

BORN TO DIE

When John the Baptist began his ministry in Israel, he showed up as a prophet in the Old Testament tradition. He lived in the desert, wore a rough, camel-skin garment, and had a restricted diet of locusts and wild honey. John claimed for himself the role of one who prepared God's people for God's Messiah. He called people to repentance, to "Make straight the way for the Lord." He must have been a striking figure.

One day, while baptizing converts on the east bank of the Jordan, "...John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'" (John 1:29)!

Put yourself into that scene. What do you think his listeners envisioned when John identified Jesus God's as Lamb, the world's sin-bearer? What do you envision? Probably a cute, cuddly creature. Lambs invoke feelings of innocence, purity, childlike vulnerability. During the Christmas season we easily connect the sweet baby lying in a manger with the image of God's little Lamb.

John's audience would have envisioned something very different—something horrific by today's urbanized sensibilities. God's Lamb would have suggested a temple scene—a sacrificial animal with its throat cut being placed on the altar to be consumed by fire.

When the Apostle John, in his apocalyptic visions, was directed by one of the elders before God's throne to look at Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah. John wrote: "Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain..." (Rev. 5:6).

This morning we want to consider what it meant for Jesus to be God's sacrificial Lamb. And we want to see this in the larger context of the story of two covenants. The first covenant was enacted at Mt. Sinai. The second on a hill outside Jerusalem we know as Golgotha.

We begin after the Exodus. Israel has left Egypt. The Egyptian army has been destroyed trying to follow Israel across the Red Sea. God led the nation south into the Sinai wilderness, miraculously providing food and water along the way. As they began their third month of pilgrimage, they arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai where they had a dramatic encounter with God.

God showed up to formalize a covenant with his people. Through Moses he told them: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5-6). Moses gave them the broad outline of what God would require of them and they all agreed: "We will do everything the LORD has said" (Ex. 19:8).

Then God descended on Mt. Sinai. The mountain shook and the ground trembled beneath their feet. Thunder rolled. Lightning flashed. A smoke of thick darkness swallowed up the peak, and they heard what sounded like a trumpet blast that just kept getting louder and louder. And out from this terrifying display on Sinai, God spoke to the entire nation. He gave them what we know as the Ten Commandments.

The people were so terrified that they begged Moses not to let God say anything else. They feared for their very lives. So God told Moses all the requirements of his law, and Moses told the people.

We read about that telling in Exodus 24. Moses led the people in the formal adoption of

their covenant with God. He repeated God's words and laws as God had given them to him. And once again the people agreed in unison: "Everything the LORD has said we will do."

That night Moses wrote it all down. The next morning was the main event. Moses built an altar at the foot of Mt. Sinai. He placed twelve stone pillars around it representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Young men sacrificed whole burnt offerings on the altar and fellowship offerings.

While they did their work, Moses once again read to the people everything he had written down, explaining in detail now for the third time their covenant obligations. And once again the people agreed: "We will do everything the LORD has said, we will obey."

Then Moses took the collected blood of the sacrificed animals and sprinkled some of it on the altar. The rest he sprinkled on the people. The writer of Hebrews says he mixed the blood with water, took scarlet wool and hyssop—a brushy, aromatic shrub—and used that to sprinkle the crowd with blood.

What would that do for your worship experience. Imagine Moses splattering you with the blood of freshly sacrificed animals.

Listen to what Moses said as he did it: "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." Does that sound familiar? Where have we heard similar words in Scripture?

A burnt offering was a sacrifice that made atonement for the person offering it. In this case, as God made his covenant with Israel, the burnt offerings were presented on behalf of the entire nation. They accomplished two things. First, they were a propitiation.

Propitiation is an old word. We don't use much anymore. But it's the only word in our vocabulary that accurately describes with the burnt offerings accomplished.

A propitiation is something that pacifies the anger of an offended party. For instance, the whole world has become privy to the cracks in Tiger Woods' character and marriage brought about by his infidelities. Ladies, if that had been your husband on the front pages of the world's news, do you think you would have been angry? Would you have been justified in being angry? What do you think it might take to appease that kind of anger and reconcile your broken relationship?

Propitiation is the word we use to describe what puts away anger, effects appeasement and brings about reconciliation.

God's holy, righteous anger is aroused by our sin. To God, sin is like a moral cancer in his universe that always destroys, always alienates, always brings about a dying. The Bible says sin is so serious that the consequences of sin is death. Death what we deserve when we disobey God. Under the terms of the old covenant, God accepted the death of an animal as a substitute for the deserved death of the guilty individual. The shed blood of the sacrificial offering represented the life offered in death and propitiated God's holy anger. Later God explained it this way: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement [propitiation] for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement [propitiates] for one's life" (Leviticus 17:11).

Now go back to Sinai. In order to make a covenant with sinful people, the people needed to have their sins dealt with. When Moses offered sacrifices on behalf of Israel, God accepted the death of the animals as a covering for sin on behalf of and in place of the nation. The sacrifice represented a reconciliation between a sinful people and their God. When Moses sprinkled them with the blood, it represented their identification with and participation in the death of the animal who died in their place.

But the burnt offerings also accomplished expiation. That's another unfamiliar word. Expiation describes our cleansing from sin's defilement. Speaking of the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement, God would say: "...because on this day atonement [propitiation] will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be *clean* from all your sins" (Leviticus 16:30).

Sometimes when we sin, we actually feel dirty. Have you ever felt that way? It's a moral filth we can't wash away in the shower. No amount of soap can scrub out the stain on our soul.

Under the terms of the old covenant God provided the sacrifice of an animal not only to bring about propitiation, that is, reconciliation, but also expiation. God accepted the sacrifice as a means of washing away the moral defilement of sin.

So when Israel was sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifices, they experienced that sprinkling as an outward expression of what God had done for them: that God had accepted them, put away their sin and washed them clean from its pollution. They entered into the covenant as a holy people, special for the LORD.

When Jesus came as God's Lamb, he came to bring into being a new covenant between God and all of humankind. This new covenant had been predicted centuries before by the Prophet Jeremiah. The writer of Hebrews repeated the prophecy this way: "'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.' Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more'" (Hebrews 10:16-17).

The new covenant would require a more perfect sacrifice than the one enacted on Mt. Sinai. It would be one sacrifice for all time, sufficient to remove completely the sins of the entire world. Isaiah said that this more perfect sacrifice would be offered by a man, for mankind. He would be God's servant who would "...[pour] out his life unto death, and [be] numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12).

Jesus came to be God's Lamb. He came to pour out his life unto death and to bear the sin of many. On the cross Jesus became our substitute, God in human flesh absorbing humankind's sin and guilt to be our propitiation, the sacrifice that reconciles sinful people with the Father.

Jesus is also our expiation, whose blood washes away our moral filth. Listen to the writer of Hebrews: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

When we come to faith in Jesus, what happened at Sinai when Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of the covenant is recreated in our hearts. Moses sprinkled the people with the blood of animals. God sprinkles our hearts with the blood of Jesus and draws us into all the benefits of the new covenant. We are forgiven, put right with God. And we are washed clean.

Now then, listen again to what Jesus said when took the cup after supper: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Jesus is God's Lamb sacrificed for us. By his death on the cross, God brought into being his promised new covenant.

When we took Communion this morning, we declared to God and to one another that we have, by our personal faith in Jesus, entered into that new covenant. When we drank the cup, we

acted out our testimony that we have a personal share in the sacrifice of Jesus. We have entered into the new covenant. God has sprinkled our hearts with his blood to wash us clean of our sin, take away the judgement we deserve, and bring us back into relationship with himself.

When Jesus was born, angels announced his birth to shepherds who were tending sheep. Scholars believe that quite possibly these shepherds may have cared for flocks destined for sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.

If so, that offers at least a partial explanation of why God made the announcement to them. When they came to the manger, they tended God's Lamb, Jesus, who was born to die, to be the sacrifice that would take away our sins.

This year, whenever you see a manger, see the infant child and remember the words of John the Baptist: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."