

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Epiphany. What is it all about? What is this important but brief liturgical season between Christmas and Lent reveal to us as we venture on our daily lives as God's beloved people?

Well I think our Gospel reading for today, not to mention the other two readings we just heard, really opens up for us, shines a light upon what Epiphany is all about.

Epiphany is sort of a bracketed season of the church – we have the beginning-epiphany and the ending-epiphany, and everything in between is epiphany. The first epiphany marks the day when the babe in Bethlehem is revealed, unhidden, “light bulbed” to the nations by way of the magi from the east who come to worship and give gifts. The end-epiphany is that day when Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up the high mountain to pray and while praying he is transfigured before them, revealing to them a glimpse of his divine nature, his glory, and his purpose.

Now if these brackets on each end of the season called Epiphany fail to shine a light, reveal, make clear to you what this season is all about, then let's look a little closer at our Gospel text and see what find.

Now in the Gospel of John, Jesus' baptism is not as spelled-out for us as it is in the other gospels. In fact, this text IS the only text which shows us Jesus' baptism by John in this gospel. But this text is revealing none the less.

John exclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”. That word, “behold” is an epiphany word. “look!”, “look here, see this, pay attention – come here!” A word that is chalk full of the

ideas of light shining in darkness, understanding driving out confusion, clarity driving out the vague, and hopefulness shining on despair.

And what is this hopefulness? The Lamb of God has come! Now when Jews would think of the Lamb of God, they'd think about a lamb, a sheep, chosen or set apart to be used for the sacrifice, for the day of atonement, for Passover, and for many the other sacrificial feasts and festivals of Israel.

But John isn't pointing to or referring to a goat or a lamb – he's drawing the people's attention to Jesus – "Behold the Lamb of God."

Jesus is the one, He is the one who has been anointed, set apart, sanctified, consecrated to do the will of the Father. In the stables, in the fields, there were many lambs suitable for the setting apart and use in the sacrificial system, and every day lambs were brought before the priests to be offered up to God on behalf of the people.

But now, THE Lamb of God, the only true Lamb of God has come.

Now listen to what John says: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

Notice what's not in this sentence. John doesn't say "behold the lamb of God who CAN take away the sin of the world," or "behold the lamb of God who WANTS TO take away the sin of the world...if only you'd devote yourself to him..." John says "behold the lamb of God WHO TAKES AWAY the sin of the world!" It's a point of fact – an absolute. He DOES it, case closed. From the moment of Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was already taking away the sin of the world by being the Lamb of God.

Now our default way of thinking sort of demands that we participate in some way with our being saved. And we always want to remake the language of faith so that at least some responsibility is put upon our

backs. And this need to say “I’ve done this,” to boast, to take credit, even if just an ounce, is really a characteristic of our sinful human nature.

In fact, we are more like those disciples who were standing with John, and when John epiphanied Jesus the lamb of God to them, they distantly followed Jesus until He turned around and spoke to them. That’s what we’re like.

And if the Word of epiphany was never spoke to them, “Behold the Lamb of God,” they would have hung around with John the baptizer until the day they died.

I think this is sort of the pun that John’s gospel is revealing. What do lambs do? They follow, right? They go where the shepherd leads because they know by experience that the shepherd will tend to them, protect them, and provide for them. And from time to time a lamb will do stupid and run off a cliff.

But here, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is being followed by these two men, these disciples of John, these lambs. Why? Because they’re so good? Because they have this innate ability to make a right choice? No, but because the call, the voice of the Lamb of God proclaimed by John the Baptizer, draws them as a lamb is drawn to its shepherd.

Now what is it that the Lamb of God does? Another epiphany moment. He takes away the sin of the world. Notice that John doesn’t use the word “sins” here which may suggest that the Lamb of God picks and chooses only certain sins to take away while leaving other sins of the world to fester. Instead John says the “SIN” of the world, asserting that the very nature, the entire substance, the whole, kit and caboodle is taken away by the Lamb of God.

We tend to put degrees of severity upon sin, suggesting that one sin is more...sinful...than the next. And we do this because we are more concerned about the earthly consequence of sinS, how they affect us temporally, or how they affect society, rather than the eternal consequence of siN, its separating power and ultimately its eternal condemnation of death.

And see we make ourselves to be the judges of sins, deciding which sins are severe and which are trivial. And then this opens the door to the thought of changing sins' severity based upon society, culture, the ebb and flow of the human limitation called time and history.

But Jesus, the Lamb of God, didn't come to take away the sins of the world and then leave it up to us to decide what it means; Jesus came to take away the SIN of the world, all sin, and as His followers, we ought to say nothing more or nothing less than what He said and did. We ought not concern ourselves with the ebb and flow of culture or society, because the whole world is affected by sin, and Christ, the Lamb of God, came to take away the sin of the whole world, and not just those sins we deem more or less sinful or that we reinterpret in order to feel acceptable to society.

Epiphany shines a light into the darkness of sin, and that light is Christ coming to take sin away. The light doesn't come to make it good and right to BE DARK. When God created the world, He didn't create the world in darkness, but He said "let there be light" and through that epiphany, darkness was subdued and all things were created. Jesus doesn't shine as the epiphany light into the dark hearts of sinful man to say "it's okay to remain in darkness," but He shines in order to subdue sin, destroy the darkness, and enlighten the hearts of man, to "take away the sin of the world" – it's the only way we could be saved!

That's why those two disciples of John leave him and follow Jesus; His light shines in their dark hearts and takes away their sin.

But as any good shepherd does, Jesus stops and turns. See the disciples are a bit gun shy, a bit scared of what they might get themselves into if they walk into this man John the Baptizer called the "Lamb of God." Certainly, a reasonable fear, considering that these disciples saw Jesus at his baptism, saw the heavens open and the Spirit of God descend like a dove and rest upon Him.

It's sort of like us when we're in the presence of a famous superstar. We don't really want that star to notice us, but if he does notice, well that's pretty cool too. We don't want to go out of our way to seem clutchy or obsessed, and yet what we really want is to run up to that superstar, shake his hand, and have our picture taken with him. But we won't; not unless that movie star invites us. It's a weird sort of dance.

And so it is with the two disciples. They do this weird sheep dance behind Jesus, and they would never ever go TO him, such that at some point, they'd probably give up and go back to John the Baptizer. But Jesus stops and turns and shows interest in them, these wayward sheep. He asks, "who are you looking for," and the door to conversation and interaction is open wide.

They've been accepted; they've been noticed and received -- redeemed.

What if I told you that many in our world today never convert to Christianity, never receive Holy Baptism, never so much as attend church, because we don't stop and take notice? Would you agree with that? That as we go about our days as God's beloved children, there may very well be people behind us, following us, hoping that we stop and turn and say "who are you looking for," but we never do, and then

they go off and they follow some other teaching, some other church, some other leader.

Now we talk a lot about growing and bringing more people into the church. We talk – a LOT – but how often have you stopped, and turned and checked to see if there was anyone following at a distance, waiting for you to notice, to be their epiphany, the light-shiner, the Gospel proclaimer?

I suspect that most of you are like me and you are so focused on getting yourself to wherever it is you're going, that you forget to stop and turn around and invite those distant ones following you to come and see.

But this week, take a moment to stop, to turn around and to those you see invite them to come and see the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Shine that light upon them; be their epiphany.

This brings me to another really important part of John's text. The phrase “come and you will see.”

Now Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. He is the center of all theology. One of my professors at Fort Wayne said that “all theology is Christology,” and though it took some time for his community of theologians to accept what he said, ultimately, he was right.

When we study God, it is through Christ that we study Him. When we seek to learn about God, we do so through the words, actions, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. God reveals Himself completely through Jesus, through the Word that became flesh and made his dwelling among us.

Now when the Word become flesh, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, when Christ Jesus turns and speaks to the two disciples of John, He doesn't persuade them to go with Him through

extensive, deep, theological conversation. He could have. Jesus is the Word become flesh, so certainly He has the capacity of advanced theology – He spoke it into existence. But instead He says “Come and you will see.”

Sometimes I wonder if our shyness, our unwillingness to invite those hesitant followers to church, exists because we seem to think that a well-rehearsed, deeply theological, persuasive argument must be developed in our minds.

How many times have I been told, either directly or indirectly, that the work of evangelism, of telling others about Jesus, of growing the church, is my job – the pastor’s job – and no one else’s? How many of you think to yourself that it’s MY job to be bringing people into this church, and you tend to judge my ministry by how many people join this church in a given year?

Well I hate to break the news to you, hate to burst your bubble...but if the hymn that we sing regularly entitled “*How Shall They Hear’ Who Have Not Heard?*” is true, and if you’re singing the hymn as much as I sing the hymn, then it’s more than just my job, my call, my work – it’s yours too. Listen to the words:

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| 1 “How shall they hear,” who have not heard
News of a Lord who loved and came;
Nor known His reconciling word,
Nor learned to trust a Savior’s name? | 4 “Lord, here am I:” Your fire impart
To this poor cold self-centered soul;
Touch but my lips, my hands, my heart,
And make a world for Christ my goal. |
| 2 “To all the world,” to ev’ry place,
Neighbors and friends and far-off lands,
Preach the good news of saving grace;
Go while the great commission stands. | 5 Spirit of love, within us move:
Spirit of truth, in pow’r come down!
So shall they hear and find and prove
Christ is their life, their joy, their crown. |

If these words are true, words based on Christ’s own word, on Scripture, then each of us, by prayer, repentance, confession of sins

and absolution, each of us has received the Spirit of Christ, who turns and says “Come and you will see.”

You’re never too old, too young, too weak, too unlearned, too busy, too distracted, to invite someone to church, where the epiphany of God’s truth and salvation – where “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” is shared by word and sacrament.

We may not be a “mega church.” We may not be flashy or always using the newest and greatest and offering people a wonderful, emotional experience, but we have the true and clearly preached, taught, and confessed Word of God. The same Word of God which caused two weak-kneed disciples to leave John and follow Jesus, and epiphanied 10 more to give up their nets and tax collecting, the comforts of home and familiarity, to give up everything and follow the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And we know, by faith, that it is the same Word of God which spoke epiphany into our hearts, awakening us from our dark slumber so that we now walk in the newness of life given to us through water and Word.

We have the very body and blood of Christ here given to us freely in the bread and wine. The true body and blood which atoned for our sin and the sin of the whole world.

We may not have what the darkness deems important, but we have what epiphany’s light proclaims as important, and we have the Spirit of God in us so that we can go out and be His witnesses.

By God’s grace, may He continue to be our epiphany, our light shining in the darkness and illuminating our hearts, so that we may be His epiphany bearers, His light bringers, to the world out there, a world He loves, a people He died for – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of you, of me, of the whole world. Amen.