

Sermon 12-13-20, God with us in the shadow of the cross  
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A small boy wanted to get his father's attention, but his father was too busy reading his newspaper to notice. The boy kept interrupting him, saying, "Lookit Daddy, lookit me, lookit, Daddy, lookit." But Daddy did not look. His nose was stuck in the newspaper. Finally, the boy tried hollering, "Lookit, Daddy, lookit me." The father, unable to ignore him any longer, put his paper down and answered, "Okay, I'm lookit-ing."

The father reminds me of many of us at Christmas time. We get so distracted by all the Christmas preparations that we fail to notice the true message of Christmas.

Thankfully, there is someone seeking to get our attention, telling us to "Lookit." Open your Bibles with me, and let's lookit at John 1:29: **"John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'"**

John spotted Jesus, but instead of hollering "lookit," he shouted, "Look!" I could not find lookit in the dictionary, but according to Webster's, the word "look" has a variety of meanings. It can mean: to make sure that something is done; to search for; to expect; to anticipate; to direct one's attention; or to gaze in wonder or surprise.

My guess is that, when John spotted Jesus approaching, he had a number of those definitions in mind. Which is why he shouted to those gathered; asking them to "look". He said, "Look." "Turn your eyes upon Jesus." "Direct your attention to the one that I've been talking about." "Get your eyes off the busyness that you are involved in, and turn your eyes toward Jesus." "Look in wonder and surprise at the very Son of God"!

We could use someone like John to shout at us today. We need to be reminded to "look", really look, because we get distracted! It is hard not to get distracted. It is hard to keep our focus on the Christ child in the manger, what with all the sale flyers, the shopping specials, the decorating and the Christmas lists.

Don't get me wrong. I am no Scrooge. I am not saying that there is anything wrong with shopping for presents. There is nothing wrong with giving and receiving gifts. But, if gift buying or Christmas preparations consume all our time and attention, we need to stop and hear John shouting down through the centuries, reminding us to "Look!"

We need to stop and make sure that we can see Jesus. Again, it is OK to enjoy the shopping and the music and the lights. But make sure you set aside time to be with Jesus! As Helen Lemmel pointed out, we need to "**Turn our eyes upon Jesus,**" promising that if we do, "The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

John urged those with him to "Look," because right there in front of them was "the Lamb of God." The Lamb of God. Certainly, lambs are often included in our depictions of Jesus' birth. Often at Christmas, we show scenes of Jesus as a **cute, cuddly baby, cradled** in the arms of his mother Mary, as the shepherds gather nearby holding their cute, cuddly lambs. Again, I have nothing against nativity scenes. They are a way of recalling the story. But, as Paul Harvey used to say, we too often leave out the rest of the story.

John reminds us that there is much more to the story. For, if you look closely at the baby in the manger, you will see that his **manger lies in the shadow of the cross**. Yes, that cute, cuddly baby was not only born to show us how to live, he was born to one day go to the cross.

That reminds me of a story from my seminary days. It is one that I have shared with you before. That said, it was such a transformative experience in shaping my understanding of Jesus that I would like to share it again.

It happened in my first-year, theology class. We were arguing about why Jesus came. This was not the first time we had had that, but it proved to be the last. As often happened, we divided into two camps. The evangelical students were pitted, once again, against the more liberal students. Those of us who considered ourselves to be evangelical argued that Jesus came to die on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Whereas, our more liberal brothers and sisters countered that Jesus did not come to die for our sins, he came to teach us how to live. We proceeded to pull out our by now familiar Bible passages and well-rehearsed arguments, but neither side made much headway in convincing the other. Indeed, the

argument descended into a back-and-forth litany of “Jesus came to show us how to live”, followed by “No, he came to die.”

Eventually, one of our fellow students grew tired of the argument and brought it to a halt by jumping up on top of a chair and shouting, “Stop it. Just stop it.” It was not often that a student jumped on top of a chair and shouted, “Stop it” in one of our classes. What made it even more shocking was that this particular student was one of the quietest ones in our class. He rarely said a word. Needless to say, we looked. He had our complete attention.

He then picked up his Bible. A huge, thick, NRSV study Bible and shook it at us as he hollered, “Jesus didn’t just come to teach us how to live. He didn’t just come to die in our place. Jesus came to do both and when you try to tell me it is one or the other you are ripping my Jesus in two.” To emphasize his point, he then ripped his Bible in two and sat down.

To this day, I do not know how he did it. He was just a little skinny, little guy and his Bible was thick and sturdy. However, he got our attention and made his point. More importantly, he was right. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, born among us, to show us how to live and love. But Jesus is also the sacrificial lamb who came to take away the sins of the world. Jesus is both and to try to say he is one or the other is to rip Jesus in two.

That was what John was referring to when he called Jesus, “The Lamb of God.” He was not referring to a cute, cuddly baby lamb. He was referring to the sacrificial lamb that gave its life to take away our sins. This is not a metaphor that many Americans can relate to. We don’t sacrifice lambs in church anymore. In my thirty years in the ministry, I have not sacrificed a single lamb. We don’t really understand what it means to call someone the “Lamb of God.” But the people John was addressing would have been quite familiar with the idea of **lambs and sacrifice**. It would have been something that they took part in on a regular basis. The Jews regularly brought lambs to the temple to sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, the historian Josephus reports that over a quarter of a million lambs were sacrificed during the Passover each year. The crowd John was addressing knew exactly what he meant when he called Jesus, the “Lamb of God.”

But, just in case they didn’t understand, John went on to explain that Jesus was, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” John was

saving that Jesus had come to die, as the ultimate sacrifice, to take away their sins for all time.

Which is why John told them to “Look!” Adding that when they looked, they wouldn’t just see his cousin walking down the road. If they looked closely, they would see the one, true, unblemished human being. The only one who was without sin. The one who had come to bear their sins and die in their place, so that all might be forgiven.”

If you think about it, that is really what we celebrate at Christmas. If Jesus had only been born Immanuel, that is God with us, it would have been amazing. After all, it is amazing to think that God loved us enough to become one us and show us how to live. I don’t know about you, but when I want to know how to live my life, I look to Jesus and try to model my life on his. He reminds me of how important it is to be humble and put others first. After all, he humbled himself giving up heaven to be born in a manger, in a stable, to a third-world mother. What’s more, Jesus reminds me that there is one law that overrides every other law, and that is the law of love. But beyond that, he demonstrated that there is no greater love than that a person would lay down their lives for a friend and then he called us his friends.

Which I suppose, bottom line, is really what makes Christmas so special. What makes Christmas special is not just that God gave up heaven to be born a baby in a manger, though that is special. What makes Christmas special is not just that Jesus walked among us to teach us how to live, though that is special, too. What truly makes Christmas special is that Jesus was willing to go to the cross as the sacrificial lamb that we might be forgiven and have life eternal.

And that’s the real story of Christmas. That Jesus, the Son of God, came to earth and was born in a manger in the shadow of the cross. Not only did he come as Immanuel, God with us, he also came as “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”

So, this week as you ponder our scripture passage and what it means for Christmas, meditate on it and commit it to memory. Try to follow John’s advice, when he said, **“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)**

As you prepare to celebrate Christmas, take time to look, to really look at the babe, born in a manger. Notice that his manger stands in the **shadow of the cross**. Which means that he is more than just a cute, cuddly baby, as wonderful as babies are. He is more than just Immanuel, God come to walk among us and show us how to live, as amazing as that is. He is also the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sins of the world. And that, all of that, is what we celebrate at Christmas. So, try to bear the whole story in mind as you prepare for this Christmas, for, as my seminary classmate reminded me, to celebrate part, without recalling the rest, is to rip Jesus in two.