Epiphany 2 (A)   Pr Aaron J Couch
January 15, 2023   First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Text: John 1:29-42   Portland, OR

Our gospel story tells of John the Baptist pointing to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It's such a beautiful and powerful image that it has been part of the church's liturgy since around the 7th century. As we prepare for Holy Communion, we sing together, "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us." (*Ask Karl to play it, invite congregation to sing.*) In our gospel story, John says again to two of his disciples, "Look, here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and those two disciples follow Jesus to his home to stay with him. In a way, when we sing "Lamb of God," the liturgy is inviting us to turn the story around so that we open our homes and our hearts to make room for Jesus to stay with us, to take up residence in our hearts and minds.

"Lamb of God" is an image that reaches deep to express the mystery of who Jesus is for us. I experience it as familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It's both comforting and unsettling. It calls to mind all sorts of stories from the Hebrew scriptures. When Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac, out of the conviction that was what God wanted, God provided a ram, a substitute that saved Isaac's life. Or when the people of Israel were ready to flee from slavery in Egypt, Moses instructed the people to smear the blood of a lamb over their doorway so that the angel of death would pass over and save the life of the first-born in that house. Coming from the bloody ancient world, the Lamb of God is a bloody image, but it's all about saving a life. It's a reminder of how Jesus' deepest conviction about every person being a beloved child of God led to conflict with the religious and political authorities, who didn't want anyone challenging the way they exercised power. And that led to a bloody end for Jesus. But his sacrifice, his refusal to back down, his determination to stand for love no matter what, changed the world. Jesus entrusted himself to God and faced death for the sake of faithfulness to God. And on the third day, God raised Jesus to new life, so that he could save the life of every child of earth.

As we prepare to share Holy Communion, singing "Lamb of God" invites us to reflect on how Jesus saves us. *"Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."*

Bob was the council president when I arrived at the first congregation I served as pastor. He was warm and funny, and had a very gentle spirit. He was also very open about his life. Within the first half-hour of meeting him, I learned that for most of his adult life, he had struggled with alcoholism, and it had cost him dearly. It had damaged his health. It had destroyed relationships that were very important to him. Alcoholism had caused him an incredible amount of pain. But he had been sober for more than 5 years, and he was very clear that Jesus had saved his life. In

fact, Jesus was still saving his life. He was active in AA, and Jesus was his higher power. Jesus was the One who forgave him and kept him focused on living his life rather than running away and retreating into substance use. Jesus was the One whose way of love gave him a sense of purpose and meaning in life, and gave him ways of investing his life in things that fed his spirit, like being part of the prison ministry team. Jesus had absolutely saved his life. *"Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."*

I knew a young woman whose family moved to a new city when she was just starting high school. She had a tremendously difficult time. At school she was lonely and bullied. It didn't seem like any of the school administrators noticed or cared. But she found safety and belonging at church. Her church community valued her, encouraged her, helped her see that she was loved. Her church community showed her that her life really did matter. She experienced love at church because that's the way Jesus is, and the church is the body of Christ. She was very clear that Jesus saved her life. "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."

Louis Zamperini was a prisoner of war during World War 2. He went through incredible abuse at the hands of his captors. After he was set free, his life really spiraled out of control. He was so angry, so full of rage for everything he had suffered. If it was truly astounding that he survived the war, it was at least as astounding that he survived coming home. It wasn't just the drinking and the out-of-control, self-destructive behavior. Louis was so full of resentment and hate and loathing that he was absolutely miserable. In his book, *Unbroken*, he tells how Jesus saved his life. It took Jesus and his way of forgiveness to set Louis free, to unbind his heart and let him live in peace. Without forgiveness, both for himself and for his captors, Louis' life would have exploded. He needed Jesus' forgiveness to save his life. *"Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."*

Over the past almost-3 years, we have been through an incredible ordeal: the global Covid pandemic, with all of its uncertainty and fear and isolation. At first, we didn't even know how Covid was transmitted. Can you remember liberally using hand sanitizer, wiping everything down with Lysol, disinfecting your groceries when you brought them home at the beginning of the pandemic? I do—that was before we knew the virus was spread primarily by aerosols. And then George Floyd was murdered, and our nation erupted. There was so much pain and grief and confusion. And then, after the 2020 election, there was the riot at the US capitol building, and the attempt to overturn the results of the election. It was so scary. And through it all, this community, which is the body of Christ, has been a life-saving anchor. Within this body of Christ, we've experienced a community that has grounded us, given us a place to talk and wonder, a place where we're not alone, where we're not isolated, where we belong, where we

can find our way through confusing times together. In this community, Jesus has been saving all our lives. *"Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."*

I wonder when you have experienced Jesus as the One who saves your life. I've shared just a few stories about people I've heard of, people I've known, people whose lives Jesus has saved. And I could tell you about many more, people I've know and loved who have been saved from bitterness by Jesus, who've been saved from frittering their life away in meaningless ways because Jesus gave them something to live for. I've known people who have been saved from despair and hopelessness by Jesus. I wonder how you would say that Jesus has saved you. *"Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, have mercy on us. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world, grant us peace."* Amen.