

Sermon: Behold, the Lamb of God!

Today (the Sunday following the Festival of the Baptism of Jesus), the Common Lectionary **interrupts** Matthew's telling of the story of Jesus [his birth, the visit of the Magi (followed by the family's fleeing to Egypt and eventual return except to Nazareth), his baptism by John; *next week*, his calling of disciples and launch into ministry] **with** this story about John-the-baptizer and Jesus **from** the Gospel-writer John. The interruption functions – let me *first* say it and *then* I'll explain – [it functions] like a wake-up call, or – better – like a billboard that *alerts* us, *reminds* us in the Church, *includes* us, *grounds* us in what is actually taking place (or *meant* to be taking place) within our lives of faith *this day*.

An opening requirement, here placed on me as preacher, is to remind you about a few key aspects of the Gospel of John (... details you've heard before at MacNeill). It is *distinct* from the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark and Luke) in *significant* ways, many of them accessible as we recognize John's followers of Jesus (in other words, *the Church* that is aligned with and gathered around John) is, sociologically, an "anti-society". An anti-society is a group of people that fully lives and functions in a larger society but that are opposed to and in conflict with it (... in John's terms, "in the world but not of the world"). So John's Jesus teaches that only if his followers "hate their life in the world" (12:25) [which is to say **in** the Roman Empire and **in** the world of Judean culture and religion] will they find truth, and light, and life; only then will they be born of God's power and filled with Spirit.

A second distinctive feature of John's story of Jesus is that there is **no** talk of the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven". The Synoptic Gospels are **dominated** by this talk: Jesus' mission there is to recruit *first* **apostles** and *then* (from Judea, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth) **followers** who carry out his political-religious task of **proclaiming**

theocracy (“the rule of God”), whose in-breaking is **prepared** by Jesus’ and the **apostles’** healings and exorcisms.

... There is no mention of “**apostles**” let alone “kingdom of God” in John, only “disciples”. “Disciples” are followers of a teacher; they join up with a teacher in order to learn a **way** of living. Jesus’ “**way**” for his disciples (according to John) – the whole point of his teaching, his signs, his death, resurrection and ascension – is life lived **in attachment** to Jesus himself. That is all. John’s Gospel account is written in order to lead, promote, nurture (indeed empower) and maintain such **attachment** (such “*abiding* in Jesus”, “*believing* into Jesus”, “*eating* of the bread of heaven”, “*drinking* of the water of eternal life”, “*being born* from above”, ... all these metaphors, and more, saying the same thing: ***attachment to Jesus***).

The story we read today is the very first ‘joining’ into Jesus’ anti-society. And those first two disciples come by ‘jumping ship’ from John the Baptizer’s anti-society group into Jesus’ anti-society group, doing so on account of John the Baptizer’s publication of Jesus’ identity. ***It is that particular public announcement concerning identity which I want to unpack for you, this morning.*** But first let me point out how this whole scene, in John the Gospel writer’s account, prefigures the style of much that will follow: There is – over and over again – a relational vignette (*others* will be with Nicodemus, with the woman at the well, with a man born blind, with people previously miraculously fed bread and fish, with grieving Mary and Martha) [... so, there is a relational vignette] whose presenting concern and resolution ***open up*** and ***deepen*** both the *original player’s* **and the reader’s** attachment to Jesus. It’s all about attachment to Jesus.

Coming back to today’s story: can you now see the importance of its placement in the common lectionary this day? We, *recently* witness to Jesus’ Baptism and across the coming weeks *about to* witness his ministry, are invited **to be like Andrew and the second disciple** who

joined Jesus' anti-society that inaugural day: we are invited to recognize just whom we are dealing with and **get on board** (OR **recommit** ourselves as 'people truly awestruck and, without second thought, ***on board***') in our attachment to Jesus.

The declaration by John the Baptizer *that changes everything* is one we've heard and thought we've grasped for its significance: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Only in my study the past two weeks, with tools from cultural anthropology doing the 'opening up', have the scholars Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh led me to the meaning of this announcement for those first hearers, and now I get to share it all with you. For you see, while *across time and based on the whole of the Jesus story* there comes great theological depth and breadth as the Christian Church makes associations with the Passover lamb and with the temple's sacrificial system, the issue *here* is "What could possibly strike those first two followers with such clarity and force that they would jump ship from John's company to Jesus?"

It turns out that *just as* "finding Jesus" was bound to a star for the magi, so this announcement situates the identity of Jesus by way of the stars; and all this right alongside the fact that divination (the turning to 'powers beyond' for insight) is discredited and disallowed in both Old and New Testaments. Be that as it may, from texts across the ancient world and with multiple references in Scripture in spite of the overarching prohibitions, **there are age-old systems of stories and understandings connecting life on earth with the stars**. Astrology was part of the fabric of ancient Near Eastern life, sort of like today as evidenced by its everyday inclusion in most newspapers. So it is that Malina and Rohrbaugh let us in on where John the Baptizer's two disciples would have gone ***in their thinking*** when John made his announcement. I quote:

There is but a single lamb in all creation that merits the title “Lamb of God”, and that is the constellation labeled Aries by the Latins. In the book of Revelation, this constellation is directly identified as “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (Rev 5:5), that is the Messiah of Israel. The same is true here in John’s Gospel, where John the prophet identifies Jesus as Lamb of God (1:29,36), and his disciples conclude he is Israel’s Messiah (1:40). [*Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, p 50*] **<end of quote>**

Phoenician texts from 1200 BCE call the constellation “Teleh” meaning “male ram, young lamb”. In the Arab world, it is called “Al-Hamal” , “male lamb”; in Hebrew, the constellation is “Tale’ ” (*same meaning*). According to lore across the many Near Eastern cultures, this constellation is the centre and head of the cosmos: at the beginning of all things, it stood in mid-sky. As ‘the first’ *in ancient Israel’s* zodiac, it was **in** the corresponding first month of the year that the Exodus (Israel’s foundational event) was celebrated; significantly, that event’s ritual marking being the sacrifice of a lamb (specifically, a young ram without blemish).

Some more important and relevant background information: In the most ancient representations of the sky, Aries was always pictured as a male lamb with a “reverted” head – that is, facing directly over its back to Taurus. This reverted head posture has continued down through the centuries of Christian art. Now people, ancients knew just as moderns know that only a being with a broken neck could have its head turned directly backward. The fit to Jesus’ story could not be closer: this Lamb of God who was slaughtered yet continues to stand.

But there is more: How does the Lamb of God take away the sin of the world? Malina and Rohrbaugh write:

... (I)t was common ancient lore that when the vault of the sky returns to the position it had at the very time of creation, it will be with the Lamb at the point of pre-eminence, the head of the

cosmos. ... By ushering in a new created order, with a new sky and a new land, the cosmic Lamb of God does away with everything that preceded. All previous accounts are set aside; it is a new beginning. The sin[s] of the world, ways of living that disgrace or dishonor God, [cease] to be. The Lamb of God thus takes away the sin of the world just as light does away with darkness, just as life does away with death. [*Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John, pp 51f*] **<end of quote>**

When John the Baptizer declares this to be the truth about Jesus (not metaphorical but literal truth: that this one standing before them is from the sky realm, precisely as in John, chapter 1, it is said that the Word – which was with God and which was God – became flesh and dwelt among us), well, the two disciples accompanying John that day are converted, calling Jesus “Rabbi” for it is – above all others – his teaching that matters here upon the earth.

<Pause>

People, the Christmas stories have once again done their stage-setting; Jesus has been commissioned and empowered in-and-through his baptism; we are set for a fresh year’s immersion into his life and ministry (... Matthew’s telling of his teaching and healing, his confronting and forgiving, his great zeal and even greater love). “Pause”, the Church scholars behind the Lectionary say to us this day; “Pause” the Gospel writer John says to us, “and look at who it is, standing before you.” Close your eyes if it helps you to focus and reflect. **Think** through all that you know about him. **Feel** through all that you know about him. “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” “It is everything ...”, John insists, “**It is everything**” to believe into this one, abide in him, ‘eat this bread of heaven’, ‘drink this water of everlasting life’, ‘be born from above’ through him. It is the way, the truth and the life.” **Do** not, do **not** allow

yourself to miss out on this one whose ‘way’ – above all others – matters here upon the earth.

Then, good people, “*Pause off*”, and let us all get on with it, in Matthew’s telling, all across this coming year. Amen.