

Mary Had a Little Lamb – 19Jan2020  
John 1:29-42; Isaiah 49:1-7

Here's some Dr. King to get us going:

*I know a man—and I just want to talk about him a minute. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. He worked as a carpenter. Then for three years, he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things that the world would associate with greatness...He just went around serving, doing good.*

*He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. They called him a rabble-rouser. They called him a troublemaker. He practiced civil disobedience; he broke injunctions. And so he was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. And the irony of it all is that his friends turned him over to them. And while he was dying, the people who killed him gambled for his clothing, the only possession that he had in the world. He was buried in a borrowed tomb, through the pity of a friend.\**

Take that portrait of Jesus from Dr. King with what John the Baptist *didn't* say: Behold! The lion of God greatly to be feared, who repays all for their iniquities!

Behold the shepherd of God who protects the flock and guides lost sheep!

Behold! The spacious oak of God, standing steadfast and immovable, overshadowing nations!

Behold! The key of God, unlocking all mysteries!

Behold! The soaring eagle of God, fast to rise to the heights of heaven!

Behold! The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle of God who fights crime with hip attitude!

Behold! The genie of God, for whom your every wish is his command!

Behold! The Avenger superhero of God, who with superpowers defends the innocent!

Behold! The judge of God, who examines and decides critically from on high the fate of all!

With a couple exceptions, those are not only possible images but biblical ones for how we might behold God. We could have both desire and reason to see God in all of these ways. So it is striking that we're introduced to God today not in any of those ways.

Again, this season of Epiphany is about God in Jesus being made known to us. This morning we pop over to John's Gospel for Jesus' first appearance there. Last week we heard his first words in Matthew's account, about a Lord in humble service, revealing peace rather than ferocious destructive leadership.

So as Jesus goes casually strolling by in his first entrance in John's Gospel, John the Baptist points him out and indicates who he is. To be clear, he might've said any of those big Beholds! The Lion! The Judge! The Superhero Savior! John could've even more basically said, Behold! It's my buddy Jesus. He's a decent carpenter and not bad to have in the boat if you go fishing. Or Behold! It's Mr. Goody-Two-Sandals, and you better watch your mouth around him because he's holy. Maybe most obviously, John might've announced, Hey! I dunked this guy in the river and a dove rested on him!

For any of the possibilities, the way Jesus might have been introduced, the first reaction to him meandering by, John the Baptist declared "Look! Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

So let's try to figure this out with some associations. Look at the lamb on the cover of your bulletin. Granted this is *A* lamb and maybe not *The* lamb. But if John thinks lamby things about Jesus, what do you think when you look at this little lamb?

---

\* "The Drum Major Instinct" in *Testament of Hope*, p266



Maybe Jesus was cute.  
Maybe he was cuddly.  
Maybe he was soft.  
He might've liked grass.

But it seems to me that the main thing is that a lamb is small and fragile and helpless. There has probably never been a superhero lamb with a bestselling action figure, right? And we'd be pretty clear that if a lion and a lamb picked a fight, the lamb would annihilate the lion. ? (Just testing.)

Dr. King would point out that it shouldn't stand up to kings or armies. Yet this Lamb did that, and has influenced life on earth more than all the others put together.

Jesus did it by being particularly lamby. I looked through the Bible 196 times the Bible mentions lambs, and the most notable characteristic is not just that they are weak and vulnerable. They die. In the Bible, lambs are constantly getting killed. There are lambs as offerings for sin and Passover lambs marking deliverance from death.

From his first appearance, Jesus is pointed out by John the Baptist as one who is going to get killed. That's an odd place to put our hopes for life. He is the Lamb of God, God's offering or sacrifice to us, delivering from death, taking away the sin of the world. With sin and death separating us from God, God bridges the divide and draws you in. There is no longer anything that can disconnect you from God. In this way that we wouldn't even want to imagine, God comes to us, to set it right. When we want to Behold God blazing in on our terms, by our standards, God shows up all sheepish as the way to come to us.

Because this victorious Lamb of God over our stubborn isolation reappears with our liturgical song, I want to share from the book of Revelation. I especially want you to hear that even there when the triumph is expected from the kingly lion in this heavenly throne room, all of a sudden a slaughtered lamb is there instead. He doesn't change into a fierce Lion to kill others; he remains always the Lamb who was slain. A special treat from Revelation, here you go:

*"Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered." Then I saw a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered. I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!"*

*After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." (from Revelation 5:5-6, 11-13, 7:9, 12)*

That was written for suffering people, feeling cut off and wondering whether their faith was right. They probably wanted a lion, a mighty king, some superhero. They get proclamation reassuring that the Lamb is indeed revealing a God who conquers by dying, that he is the answer for us and for all the world.

For any of your suffering, for anything that feels like it's been inflicted on you or that you've done wrong, for all that you fear would cut you off from God, this final vision of the Bible and the weekly practice of our worship service knows that

you join in the hymn of all creation, gathered around the Lamb who died to give you life.

If you feel like nobody, you're invited to the party. If you feel you're special, you're invited to join the party. If you long for things to be different, you're invited to the party. If you want to party and celebrate life, you're invited to the party. If you're a troublemaker, if you have too much, if you wish you had more, you're invited in. If you are climbing into the back of an ambulance, you're invited to the party. When you need help, or when you're ready to serve, you're invited to the party of the Lamb. It's a big party.

As Dr. King also declares for us, *the fact that this new age is emerging reveals something basic about the core and heartbeat of the cosmos. It reminds us that the universe is on the side of justice. It says to those who struggle, 'You do not struggle alone, but God struggles with you.'* This belief that God is on the side of truth and justice comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. There is something at the very center of our faith which reminds us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant drum beat of Easter.\*

Though, I'd remind Dr. King if I could, that Easter doesn't undo the slain Lamb. He's still Jesus. And it is his way of sacrifice and suffering and love that triumphs for you. The Lamb of God is vindicated and opening the party doors. With that, you join the angels and archangels, saints past, present, and future, earth, sea, sky and all their creatures in singing: "Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, whose blood set us free to be people of God. For the Lamb who was slain has begun his reign. Alleluia!"

---

\*\* "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," p141