

“Behold”
John 1:29
Lent Midweek I
February 21, 2024

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

The text for our entire Lenten midweek meditation will be that one, so well-known, declaration of John the Baptist, pointing us all to Jesus, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Might it seem rather ho-hum, even a less-than-interesting task, to meditate upon this phrase for an entire Lenten season? Aren’t there more creative themes we could use? Indeed, we hear this phrase so commonly – not just in Lent – but throughout the whole church year!

It’s a phrase common to Advent, as - in the Advent hymn entitled “When All the World Was Cursed” – we sing “Behold the Lamb of God that bears the world’s transgression, Whose sacrifice removes the devil’s dread oppression. Behold the Lamb of God, Who takes away our sin, Who for our peace and joy will full atonement win.” Yes, that’s *Advent*. Then again, during Epiphany, the declaration is given voice again in its historic setting in John 1, with John preaching on Jordan’s banks and introducing us to the Lamb of God. Of course, we hear its refrain in Lent... especially the phrase “Lamb of God,” (or as we just sang in the opening sentences of

Vespers, “Lamb of our salvation”)... but also a heavy emphasis on the latter half of the refrain – that Jesus takes our sins away. The image of that “Lamb of God” at Easter as “At the Lamb’s High Feast we sing praise to our victorious King” ... also in season at Christ’s ascension and our meditation upon his glorious throne, as we hear in Revelation 5 St John say, “And I saw in the midst of the throne a Lamb standing as if it had been slain.” And, is the image of the Lamb of God not also central to the adornment of our altar? And, even in the description of our Christian faith, the theologians write: “[All the prophets and apostles]... they all point to Christ with an outstretched finger as did the last of the prophets before Christ...: ‘Behold the Lamb of God’... They know nothing other than Jesus, the Crucified.” (Sasse, 153)

Indeed, this image – the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world – is an image so central to the gospel, John’s refrain is so well-known by us, we sinners can actually become too comfortable with it and tend to underappreciate the weight and depth of it.

So, these Lenten midweeks, let’s consider this image and appreciate anew the wonderful comfort and joy that is ours that this refrain would be preached regularly and forever into our ears and hearts.

Tonight, the very first word stands by itself: “Behold.”

It's important to understand this word, "Behold," rightly. In the Greek, the word is "ἰδε" and sometimes "ἰδοῦ"... various forms of the verb ὁράω, which just basically means "to see." So, some might say, "Well, the word's not that big of a deal, not all that impressive; John is just saying, "See, follow my finger, where I'm pointing – to the Lamb of God." But, this form of the word (ἰδοῦ) occurs so frequently that it is often appreciated as its own word, not a form of ὁράω, just ἰδοῦ. Because, when ἰδοῦ (or ἰδε) is used, it is almost always used to express great anticipation suddenly being fulfilled. Something amazing and unexpected suddenly being brought to light. We hear it, for example, even way back in Isaiah, when the prophet prophesies the virgin birth, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive." Again, we hear it when the angel appears to the shepherds with a proclamation 700 years on the shelf, then suddenly, unexpectedly, here it is: "Fear not, for **behold** (ἰδοῦ), I bring you good news of great joy..."

And, of all the other 200 times we hear it throughout the Scriptures, perhaps our text is the next most famous use of it: "Behold, the Lamb of God." The unexpected is suddenly on the scene, has *suddenly* arrived.

So, perhaps the first question to meditate upon is this: Why is it unexpected? *Why* is the proclamation and the image-enfleshed to which it points us, *why* is that all so unexpected to any of us? *Why*

does it prompt the language of the ‘unexpected suddenly arrived’, “Behold”?

The first reason we naturally think of is the long delay of history. The news is so unexpected, so sudden (we think), because – though the Messiah had been promised thousands of years earlier – God’s divine timing is not our timing, and perhaps even 200 *generations* had passed since the promise was first given in Eden, some 1500 years since the first lamb had been slaughtered in the sacrificial system, and even 400 years since the last divine whisper of this promise had been uttered by the final prophet. Such ***silence*** had predated the coming of the Christ *so much so* that John’s pointing seemingly comes out of nowhere. And, in the meantime, how many had fallen asleep? – not just in the dust of death and the grave – but in hope lost, unbelief, and despair? ‘Yes,’ we convince ourselves, ‘everything was unexpected because the message had long faded into oblivion and irrelevance.’

Now, we could argue whether that’s accurate, whether that’s truly the case... we could point to how God worked throughout the Old Testament to point to the promised Messiah over and over again, to state his case, and keep the people alert, but such misses the point. The true point is – when we say that the reason for the unexpected is because of God’s timing, we implicitly blame God for not understanding the needs and short attention span of His people: “Oh, if only God would have been more understanding and be

quicker to respond, they wouldn't have had *time* to slip away," we reason. It's the "macro"-scale, the "universal" scale, of those who blame God's timing in their own individual daily lives: "He's taken so long to answer my prayers the way I want them answered; if only He would have answered me sooner, I'd still go to church." No, whether on a micro-scale or macro-scale, whether for one person's life or for generations of awaiting the divine promise, that's the wrong understanding for thinking this is so unexpected, so sudden, so worthy of the exclamation, "Behold!" To be sure, the history is to be factored in ("Long ago..."), but that's not all...

Instead, we must also factor in what we never want to factor in: The one dead in his trespasses and sins doesn't think he needs the promised coming! For the prideful, the sudden proclamation "Behold!" is a threat. It's not a wake-up call to some dreamy promise long forgotten, it's a wake-up call to humility and repentance. It's an unwelcome siren, a spotlight upon one's state of peril: "Behold, you who were content in your sins! Behold, you who assumed you were right with God! Behold, you who have dismissed as 'irrelevant barking' the prophetic pleading for you to repent! Behold, the Messiah is now here (judgment is at hand!)... and He's only here because all that forewarning which paved the way for His coming, all that pleading you dismissed – was accurate and true. Look... and repent!"

Yes, that's a preaching the world needs, isn't it? But it's also a preaching our Old Adam still needs. He's still about our neck, trying to claim we are without need, trying to convince us we are 'good to go.' He says, "Of course this news is sudden, unexpected! It's an intrusion upon a life that is otherwise comfortable and fun and pleasant. Ignore it; don't worry about it. This barking will eventually pass by and fall again into silence!"

But, you know better. You know your need. You know your sin. This is Lenten repentance, isn't it? We just confessed it abundantly last week, on an evening named after the ashes to be heaped upon the groveling. You sing of it again in this season's penitential psalms: "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O Lord, *how long* - ?" Note how the psalmist's need is *highlighted* by the Lord's seeming delay. It becomes more understood by him because of the Lord's seeming delay. The proud, the stubborn – *they* don't seek His coming, for the only ones who seek His coming are those who know their need!

St Paul knows your need well, and you agree with him when he writes, "You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." And do we not confess with Luther in the Small Catechism that "we daily sin much and deserve nothing but punishment."

So, if the “Behold!” that breaks the silence is heard rightly by those who know their need and weigh their sins rightly, then why would that proclamation still strike us? There is another reason the word “behold” hits home as sudden, unexpected: for, up until this point, the divine testimony against us is that we don’t deserve the Messiah to come. The news that God would actually deliver on His promise and therefore deliver us *is* unexpected! We’ve done nothing to earn it or make ourselves more fit for the promise to come among us, so it *is* sudden! Indeed, that word “Behold” is carrying on its coattails so much *good* news that we would almost be tempted to not believe it *would*, or even *could*, be true. Oh yes, it has the ring of a wonderful theological truth, of the Scriptural narrative making sense as a polished story, but that it would come to pass *for me*? The Lamb of God would come for *me*? As I look in the mirror and know my sins... as I say with the psalmist: “My sin is ever before me”? – that good news that salvation is for me *is* unexpected! That this Gospel would appear in a specific time and place and flesh-and-blood person in history, when – for so much of history – it seemed too far off for me to grasp, for you to take hold of? That *is* sudden... so nearly unbelievable that the good news must be introduced as being true: “Behold, here it is!”

It’s like Jesus’ exchange with the formerly-blind man, almost too good to be true: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?”, “It is he upon whom you are looking”

(Behold!)...or like Jesus saying to the sinful tax collector, “I am coming to your house to dine with you today” (Behold!)... or like Jesus saying to the one dead and in the grave, “Lazarus, come forth” (Behold!). But, instead the proclamation is for *you*, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world... and that means he takes away *your* sin.”

Yes, it *is* true. Behold, even for us sinners – precisely for us sinners – the Lamb of God enters the scene and carries out the plans of salvation, just as the Lord had promised.

And that brings us to the last way we might hear the declaration as sudden, unexpected. It’s still sudden and unexpected in that it still carries a sense of urgency, doesn’t it? – even after it has been completed and proclaimed throughout history. There’s still urgency. Urgency for there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved. Urgency, for – as we heard St Paul say last week – the day of grace is now, and the day of judgment is coming! In fact, how did Paul say it to the Corinthians? What word was attached to his urgent exhortation last week?: “*Behold*, now is the favorable time; *behold*, now is the day of salvation!”

Yes, 2000 years after Christ’s redeeming work was finished at the cross... two millenia of hearing that Christ is coming again soon... such a time span ought not give Old Adam reason to lull us to sleep, but ought always keep us alert that the day of grace is soon drawing to a close, and Christ’s return for judgment is imminent.

Thus, we rejoice at the first proclamation that broke the silence of fading expectation, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ... and we cling to the weekly proclamation that that same Lamb of God comes suddenly to His Divine Service to serve us with heavenly riches in this day of God’s favor... and we eagerly anticipate and forevermore live in *expectation* (not in *unexpectation*) for that day when the proclamation rings out in trumpet fanfare —“Behold!” — and He descends upon the clouds accompanied by the angels to gather those who have faithfully awaited His reappearing.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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