

The Lamb in your Telescope

- [John 1:29-42](#)

*In July of last year we got to see the first images from the James Webb Space Telescope launched just over a year ago on Christmas Day 2021. Its ability to see infrared light means that it can see through dust storms which is where stars and planetary systems are born. According to [NASA](#)¹, scientists hope that it will help answer age-old questions like “How did the Universe begin?” “How do galaxies form and evolve?” and “How do we fit in the cosmos?”

*The last of those is a question that up until now has been the purview of theology. It will be interesting to see how and if that changes. My guess is that for as many questions as it may answer, the Webb telescope will bring even more. Which is also rather like theology.

In today’s Gospel reading, we heard John the Baptizer say twice that Jesus is the Lamb of God. This is a very familiar image as we often include it in our liturgy and sometimes in our hymns. But no-one can say *exactly* what it means. Like any really good symbol it is potent with meaning.

*When the Hebrew people came out of Egypt, the angel of death passed over their houses and only visited the houses of the Egyptians. The angel knew the difference because the Hebrews had put the blood of a lamb on the doorposts and the lintel. This was the first Passover – the angel of death passed over because they saw the lamb’s blood. The family then roast and ate the lamb with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

According to Exodus 12, this Passover meal was to be repeated annually as a memorial feast and the children were to be taught that, “It is the sacrifice of the LORD’S passover, for He passed over the houses of the

¹ <https://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/first-science-images-packet>

children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses.'

John's gospel, which is the one from which our gospel reading is taken, places the last supper just before the Passover Feast as if to emphasize that Jesus is the ultimate Passover Lamb. But John the Baptizer says "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" The Passover lamb was not for taking away sin but as a signal that death should pass over.

*Lambs were also used within the ancient Jewish sacrificial system as sacrifices to ensure a good relationship with God. A lamb without blemish could be sacrificed for thanksgiving or, the Hebrew says in the first chapter of Leviticus, for wiping away anything that might stand in the way of a good relationship. (Lev. 1. 4) Most translations use the English word atonement here. Atonement is a word that means what it says 'at-one-ment' – so the sacrifice of a lamb wiped away anything that might hinder the relationship with God and achieved atonement.

So we have two quite different meanings which complement each other. As the lamb of the Passover, Jesus keeps us from death and in fact gives us life; and as the lamb of sacrifice, Jesus restores us to right relationship with God.

There is another echo here. You will remember the story of Abraham taking his son Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him. When Isaac notices that they are taking wood and fire for a sacrifice but don't have a lamb with them, Abraham tells him soothingly, "God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering my son." (Gen 22.8) Who knows whether he really believed that or whether he was just trying to calm a scared kid – but it turned out to be true. Just as he was about to sacrifice Isaac an angel told him to stop and there was a ram caught in the bushes which he sacrificed instead. God really did provide the "lamb" for the sacrifice. So the lamb of God may be seen as the lamb which God

provides for the sacrificial meal. Normally humans bring the food, but here God does.

*And there is still another, a third (or is it a fourth?) meaning. A lamb is defenseless. A lamb cannot fight back. You may remember that Jesus told his disciples, “I am sending you out like sheep surrounded by wolves, so be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Matt 10:16) Jesus practiced non-violence – the Son of the great God did not fight back against the oppressors with swords and knives but with love. On this Martin Luther Jr weekend, this may be the meaning of the lamb which has the most power for us. Jesus the Lamb is also Jesus the Christ who overcame the sin matrix and was resurrected to take his rightful place as Lord of the Universe. Its an amazing paradox that defenselessness is powerful against evil.

There are 78 Bible verses that mention a lamb – most of them are in Leviticus with all the ancient sacrificial practices, yet 25 - just about one third – are in the book of Revelation which really builds on the idea of Jesus as the lamb who was slain.

But the first person to declare Jesus the Lamb of God is John the Baptizer. We don't know exactly what he meant, but if he hadn't used that analogy, would it have been picked up by others? Would the John who wrote the Book of Revelation from his visions on Patmos had so much focus on the slain lamb on the throne if John the Baptizer had talked about Jesus some other way? Would we have hymns like “washed in the blood of the Lamb” if it were not for John the Baptizer?

He has a lot to answer for.

John inspired Andrew who inspired Peter and Peter became a great preacher, a leader of the early church and probably the source of much of the material found in Mark's gospel. We might not be here today and we probably wouldn't use some of the symbology I have been talking

about this morning if it were not for John the Baptizer and the trail of witnesses which started with him.

This is the way that we get most of our knowledge – from other people. I have consulted three books and seven websites in preparing this sermon. Each of those was prepared by one or more other people.

*Which brings me back to the Webb telescope. It was created over many years by a team of scientists. The images that it brings bring us new knowledge and new understanding which will be communicated in learned articles and scientific papers and in very simplified websites which will be consulted by people like me and passed on to you. Without all those hundreds, probably thousands of people, I would know nothing about it.

The church functions a bit like that. People come to church where they heard the gospel and gospel reflections. Over time we learn about things in greater depth and it informs our direct experience of God. And when we share our experience of God with one another we enrich one another and we pass the chain of knowledge and inspiration on...

But when we fail to communicate, the chain peters out.

We have generations now who have not been brought up in Sunday School, who have not had Religious Education at school, who only have vague memories of Scripture, much of it out of context.

We, my friends, are called to be witnesses, to talk about our own experience of God. We are called to magnify God, to be telescopes which see what God is doing and relay that to other people. We may not be able to see God as clearly as the Webb Space Telescope can see the beginnings of stars and galaxies, we may not even be up to Hubble's standards. Some days I feel that I'm more like a toystore telescope in my ability to see and communicate God's presence.

*Whatever size telescope you feel that you are, it is our calling to share those glimpses and those inklings not just with each other but with our children and grandchildren, with the generations who somehow missed out on knowing that God is present and that Jesus the Christ is the Lamb of God.

It is good to practice together and I commend to you the storytelling gatherings. Like the parish survey, these are an integral part of our discernment process as we ask one another, what has given you joy here? When has your sorrow been held? What has God done amongst us these past seventeen years and what might God be about to do in our midst?

The servant in the Isaiah prophecy this morning was told, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob... I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” God took the small vision and said that’s great but there is more, there is a bigger picture.

I am sure that God is calling St. Benedict’s to a bigger picture – to reveal God in this community in new and hitherto unthought of ways. And that will become more and more apparent as we bear witness to what God has already done and is doing, and as we share that story with each other and then with those who have not heard the good news of Jesus.

So people of God, dust off your telescopes and let us see and share the movement of God in our common life together.