

Something that can be confusing about the Bible, and about our hymns, and stained glass windows and all the images and poetry with which we attempt to pass on the story of Jesus

is that sometimes Jesus is described as a shepherd, and sometimes Jesus is described as a sheep. Like in today's reading from John, where John the Baptist announces to his followers when Jesus comes walking towards them: Look, there is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

Now, I think that the image of Jesus as a good shepherd is much more appealing than the description of Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Shepherds do good things for us, like lead us beside still waters, go after us when we get lost, fight away the wolves, keep us safe and well-fed.

Who wouldn't want Jesus as a friend?

On the other hand, while lambs are all fuzzy and cute, they can't do much for you. Kind of like those videos of kittens that you see on the internet, cute, amusing, makes us feel all warm and happy inside, but frankly, when the wolf comes around, I want a shepherd with a staff as my companion, not a cute cuddly little animal. And, that's only what I, as a modern person think.

We have to remember that to those Jews back there, to Andrew and Simon Peter and the rest, being a lamb of God meant something altogether different.

For John the Baptist, who made the announcement about Jesus, and for all those who heard him make it, that simple statement, behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world was loaded other with meaning,

and it must have fascinated those guys, this whole notion that a person, a fellow Jewish man, could be a sacrificial lamb, because, like, by then humans were so over the idea of scapegoating, right?

A brief history of sacrifice is in order:

A long, long, long time ago, but do things like it still today,

there was this cultural practice of scapegoating that was meant to give a community, a little town or village or tribe of people, a fresh start every now and then. It usually happened once a year.

The idea was that in their community, clearly things were not right. People

did bad things. They sinned, we would call it. And the more they lived together, the more they sinned and the worse things got in town, people angry with each other, then mean to each other, and things got worse and worse

until it was so bad something had to be done. So there developed a little ritual: once a year, a goat would be picked, and then all the anger and meanness and wickedness and sin of the community, would be symbolically placed on the goat, loaded on like a saddlebag full of sin,

and the goat would be driven out into the wilderness.

Voila, problem solved. No more guilt weighing them down, no more regrets or shame. A new beginning, the slate was clean and the tension between the villages dissolved.

The idea of sacrificing something valuable, like a goat, or even better, a cute little lamb in order to get something even more valuable, like a clean slate, informed the temple practices of Judaism.

So the idea of something being sacrificed to take away sin, not a new idea.

But the whole idea of a real person, a man, being a lamb who would be sacrificed to clean the slate, and, for the whole world, well that must have been very weird indeed.

No wonder Andrew and Simon Peter wanted to know where Jesus was staying—in order to make sense of this strange idea, they needed to know more.

There is just no way it makes sense to sacrifice a man in order to get a clean slate.

Well, it seems Jesus was intent on stopping the confusion—rather than giving him his address, taking a chance that maybe they'd stop by later, he invited them right then and there to come and see. Come and see what it means to be Jesus.

Come and see what is so good, that Jesus he didn't blink an eye when his cousin John makes such an outrageous statement about him: behold the sacrificial lamb, sent by God, to make things right for the whole world.

This notion of Jesus being the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is one that the church has struggled over the ages to make sense of. It is very strange language, and frankly puts God in a bad light. How, exactly, are we to feel

good about God when he goes around doing barbaric things like offing his son? So we have struggled over time with what to make of that image. And how the image works has, over time, has depended very much on how we have framed our understanding our human tendency to do very bad things, and how we have understood what needs to be done to make things right.

In one era, the image works this way: Satan has done harm to God's world, and to avenge this slight, Jesus was seen as fulfilling to duty of a loyal son to a devoted parent, defending a father's honor by going into battle with the enemy- but dying in the process.

In another era, Jesus came to teach us how to be moral human beings. In this understanding, the price that God's lamb paid

was the price that very moral people sometimes pay when they try to right wrongs like human sin. The price is martyrdom. Jesus, the lamb of God, is the martyr holding the mirror up to us: In order to show us the sin we are capable of, an innocent person must die. That is what you are willing to do in order to wipe your slate clean. Doesn't make much sense, does it? It's a wake up call.

Still another understanding points out that part of what we are too learn

is that we, as humans, did despicable things to Jesus, and in the normal order of things, at least as the world sees it, the proper response of a victim is to take revenge. For what we did to Jesus, we should all be struck down and burned with the hottest fires of hell.

But to show us another way of dealing with our human sin, Jesus came back to us,

but not seeking vengeance. What were his first words of Jesus to his disciples who didn't lift a finger to save him? To Peter who actually denied knowing him to save his own skin?

Not where were you you two faced traitors,  
not wait til I show you, what I'm going to do to you  
in return for your lack of loyalty.

No the first words of Jesus were not words of anger, or revenge or violence,  
but words of peace and encouragement.

In this understanding, the resurrection is the highest demonstration

of God's forgiveness and desire that we come back into loving relationship.  
And the lesson to be learned is not only how far we can wander from God's

intention for our lives,  
but how far God is willing to go to rescue us from our worst human impulses.

Turns out the lamb will go to hell and back, just to catch our attention

Maybe the bottom line to take away today

is that this whole notion of Jesus being the Lamb of God, given to take away the sin of the world, is hard to understand—it is complicated and we don't grasp it easily. But it has meaning that is central to understanding both God's desire to save us from ourselves, and Jesus role in helping that happen. It has meaning, so we shouldn't take it lightly. But like any hard teachings, we don't grasp it straight away.

Maybe that is why Jesus invited Andrew and Peter to come and see. Because I think that it is only when we take Jesus up on the invitation to come and see,

to learn the teachings and the story,

to take up the practices like prayer, and forgiveness and compassionate care that Jesus teaches. That it is only as we come and see, and learn, from Jesus, and see who he is and what we did,

that we are able to make sense of how it is that the in Jesus,

the good shepherd

and Jesus, the Lamb of God are one in the same.