

## 2023 Lamb of God

Imagine I did a children's message today and the kids all came up front and then I brought out a real, cute, clean cuddly lamb. Think they'd want to pet it? Think they'd want to cuddle it? Maybe name it something?

Then lets say I told them I had to kill it.

Not a very good children's message, is it? I'm sure some would think I would just be making a bad joke, maybe a bit of nervous laughter goes through the congregation. But then I pull out the knife and make for the lamb.

Maybe then an elder would stand up, "Pastor, let's move this along." Maybe a parent runs up and grabs their child. I'm sure anyone who cares about the cleanliness of the carpet would be up in arms. For sure.

Maybe a child grabs the little lamb and says, "No, please don't"

And who am I then in the child's eyes? A monster. A monster who is going to kill an innocent, cute, lamb.

I think most of us know, cognitively, that a whole lot of lambs were killed in the Old Testament. But can you imagine the cute things being led in? Can you imagine the priest slitting it's throat and the blood pouring down? Can you imagine it being tossed in the fire?

Why did you make this system God? Is he a monster?

Should we take the children's message even further? The terrified parent runs up to take their child away from the crazy pastor, and maybe they spit at me, "How dare you threaten to kill a lamb in front of my child!"

To which I, perfectly reasonably, respond, "Well it was either the lamb or your child."

And that's about when the cops are getting called and the president of the congregation is on the line with the district president, ya?

If you ever criticize one of my children's messages, just know, I got that one in my back pocket – it could be worse!

But in all seriousness, Romans: the wages of sin is death. Hebrews: There is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood. A debt is made because of our evil, and lets face, God doesn't take visa and he doesn't need shiny rocks like gold. What we can offer as payment for sin is blood. The very life we have in our veins. And short of harvesting it at blood drives to offer on the altar, the reality is, we don't have enough to shed, and not in a pure enough concentration. He won't take second rate blood. He didn't take second rate lambs. Pure, undefiled, without birth defect.

And we might say, “God, lighten up! Chill out.” Is God just a crazy man with a knife, thirsting for blood?

Or is he a just judge? You’ve heard me say it before: What kind of good judge looks at the criminal, knows they are guilty, and then lets them off scott-free? Not a very good one. And the crimes we commit may seem minor “I haven’t shed anyone else’s blood, why do you need mine!?” Well, first of all, have you shed some blood before? And if not, as our Lord teaches, the sin is far beyond just skin deep. Lustful thoughts, hateful thoughts. Jesus has something to say about those in the sermon on the mount, go look those up. Same with selfish pride, prejudice. We sometimes ask, “How can the news on TV be so bad all the time?” Answer: because of the very same things in your heart. They lead to those things. Lust to trafficking, pride and greed to wars. Hate to murder. And we are going to tell God to just lighten up about it?

No. He is good, he is holy, he is just. And so the people of the Old Testament were given a covenant with a sacrificial system that said, “Ok, someone has to pay. Who’s blood is it going to be? You and your children’s... or the lamb?” And as terrifying as a knife wielding pastor might seem, when faced with that choice I think we would all choose the same – the lamb.

But why a lamb, why not a cockroach or a pig (though baby pigs look pretty cute too)? Why the lamb? And to be sure, there were other sacrificial animals, but the lamb, on the Passover (where death would Passover you) was chosen *because* it was an innocent, cute, and cuddly... and now it had to die. Only the purest, most innocent of blood would do. And I have a theory as to why the pagan nations sacrificed virgins and babies – it was a perverted twist on this theme of innocence of the sacrifice that God instituted.

But we know that God takes no pleasure in the death of his or our children – it's the whole reason he put forward a lamb, a substitute! And now I hope you can begin to see why God maybe isn't the monster at all, but offering a sacrifice to save his people.

And all these themes culminate in our Gospel reading today. And so John looks at Jesus and sees something truly, completely, innocent. Something really, quite harmless, sure he is omnipotent, but he isn't using that to smite people. He sees something so pure, more than any fair maiden, more than any cooing child, he sees the sinless Son of God and says, "behold the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!"

And that lamb would die. Who calls the authorities to stop the slaughter of this innocent man? Oh, no, they wash their hands of the matter. Who, like an innocent

child, rushes in to protect him, “No, don’t hurt him?” Maybe the women following him, mourning? But they can’t stop the beating and the crucifixion. What did he do to deserve the nails in his hands and feet? What did he do to deserve the whips, with rock and bone, on his back? What did he do to deserve betrayal, mockery, and, lets not forget, the weight of justice for your sins? Answer: Nothing. Its what you did! And so the question to you, person of the New Covenant, is similar: “Ok, who’s blood is it going to be for your sins. You and your children’s or the spotless, innocent lamb: God in the flesh, Jesus?”

And so the sacrificial system of the Old Testament was not from a bloodthirsty monster, it was to point forward to the God who has such love and compassion for his people that he himself would be the perfect and innocent and spotless sacrifice. He would pour out his blood, so priceless, with such concentrated righteousness and innocence that the Judge of all cannot help but render payment and satisfaction for every, single, solitary, sin ever.

The justice of God is shown on the cross, evil is paid for. But oh, how the mercy of God is seen. God is not the bloodthirsty monster, He is the lamb! The lamb who lays down his life and pours out his blood for you, for the world.

If we could even pretend to begin to calculate how much that means God loves us, perhaps some of our anger, some of our despair, some of our doubt, might recede.

He has given his all for you! What other way can he better show his love, his care, his desire for you to be with him forever?

And how can we then look at others in this world and say, “I hate them.” The lamb shed his blood for them, even unto those who despised it. How can we then look at our neighbor and say they are worthless? A price has been paid for them. How then can we look at the luxuries and distractions of the world and say, “Oh that’s the point of life, that’s where security and peace are found.” I get it, a shiny screen and numbers in our bank accounts are a whole lot easier to look at than that – a dead carcass of a lamb. But only a fool would say anything else is more valuable.

And we are so often just that: fools. Ungrateful fools that deserve... ah, but here we are again, at the question: who will get what they deserve? Who will pay the price? Who’s blood will be spilled? This question came to Jesus. “Shed my blood for them with their sins and their doubts and their insincerity? Of course I will. I love them. I made that decision before the foundations of the world.”