

John 1:19-34

The reading for today follows immediately upon the reading for the fourth Sunday in Advent, in which John the Evangelist introduced Jesus as the eternally-existing Word of God, and John the Baptist as his witness. Today we focus more on John the Baptist, and we see that in his witness to Jesus he began by testifying to what was *not*. He's out and about, starting a movement, and the representatives of the Temple show up to find out what kind of person and movement this is. "Who are you?" they ask, and he says, "not the messiah." "Are you Elijah?" "Nope." "Are you the prophet (probably Moses)?" "Nope." He is, he says, the voice from heaven crying out to the people that they should clear and level the road on which the Lord is to come.

Furthermore, John is not a person of power. He is not worthy to untie the sandals of the one who is coming. When he actually sees Jesus, he says that he hadn't known Jesus but that he'd seen the Spirit of God descending on him, and then had understood that this was the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." So John isn't any of the big-time prophets and he didn't even know who Jesus was until God told him. John is no big deal, out here in the wilderness far away from the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. And the Anointed One of God to whom he witnesses, the one who "takes away the sin of the world," is not a conquering hero with glittering armor, but a sacrificial lamb.

Sarah Dylan Breuerⁱ points out that Jews in the first century were well aware of features of Greek culture, like astrology. John the Baptist's origins story about Jesus invokes Passover, the celebration of God's liberation of the Hebrew slaves from the poison of slavery. Passover is observed in the month when Aries the lamb rules the sky. Just as pagan and Israelite stories

portrayed Aries as ascendant at the moment of Creation, Hellenistic Christians used that imagery to talk about what the moment is like when the kingdom of God arrives in its fullness.

So when John the Baptizer says, "Look -- the Lamb of God," he is articulating a hope that spanned **multiple** cultures in the ancient world. He was saying that in Jesus there was power, power that would rise above the other powers in the sky, power present in the beginning, power to make all things new. When Andrew and his companion are drawn to Jesus in John's gospel by that vision of Jesus as the "Lamb of God," they are drawn by an understanding that here is power.

But John's gospel is also the one in which Jesus says, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). The . . . power of the "Lamb of God" is **shown most fully not in his displaying power over others, but in his humble service to others, and in his willing submission for the sake of others to death on a cross.** To understand the Baptizer's hope in proclaiming Jesus as "the Lamb of God," we must look to the night sky; to understand how Jesus redefined that hope in fulfilling it, we must seek Jesus' presence with the lowly, the suffering, the prisoners, those our culture pushes to the margins -- those whose lives are seen of being as of little account as Pontius Pilate saw Jesus'. ["Sarah Laughed"]

The author of John's gospel sees "sin" as a cosmic force, like the White Witch's spell that made it always winter and never Christmas in Narnia. Or like the power of a supervillain in Marvel comics, as one of my students helpfully suggested. Sin is a cosmic power that poisons the environment in which we live and move, and poisons our lives. The one who "takes away the sin of the world" is one who neutralizes that poison. How does he do that?

I will tell you, if you will forgive a substantial and meandering lead-up. A couple years ago my college friend Abby Hafer memorialized a colleague on Facebook. Abby teaches biology and anatomy at Curry College in Massachusetts. She is a staunch Unitarian, the New England kind that decidedly does not believe in God but believes in community and truth and beauty and good food. She has carried on a battle against creationism for decades, even writing a book called *The Not-So-Intelligent Designer*, which she kindly asked me to write a blurb about.

At the last class reunion I attended, Abby gave a lecture debunking creationism and

intelligent design. It was witty and well-illustrated, though I doubt many of our classmates needed to be convinced. One of her pieces of evidence for the absence of an intelligent designer was the placement of testicles outside the body. Why, Abby asked, would you put testicles in such a vulnerable position? The disadvantages are well documented. A couple years later, when we were in a natural history museum in Quito, I took a picture of a taxidermied monkey that I thought illustrated her point well and sent it to her. She was most appreciative.

On Facebook, Abby wrote:

I raise a glass to unpredicted friendships. Who knew that my kindest and most enthusiastically supportive colleague would be a religion professor and Episcopal priest? Yet there he was, Dr. Les Muray. Hungarian emigre, rock and roll fan, sports nut, and Process theologian, he did not let a teaching year go by without inviting me into his classes to give a guest lecture, and would have been deeply disappointed if I had not mentioned testicles during that time. I think he knew nearly everything, yet he was at his happiest when he could be in a conversation with a dozen people at once, all of whom had wildly divergent views. Particularly if it also involved eating central European food and drinking wine at the same time.

I attended Les' memorial service this evening, and I miss him. The funny, portly guy who stared down a Soviet tank finally met his match.

Les Muray had been deeply moved by something that Alfred North Whitehead had written:

“The power of God is the worship [God] inspires.” I looked for more, and here is an explanation

by James Luther Adams, who had studied under Whitehead:

. . . Whitehead does not accept the Aristotelian view [of God], for the Unmoved Mover is insulated from the conflicts and sufferings of humanity. Nor does he think of God as the personification of moral energy; such a view makes God “a ruthless moralist.” Nor does he accept the idea that God is a ruler, for this view assigns God the attributes of Caesar. . . . He holds that the divine is to be associated rather with “the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love. . . . Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious to morals.” The human being is not driven but rather is lured by the divine persuasion.

Les Muray had been a child in Hungary under Stalin, where the Christmas tradition was to set up a creche in the house and kneel in prayer around the Christ Child before opening presents and eating Christmas treats. As an adult, he connected that humble ritual with Whitehead's words: "The power of God is the worship [he] inspires." Muray wrote that his happiest Christmas was the year he was four, 1953, when his father came home. His father had been arrested in March of that year for "libeling the name of Comrade Stalin." For six months the family didn't know if he was alive or, if alive, where he was being kept. After nine months he came home as a result of a broad amnesty for political prisoners by the new reform-minded leader Imre Nagy.

Little Les didn't recognize his father when he came home. Normally he was 5' 2" tall and weighed 170 lbs, but he came home weighing about 70 lbs. Most of his teeth had been knocked out as a result of frequent beatings. He was deaf in his left ear, and his hair had turned white. It was Muray's happiest Christmas ever, of many Christmases that were to come in a rich and eventful life. Muray wrote, "As we re-enacted the manger scene that night in 1953, my present was not under the tree but kneeling next to me. . . . Empires come and go. The effects of coercive regimes may live in people they have hurt yet they too disappear. What lingers is the image of the Christ-child in a manger showing forth that the power of God is the worship God inspires."

John proclaims Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He neutralizes the power of evil that poisons our world by being small and vulnerable, luring the human heart by divine persuasion. The infant that lay helpless in a manger was the compelling

figure that sustained a prisoner in Stalin's Hungary through months of pain and isolation, and that drew his adoration when he was able to see him once again with his small son. Empires do come and go. What persists, and what has the power to break the hold of evil, is love that comes into being in out-of-the-way places among unremarkable people, evoked and provoked by "the tender elements of the world".

O newborn Savior, this morning
in the wake of your birth
there is still time to believe
that because you are with us
the world can change.
So in our 'Merry Christmas's today
may we make peace
and sow seeds of justice.
And may we believe
not in illusions of power
but in a vision built around love, a vision
that isn't a dream
but a way of life
not for someone else
but for us this morning
now you are born.
So be it
Amen

ⁱ https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/01/second_sunday_a.html