



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION
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BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD

John 1:19-34

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On Epiphany we remember the journey of the Magi. Why did they leave their homes and jobs and families in the East and make the long pilgrimage to Bethlehem? In those days, any long journey would have been dangerous, but especially this one into Roman-occupied Palestine, simmering with unrest back then as it is to this day. Why risk it?

They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh as gifts. Why not send them by courier? Was there no-one trustworthy whom they could send?

We presume that the Magi were Gentiles. Why all the effort to visit a Jewish baby? Why did they come?

They came to behold Jesus. When they arrived they asked, “Where is he who was born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, *and we have come to worship him.*”

These philosopher-sages came to Bethlehem because they believed Jesus was no ordinary king. Regardless of whether their religion foretold a messianic hero, they knew that Jesus’ birth signified the dawn of a better day, a new era of peace and prosperity not only for Jews, but also for themselves as well. So they came bearing gifts, and they came to *worship him.*

That was all a long time ago. Yet we’re not unlike the Magi. We’re also looking for a better day, and we’re willing to worship whatever we believe will lead to that better day. Sometimes it’s new technology that we line up for, dreaming of better. Sometimes it’s a better place, or a better job, or a better name that motivates us to study and work night and day to get there. Sometimes it’s a spouse—or perhaps a new and improved spouse—that we’re willing to do whatever it takes to obtain. We have different longings, but at the end of the day we all long for a better day one way or another. And it was that same sense of longing that brought the Magi all the way to Bethlehem to behold Jesus.

In John 1:19-34, John the Baptist points us to Jesus, inviting us to behold him for the same reason, i.e. that Jesus is *better.* The only imperative in the passage is v. 1:29: “Behold the lamb of God.” It’s an invitation to see Jesus in a new way, as the dawn of a better day. As we meditate on this passage, remember the Magi. They didn’t understand all the details, but they knew enough to seek out Jesus and worship him. It’s what wise men—and wise women—do.

WHO ARE YOU?

John 1:19-34 is the first scene, in the first act, following the beautiful prologue to the Gospel of John. The passage begins with a question that we hear all the time as we try to size one another up.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" John 1:19.

Who are you? What do you do? Are you important? Here in the capital city, we sort one another according to power and influence. The question posed to John the Baptist had the same purpose. People had been going out to the wilderness to listen to John speak. He had developed quite a following—including among people from the capital city of Jerusalem. Back in Jerusalem, the people in power wondered what John the Baptist was up to, so they sent out their agents out to size him up.

In 1:19, John the author¹ identifies the people in power as "the Jews." But what John the author meant by "the Jews" is not what we today would typically think of, i.e. not an ethnicity or a religion. John the author was ethnically and religiously Jewish, as were John the Baptist and Jesus. All were ethnic and religious Jews, yet distinct from the people in power. So when John the author speaks of "the Jews," he does not refer to all *ethnic* Jews, but instead to the Jewish establishment in Roman-occupied Palestine. "The Jews" weren't supremely in power; Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor Caesar had stationed there. Yet "the Jews" were effectively the permission-givers for ethnic Jews living in Palestine.

In John's Gospel, "the Jews" quickly become antagonists to Jesus. It begins in this passage as they size up John the Baptist. Ultimately it climaxes three years later in Jesus' sentencing with "the Jews" shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Yet we mustn't think of "the Jews" as outright villains. For the most part, they had good intentions. They looked forward to the end of the Roman occupation, and they believed that it would probably be a messiah (or anointed king) who would rise up to lead them to freedom. "The Jews" become antagonists as the story unfolds because instead of beholding Jesus, they sort him.

You know how the sorting game is played. "What do you do for a living? Who do you work for? Oh, do you know so-and-so?" All it takes is one wrong answer to lose the game. If you're a nanny, for example, you've learned the hard way that in order to keep playing you have to say, "I'm the CEO of a private home services company." To keep playing and move on to the next round, you have to establish and maintain that you're somebody.

¹ For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish "John the Baptist" (the central character in John 1:19ff) from "John the author," to whom the church traditionally attributes the fourth Gospel.

When John the Baptist started gaining a following, “the Jews” sent a delegation to play the sorting game with him. In order to keep playing, John would have to establish and maintain that he was somebody. When the delegation arrived, they asked him, “Who are you?”

JESUS’ ANONYMOUS HERALD IS NOBODY

John’s response in vv 20-21 was emphatic: “I am not the Christ (Messiah).” In fact, John was nobody. He wasn’t trying to be any of the big name roles from the Hebrew Bible—not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the capital P Prophet foretold in Deuteronomy 18. Instead, John was the person those awaiting the messiah most should have expected.

The Jews: “Who are you?”

John the Baptist: “I’m nobody—just an anonymous voice.”

In those days, all throughout the ancient world, whenever a new king rose to power, the king would send out heralds to announce the news. It was a very important job, and yet it was an anonymous job. The herald was nobody important, spreading the word about the one who had become most important. The herald’s job was to share the good news. In fact, that’s where we get the word “Gospel” from. It means “good news,” and it’s associated with these heralds. The first use of the word “Gospel” in the Bible is in Isaiah 40, in a description of the herald’s role in announcing the messiah:

Get you up to a high mountain, O herald of the Gospel to Zion!

Lift up your voice with strength, O herald of the Gospel to Jerusalem!

Lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!” Isa 40:9

Isaiah was saying that someday, when Messiah came, anonymous heralds would let people know.

Centuries after Isaiah, when the Jerusalem delegation played the sorting game with John the Baptist, he maintained that he was nobody—not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Capital P Prophet. He was just an anonymous voice, the voice described in Isaiah 40: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said”(John 1:23).

Usually in playing the sorting game, if you confess to being a nobody, then it’s game over. But in this case, John’s answer broke the rules and suspended play. In saying what he did, John called into question the whole pecking order system. Remember that “the Jews” were *the* permission-givers for Jewish people living in Palestine. They remained in power by being somebodies. And they believed that when messiah came, he would undoubtedly be one of theirs, so he would be a somebody too. And since the messiah would have to come up through their sorting process, then it was obvious that *they* would be his heralds, so his heralds

would be somebodies too. That's how they understood everything to work. They couldn't conceive of it happening any other way.

But John was a card-carrying nobody. Just an anonymous voice, as Isaiah had said. That blew the minds of the delegation. And John wasn't interested in playing their sorting game. He was too busy proclaiming the Gospel, the good news, that the Messiah king had come.

JESUS THE MESSIAH IS TRULY SOMEBODY

In v 26, John the Baptist says to the delegation, "among you stands one you do not know," and he goes on to identify Jesus as the Messiah king. The Messiah was right there, yet the delegation didn't even recognize him. Why not? Because they couldn't behold someone they couldn't sort. Their power structures ruled out Jesus' very existence.

Over the centuries, people have sometimes mistakenly believed that what John the author meant by "the Jews," was all ethnic Jews, and then they have used this Gospel to justify anti-Semitism. It's a tragic mistake that completely misses the point that John the author was making—that it's hard for the people in power to behold Jesus. Whoever you are, whether Jew or Gentile, if you're a person of influence, then you probably got where you are by playing the sorting game. But none of that can help you behold the Messiah. Because what happens when you finally behold him is that you realize that he's somebody, truly somebody, the only somebody who matters, and that in comparison with him, everyone else is nobody.

Rev 5 gives us a glimpse of the heavenly throne room, where a lot of VIPs are gathered. There are these four magnificent "living creatures" there, and the twenty-four elders, each of them majestic kings in their own right. But when the Lamb of God comes in, they all fall down before him, singing his praises. And then thousands upon thousands of angels do the same thing. And finally every creature in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and in the sea, all say, "To him who sits on the throne, and unto the lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and power forever!" When we finally behold him, then we realize that no matter where we rank in the sorting game, we're all nobody in comparison with him.

Once John the Baptist beholds Jesus, John knows where he stands: he's a nobody in comparison. He says in 1:27 "I'm not even worthy to untie his dirty sandals." Wow! Such self-deprecation! It's disturbing, given our obsession with identity today. It sounds pathological, doesn't it? Yet it's the starting point for a new and better identity, no longer earned by playing the sorting game. When we behold Jesus, we're set free from the dominion of the pecking order, in order to find our true identity in the eyes of the only one who matters. We're also set free to be heralds for Jesus, proclaiming the best news that we can possibly proclaim. It's not a burden or a chore to share good news. We simply report what we've seen and invite others to come see him too.

BAPTISM: CONNECTING NOBODIES TO SOMEBODY

The delegation still didn't get it. John's answer was absurd to them. He was gathering a crowd in the wilderness and baptizing them, for goodness sake. Obviously he was trying to prove that he was somebody. So they asked him (v 25) "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Messiah nor Elijah nor the Prophet?"

In the verses that follow, John gives two reasons why. First, he says, God sent John to baptize people and to watch for a special sign: the person on whom God's Holy Spirit descended like a dove would be the Messiah. So, v 32, John saw the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus, and that's how he knew for sure that Jesus was the Messiah.

Second, because John knew Jesus to be the Messiah, he was able to point others to him. That's what Gospel heralds do, and they do it all the time in many different ways, even though they're nobodies. It might seem counter-intuitive at first, but nobodies are really great for pointing people to Jesus, because they're honest and trustworthy in ways that somebodies often aren't.

I make this mistake all the time, because I'm a pretty good problem-solver, and I like to be of help to people in need. But the best and most important thing I can give people is not my advice, no matter how wise it may be. What they need most is Jesus. It's malpractice if I give them counsel without pointing them to Jesus.

John said (v 26-27), "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." In other words, you ain't seen nothing yet. If you thought my teaching was great, wait 'til you hear Jesus. Further, if you thought my baptism was helpful, wait 'til you meet Jesus.

John's baptism is the first explicit reference to baptism in the Bible, but we know that by this time Judaism was using ritual baths to signify repentance and cleansing from sin. Palestine was a powder keg back in those days, and people were scared. Some were going out to John to be baptized in order to show their contrition. Yet John couldn't give them what they really needed, and he knew it. All he could do was point them to Jesus. Thus his remarkable transparency in 1:33 when he says, Jesus "is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." John was saying, "You need better than me. That's why I won't pretend to be the one you're looking for." John was able to wash people's outsides, but only Jesus can give us what we really need. When Jesus immerses people in the Holy Spirit, they become true somebodies, because it's the Spirit who gives us a new identity by certifying our adoption into God's family. The Spirit unites us with God, confirming that we belong to him forever. John knows that's what we really need, and that's why he points us to Jesus.

BEHOLD THE LAMB

Because Jesus is the Messiah King who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, John invites us to worship him, saying (1:29), “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Sin is never a popular topic, and if it weren’t for Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, I would avoid talking about it.

Sin is real, and it’s everywhere. We see it so much that we no longer pay attention. It’s on every page of the newspaper. At work in every office and cubicle. At home and at school. It’s everywhere out there, and it complicates our lives in endless ways. Sin is also the reality within. It’s in our own dark thoughts and desires. It’s what we do and say whenever we put ourselves first. All of us, every one, is marred by it. And though we try to tune it out, it comes back to us day in and day out in our self talk, in cycles of shame and self-justification for things done and left undone.

God sees sin and he hates it too, because it separates us from him and from one another. God knows that we are enslaved to sin, just as the Israelites were once enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. And so, because he loves us, he sent us a passover lamb.

On that first night when God set his people free from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12), the Israelites spread the blood of the passover lamb on their doorposts as a sign of God’s protection. Pharaoh ignored all God’s prior warnings, so it took the death of his firstborn son to get his attention. From then on, the Passover became the most important feast of the Jews, when they remembered God’s protection and deliverance. But as great as that Passover was, it was only a shadow of things to come. God gave his firstborn son to be sacrificed for us on the cross, so that we might no longer be enslaved to sin. The blood of Jesus, the better Passover lamb, covers us a sign of protection from death and eternal separation from God. Jesus is the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the whole world, Jews and Gentiles, once and for all.

There is nothing we need more than the Lamb of God, but it takes becoming a nobody to be able to see our need. As long as you’re somebody, you’ll never behold him.² We need a better savior than somebodies like you or me. We need a true somebody—Jesus, whose sandals we aren’t fit to untie. Nobody needs him like you and me.

To all of us John says, “Behold the lamb of God.” Wise men and wise women still seek him. Come and worship him, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

² “Never in human history have we been more assured of our ability to fix ourselves, yet all we have to do is look at 2017 to realize how profoundly mistaken we are.” Bishop Steve Breedlove, homily for Jay Traylor’s ordination to the priesthood, January 6, 2018.