

The Church of the Transfiguration  
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany  
John 1:29-42

## Look, Listen, and Pay Attention

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In the fall of 1966, only a year and a half before he was killed by an assassin's bullet, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., reflected upon the Christian life and the cross. He wrote:

Life is not a euphoria of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Christianity has always insisted that the cross that we bear precedes the crown we wear.

The great theologian James Cone, who was the father of Black liberation theology and one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century, has written about the importance of the cross in Dr. King's theology. In his book *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, Cone noted:

For [Dr. King], the cross was the essence of the Christian faith, emphasizing that suffering was an inherent part of the Christian life in the struggle for freedom.

For Dr. King, the cross was central to Christian discipleship because it reminds us that things are not always what they seem. On its face, the cross is a horrific instrument of suffering, torture, and death. However, if we look beneath the surface, the cross is what paradoxically leads to our freedom and eternal life.

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Today's gospel reading is from the Gospel According to John. The passage invites us to reflect upon the idea that things are not always what they seem. The text invites us to look closely at Jesus Christ and see the deeper reality, or truth, about him.

Our reading begins with John the Baptist. As Jesus approaches him, John proclaims, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The next day, as Jesus walks by, John says the same thing again: "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" When John's two disciples hear this, they end up following Jesus and acknowledging him as the Messiah.

Now what exactly was John the Baptist telling his disciples to do? Well, it's a bit obscured by the English translation, but John was basically telling his disciples to look closely at Jesus – that is, to observe a deeper reality, or truth, about him.

The original Greek passage reads: *ide ho amnòs tou theou ho airòn tèn hamartían tou kósmou*. I don't expect most of you to understand the Greek. But I would like for you to notice

that the very first word in this passage is *ide*, which means “look,” “listen,” or “pay attention.” (*Ide* is translated as *ecce* in the Latin, and we often hear it in our Rite I language as “behold.”) Now *ide* might be a small word in the Greek, but it is a huge one in terms of its significance. Look. Listen. Pay attention.

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Like John the Baptist’s disciples, we too are invited to look, listen, and pay attention to Jesus Christ in order to observe a deeper reality, or truth, about him.

What is this truth? Well, John the Baptist describes Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve heard that phrase so often that sometimes I don’t stop and think about what it really means. Perhaps you’ve experienced that as well. What’s clear is that John did not intend to evoke warmth or fuzziness by that phrase. He certainly was not thinking along the lines of “Mary had a little lamb with fleece as white as snow.” He was not thinking about Mary – or at least not that Mary!

Rather, John was thinking about the Passover Lamb as described in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. As you may recall, the Ancient Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians. God had sent down nine plagues on the Egyptians in order to force the Pharaoh to free the Israelites. But the Pharaoh refused to budge.

On the night of the tenth plague, or the Passover, each Israelite household was instructed to sacrifice a lamb and to smear its blood on the door posts and beams of their houses. Because of this, the Angel of Death “passed over” their homes and spared their firstborn sons from death.

By contrast, all of the firstborn sons of the Egyptians – including the Pharaoh’s son – were killed by this tenth plague. As a result, the Pharaoh finally relented and allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt.

So what does it mean for John the Baptist to describe Jesus as the “Lamb of God”? It means that, like the Passover Lamb, Jesus will suffer a sacrificial death. (Indeed, the Last Supper takes place on or near the Passover.) But it would be a death that paradoxically leads to life. That is, Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross ultimately saves us from death and – through the resurrection – gives us eternal life.

Later in the mass, you will hear John the Baptist’s words yet again – immediately before Holy Communion, when the Celebrant holds up the consecrated bread and wine. If you think about it, this makes sense because, as with Jesus’ sacrificial death, the Body and Blood of Christ also leads to eternal life.

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On this Martin Luther King, Jr., weekend, we commemorate the life and ministry of Dr. King. The Episcopal Church has written a beautiful collect to honor Dr. King. You can find it at

the bottom of page 13 of your bulletin. The collect refers to the Exodus story as well as the liberation of the Ancient Israelites from slavery. It begins:

Almighty God, by the hand of Moses your servant[,] you led your people out of slavery, and made them free at last.

The collect then asks God to help us to follow Dr. King's example in resisting the evils of oppression and in seeking true liberty for all. It says:

Grant that your church, following the example of your prophet Martin Luther King, may resist oppression in the name of your love, and may strive to secure for all your children the blessed liberty of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As with the case of Jesus, the collect asks that Dr. King's death be transformed into a source of strength for us all.

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You might have noticed while I'm preaching that there is a mosaic of the Lamb of God just to the right of the chancel steps and below the lectern. The mosaic is a beautiful synthesis of the themes that we've been discussing today. The Lamb – whose head is surrounded by a halo – represents the deeper reality, or truth, about Jesus Christ. And the Lamb is holding a cross, which represents how a sacrificial death can lead to eternal life.

There is also a beautiful stained glass window to your left as you walk through the chancel, right behind the rector's stall. The window depicts the victorious Lamb of God from the Book of Revelation. The Lamb is in heaven, standing on a rainbow, and is surrounded by a myriad of saints. Like the mosaic, this window also represents the victory of eternal life over death.

I invite you to gaze upon the mosaic and the stained glass window when you come up to receive Holy Communion later in the mass. What exactly do you see? What do these images of the Lamb of God say to you about the deeper reality, or truth, about Jesus Christ? Look. Listen. Pay attention.

May today's gospel passage – as well as the life, ministry, and death of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – help you to deepen your relationship with the Lamb of God – him that taketh away the sins of the world. Happy indeed are they who are called to his supper.