

January 19, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church Bend
John 1:29-42

Today's gospel reading declares Jesus as the Lamb of God. And then the Son of God.

This reminds me of a story that well-known biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan tells about himself. Dom was interviewed by a Christian journalist who wanted a straight answer about what Dom believed about Jesus. New Testament scholars, especially "progressive" or "liberal" ones often equivocate about their own faith and belief. Or so it is often thought.

So, the journalist getting right down to business asks: "Dr. Crossan, do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? I want a yes or no answer from you. Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?"

Without a moment's hesitation Dom responded. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and the Lamb of God, and the Word of God.

The journalist hesitated. Was that a Yes?? The journalist wasn't quite sure.

I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Lamb of God and the Word of God. I'm with Dom Crossan on this.

Dom answered in the language of John's gospel. John's language is more symbolic and suggestive than literal and factual. I would argue the same for the other Gospels as well. But the language in John's Gospel is particularly poetic, evocative, imaginary, moving. I was converted reading this gospel. John's use of language had something to do with that. It "spoke" to me at an almost unspeakable level, as paradoxical as that might sound. John's language caught my senses and stirred my awareness in ways the other gospels had not. It loosened my logic. And helped me to hear things in new key and see things in a new light.

I want to say a little about the “I am” sayings of Jesus in John’s Gospel this morning. They are unique to John’s Gospel. I think reflecting on them will put the language of Lamb of God and Son of God in a helpful context.

In John’s Gospel Jesus says: “I am the Bread of Life.” “I am the Gate.” “I am the Door.” “I am the Way, the Truth and The Life,” “I am the Good Shepherd,” “I am the Vine,” “I am the Resurrection and the Life.”

The “I am” sayings are beloved. By many. Certainly by me.

And here is a spoiler alert about the I am sayings. Here it comes: Scholars insist that Jesus didn’t say these things. The I am sayings do not go back to the historical Jesus. Not a one.

I know.... That claim almost sounds blasphemous, doesn’t it. When I learned that Jesus didn’t say these things I was upset. A little more than upset. I almost wept over this. Don’t take away my Jesus, my Jesus in John’s Gospel. I was converted reading those words! Don’t tell me they aren’t true.

But I slowly came to a different understanding.

Let’s assume for a moment that Jesus did say these things. Like I am the Lamb of God or I am the Bread of Life, or I am the Light of the World. If we were to imagine hearing Jesus say these words and were somehow to take these words at face value I think, in all honesty, we would be cocking our heads from side to side, from left to right like my dog Abbey does when she is trying to understand me. What could Jesus possibly mean by these words??

If we were to see someone walking around saying I am the Door, or I am the Son of God for that matter, people rightfully would think these were the words of a crazy person. We have Diagnostic Manuals that confirm that. Some people did think that Jesus *was* crazy. But not because he said these things. Because he didn’t. But because he had a vision of the way the world could be: just and humane for all of us. For all of us. He called it the kingdom of God. John’s Gospel calls it “abundant life.” Some thought that was an impossible dream of a crazy person.

So, let me suggest what those I am sayings do say about Jesus. The I am sayings describe how John's community experienced Jesus. How they experienced him. Think about that for a minute. The imagery John uses reflects an experience.

Jesus was the Bread of Life not because Jesus said so. But because he was so. The I am sayings are not Jesus sloganeering. The I am sayings convey a poetic sense of meaning, more than the words themselves, and were testimony to an experience of Jesus.

Jesus as the Bread of Life. May go something like this:

Jesus is my daily bread. I don't know, there is something about him. He addresses a deep hunger in me. A daily hunger. And somehow satisfies it. He feeds and nourishes me at a soul level. A level I cannot even bring to words. But it's as though he knows what I am longing for. Jesus as my Bread of Life names something I do not know how else to name.

That is testimony to an experience. I hope John's language Jesus as Bread of Life reflects something of your experience too.

Or this:

I am the Door, or The Gate. In folklore the threshold, or the lintel, is where the demons lived. This is not literal, as you know. But this folk wisdom reflected an anxiety about crossing from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Anxiety about not knowing what is ahead. Because we don't know what's ahead! Many of us fear stepping into the unknown because it might be threatening. A door or gate is descriptive not just of stepping into a new place and starting a new time but it carries all the nuances and anxiety of the unknown and undiscovered meaning as well. For John to have Jesus say, I am the Door or I am the Gate, is a way of saying I know your comings and goings, I am with you on your journey. I know we move into an unknown. But come. There is no demon at this crossing. It is I. Do not be afraid. Come through to the next phase of your life. I am with you as we cross over.

This might be how members of John's community heard these words. I hope you hear them speaking to you in a similar way.

Jesus is the Light of the World.

What is it about Jesus that would have people say this about him? Did his teaching or presence or way of being, or even the remembrance of him, illumine things in such a way that the world came alive and brightened as if for the first time? Was being with him like recovering sight as if we had been blind? Was the experience of Jesus like light shining in the midst of what we thought was only a dark place? Was being with him like having us awaken from our ignorance? Like having the light go on? A glimpse of enlightenment?

Let me make a quick aside here. In John's gospel the meaning of sin, is ignorance. Sin is ignorance in John's gospel. The antidote for sin is enlightenment: awareness, seeing again, a first-hand authentic experience of the reality of God. For John Jesus incarnates, embodies such enlightenment, such wisdom. He is the way, the truth, the life. And the darkness will not overcome it. When John has Jesus say I am the Light of the World a whole range of experiences and possibilities take shape for his hearers. I hope that is so for us as well.

You have the hang of this already. But one more.

I am the Resurrection and the Life. What was it, what is it about Jesus that makes people feel there is yet life even after great and unspeakable loss. Even "when shadows cut like knives", or when our hopes have been dashed, or when death comes, life continues. What was it about Jesus or how he lived or about his presence in the world that made this inscrutable sentence "I am the Resurrection and the Life" seem so true? Jesus spoke to another level of hope and possibility. Even though we cannot really imagine what that hope and possibility is. There was something about Jesus that compelled John to write, "Jesus said, I am the Resurrection and the Life." And people understood.

We are not asked to believe in the I am sayings. We are rather asked to hear them as invitations. To come and see. And experience them for ourselves. John's language does not demand. It evokes, invites our trust and imagination.

John's gospel is not historical in the way we think of historical. It is not factual in the way we consider facts. But John's Gospel tells a story full of truth and beauty about Jesus of Nazareth, Lamb of God, Son of God, Word of God. And those images from the first chapter of John are just the starters. The I am sayings follow.

A final comment about today's gospel reading. In this first chapter John assigns Jesus his first words in a public setting. Again, Jesus did not say these words. But he might as well have.

His first words according to John in this Gospel come in the form of a question:

What are you looking for?

What are you looking for?

Sounds like something Jesus would ask, doesn't it.

Disciples are traveling with Jesus in today's gospel. He reads the restlessness in their hearts. He knows their longings and desires. He asks: What are you looking for? Knowing full well that they don't really know.

I can imagine Jesus asking us today, What are you looking for? What are you looking for? We probably don't really know either. But the question goes to our depths. And stirs something in us.

What are you looking for? A genuinely open ended question that allows for the unknown, the unexpected, a longed for hope. And calls us to await the coming of something new.

And the next words John gives to Jesus are: Come and See. Come and See.

Sounds like Jesus, don't you think? An open ended question followed by an open ended invitation.

Come and see. Follow me and Come and See for yourself. First hand. With new eyes. The eyes of a poet. Which I would say are the eyes of the prophet himself.

Jesus doesn't want us to believe in him. He wants us to experience him. To see the world and others and God and the dream of the kingdom of God as he did. To share in his experience of what is possible. What others may think is impossible.

And then, wouldn't it be amazing, wouldn't it be wonderful, if we began to see and experience ourselves and each other as bread and door and light and resurrection. It would change the world.