

Second Sunday After the Epiphany – 2020

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42a

When the Master Sergeant told you that you were going on TAD, it wasn't a good day. TAD – temporary assigned duty, that was what the Navy called the worst work they could find. On board the Enterprise, I was sent TAD... to the mess hall. Between 5000 and 6000 people, an aircraft carrier is a floating city. I was on trash duty. Whatever the sailors didn't eat they scraped into a garbage can and I took it from there. The day I arrived, they ran out of the right liners. Too small, too thin – they fell into the can and I had to pull them back out while a steady stream of military men scraped their leftovers. Then, when it was full, pull it out, tie it up, sling it over your back and take it to the storage room. During flight ops, you couldn't throw it overboard. It had to ripen in a storage room. The aroma in that room, the insects, the heat – it all created a vomitous environment. And then, after multiple meals, garbage bags floor to ceiling, the fun began. Time to bear it away. Go into that fabulous room, grab a slimy bag, sling it over your back and haul it up a ladder, across the hangar bay and toss it down the chute. Bag after bag – the liquid seeping out of the bag, onto your uniform, saturating your skin.

Bear it away. That was just a story to get you to think about the Lamb of God. “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Takes away; that is a decent translation I suppose, but it doesn't really capture the force of the Greek verb that is used. The garbage man “takes away” your garbage. Clearasil “takes away” your acne. The sewer system “takes away” your waste. This is different. There is more here, more to the work of taking away all that which infects us, more to taking away the sin and death which saturates your person than merely picking it up and whisking it away in some antiseptic miracle. “Bears it away,” now that is the true force of the verb – Jesus takes it away by bearing it **in His person**. Someone has to bear it. Only One person can bear it away.

Think “scapegoat” and then you're getting closer. The scapegoat was that massively unfortunate creature who had a starring role in Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement – it was a festival of forgiveness in the OT. Once a year, God ordained a festival unlike any other. The High Priest was to take two goats, one to sacrifice and then take its blood into the Most Holy Place. The other was the scapegoat, a wretched creature. What made it wretched? The High Priest placed both his hands on this goat's head and confessed over it all the sins of Israel. Can you imagine hearing the High Priest speak all the wickedness of Israel, in effect transferring all their sins onto this goat, which is then sent out into the wilderness? Perversion of every sort, spoken, confessed aloud. Greed and hate, pride and murder, deceit and devilry – the scapegoat became the object of radical scorn and then it bore it away. What a ritual! What a graphic portrait – of sin being located on one creature and having that creature bear it away. A festival of forgiveness by some substitute carrying away, bearing away the sins of Tom, Dick, and Harry – of Jacob, Samuel and Levi, of Miriam, Deborah and Rachel, of Jane, Jill, and Jenny. Scapegoat!

Jesus said this, very near the beginning of His ministry – it qualifies as a memory verse for you all (young and old): “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). John the Baptist knew the

veracity of those words. He saw Jesus and John knew what Jesus had come to do. “Behold, the Lamb of God.” He will bear away the sin of humanity. He is the embodiment of God’s grace, God’s forgiveness. He will shed His blood in a torrent of mercy. He will die to make us holy. He will take what is ours and He will become wretched with it. All of the holiness of God has been funneled into this man for this man is God. He is our festival of forgiveness. What He will do none but Him *can* do. Those who were near to John listened to Him. The Spirit enlivened their hearts to see the beauty of what God had long planned to do. The Spirit, which attended John’s Word, moved them to be near this Christ.

That is you; sure as shooting, that is you. The Gospel of Jesus Christ has come to you. The Spirit has enlivened your heart and you see the fulfillment of God’s grace – it is in your Lord, your Savior, Christ the King. You know what He has done and you embrace it. So, where are you? You are in His church, near to Him, where His Word is proclaimed, where He extends His grace to you in His delightful means. Only He could take away what you have done; the failures, the meanness, the radical selfishness – only He, true God and true Man, could fully love you and take your place. The Spirit enlivens your heart and you know how good God is, how truthful this revelation in His Word is, how truly blessed you are. And you are here – to receive it again, to learn of His grace afresh, to enjoy this blessed Word and enrich your life with His service to you.

When they followed Jesus, He saw them and asked them a simple yet probing question, one you should hear, one you should ponder, one for which you should find a ready answer. What are you seeking? Half the world never even considers this question let alone tries to find a decent reply. What are you seeking? Wisdom, knowledge, peace? What are you seeking? Love, hope, truth? Most are seeking things like leisure, a new Bar-B-Que, perhaps the lottery. What are you seeking? Really ripped abs, whiter teeth, or perhaps that perfect pair of jeans. What are you seeking? The truth is that what we are often seeking is simply to remain comfortable in our sin. What are you seeking? It was a real question and those who were queried replied in a way that you should think about. “Rabbi, where are you staying?” What they were seeking was Him. They wanted to be near this Lamb of God who was going to bear away their sin. There was something to discover in Him. They were prepared to stand at His door and knock. Rabbi, where are you staying? The invitation was laid out like a red carpet: “Come and you will see” (John 1:39).

Come and see. I am staying in a tomb, cut in the rock, one in which no one has yet been laid. I will stay there only briefly – parts of three days. Come and see. The women went and saw. Mary and her friends; they had prepared spices for His corpse. Morticians they would not be. The Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world would not stay in the wilderness of death. Death couldn’t hold Christ the King. Where are you staying, Lord? Come and see. Peter and John ran to see. The Agnus Dei was not staying dead. The Lamb of God was not staying in the tomb because the Son of God was not staying dead. He is risen! Jesus, in a marvelous act of mercy, told Thomas – come and see. Thomas was not staying doubting, the rich wounds in Christ’s flesh were a red carpet to Thomas’ faith: “My Lord, and my God!” You are here because you know where He is staying. He has told me, He has told you, He has told the believing world and we come here for He is staying with us, in His Word, in His Sacrament, in His church. My Lord and my God! How blessed are we that You are staying with us!

We have found the Messiah. So said Andrew to his brother Simon. You sing it when you sing the liturgy, the Agnus Dei, the confession of the church. You bring people to Jesus as you bring them here. Our Lord lays a red carpet of forgiveness for all who hear His Gospel. The Lamb of God is actively seeking us, and many, many others. It is His assigned duty – not temporary but eternal. Behold, the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world!