

The catechism families and I spent Friday night at Temple Beth Israel in Altoona for their annual Shabbat service honoring Martin Luther King and recommitting as people of faith to the ongoing pursuit of justice commanded in scripture. Because Rabbi Audrey was expecting our group and other visitors who were not familiar with Jewish worship, she created a bulletin with explanations and citations for everything we said and sang—some words from Dr. King and other theologians, but mostly verses from the Hebrew Bible, what we would call the Old Testament. We don't usually take the time or space in our bulletin to cite each verse of scripture, but almost all of our own liturgy comes directly from scripture, too. A colleague of mine loves to tell the story of planning a funeral with a neighboring non-denominational pastor: this other pastor was quite vocal about only wanting scripture in the service, not the fancy, highfalutin nonsense in the Lutheran funeral rite. He kept saying, "We don't need this" and "Let's take out that" and every time, my Lutheran pastor friend would say, "That's 2 Corinthians; what's wrong with 2 Corinthians?" "That's Romans, chapter 6. What do you have against the book of Romans?" We may not always recognize the original context or think much about it, but we are thoroughly immersed in scripture when we sing and pray our way through the liturgy.

Today's gospel is one of the places in scripture where we find the image of Jesus, the Lamb of God, which we sing about each week. In Matthew's gospel, John seems to know from the start that Jesus is divine, and is therefore reluctant to baptize him. But in John's gospel, John the Baptist claims not to have known that Jesus was the Son of God until it is revealed to him at Jesus' baptism. Now that he knows who Jesus is, he can't stop telling everyone who will listen, every time he sees Jesus.

*Behold! Here is the Lamb of God!*

But where did John come up with that image for Jesus? How would John's disciples have recognized that metaphor and what would it have meant to them? One lamb that would have likely to come to mind is a lamb used for sacrifice at the Temple as atonement for sin. That's the way Christians most often talk about Jesus as the Lamb of God—that by dying on the cross, Jesus became a sacrifice so God would forgive our sins in the same way that God forgave the sins of those who offered a sacrificial lamb at the Temple. But that is only one way—and by no means the only way—to try to explain how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus accomplished salvation for our fallen world.

John's disciples are equally likely to have been thinking of a completely different lamb—the Passover lamb from Exodus that was also part of Israel's religious practice. If we remember all the way back to that story, God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt by sending ten plagues. The last plague was the death of the firstborn child in every household, except for the houses that had been marked

with the blood of a lamb that each Israelite family was to have eaten with unleavened bread, while they were already dressed for travel, so they would be ready to begin the Exodus journey. In that story, the lamb wasn't a sacrifice for sin but nourishment for God's people, protection for God's people, a sign by which they could be identified as belonging to God, and a symbol of their coming journey to freedom.

When John announces *Here is the Lamb of God*, his disciples immediately get up and follow Jesus. Jesus asks them, *What are you looking for?* ...but they don't really answer. Instead they ask him where he is staying, and in turn, *he* doesn't really answer, but invites them: *Come and see...*

We can't know for certain which lamb the disciples were thinking of when they started following Jesus, but it is accurate to say that they wouldn't have had any ideas of Jesus being a sacrifice, crucified to forgive their sins and secure them a place in heaven. That was simply not part of anybody's theology at the time. And if they knew that Jesus was headed for the cross, he probably wouldn't even have gotten the dozen disciples that he did get. If John's proclamation that Jesus was the Lamb of God evoked any ideas in them, perhaps they followed because they wanted what the Passover lamb signified: sustenance, belonging, and a journey leading to freedom and new life in God's community. And whether that's what they were looking for or not, that's what they got.

If you listen to me long enough, you'll notice that I don't worry much at all about what happens to us after we die. We have Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; we have the promises of baptism; we have the grace God gifts us at the table; what happens after all this shouldn't keep us up at night. So when we come here week after week as disciples of Jesus, and Jesus asks us *What are you looking for?* I hope we're not looking to keep our attendance high enough to squeak through the pearly gate. I hope that we're here because of love, not fear. When Jesus asked his first disciples *What are you looking for?* they wanted to know, *Rabbi, where are you staying?* But were they really asking if he had a room at the Holiday Inn or whose couch he was surfing? Or was their question more like, *Where can we find you? Where is the Son of God going? How do we become part of who you are and what you're doing?* And don't we come here asking those same questions? *Where can we find you, God? What are you up to in this crazy, messy world? How can we be with you and be part of your good, abundant life?* The disciples don't get an answer but an invitation, as do we: *Come and see.* Jesus invites us to set out on a new path, with open eyes to see what God is doing, to experience the freedom of forgiveness, to come along in community with God and with each other—not to wait until this life is over, but to live into God's love now. *What are you looking for?* Whatever it is, Jesus knows the answer, and whatever the answer, Jesus calls us, *Come and see.*