Today, on The Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we hear John the Baptist say, “Look! It’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Someone has said, “The John the Baptist we find in John’s Gospel shows how what we do reveals to others what we believe. The presentation of John the Baptist in John 1:19-34 challenges us to examine how our actions testify to our beliefs and what beliefs it is that they present to the world.”<sup>1</sup>

How will we testify to what we have seen and heard, by what we say and in how we live, so that others will come to know that Jesus really is Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God, the Son of God?

***Let us pray: Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed him your beloved Son, and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into his name may keep the covenant they have made, and bold confess him as Lord and Savior. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gilberto Ruiz, "Commentary on John 1:19-34," December 29, 2013 at [www-workingpreacher.org](http://www-workingpreacher.org).