

## **Jesus and Martin: The World's Savior and America's Prophet**

### **John 1:29-41**

This is Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday, and the Gospel for today is “Behold the Lamb of God!” The world’s true Savior and America’s prophet. What’s the connection? The political powers hounded Jesus and hung him on the cross; King was assassinated. “Behold the Lamb of God,” cries John the Baptist. “We still have a choice today: non-violent co-existence or violent co-annihilation,” preached Dr. King.

The roots of that choice are found in our text. John the Baptist points a finger at Jesus and declares, “Behold, the Lamb of God.” This changes everything. The entire ministry of Jesus now has a permanent mascot: a lamb. An early Byzantine painting shows a stick cross and hanging there is a huge lamb.

Do you see what this means? This is not just any lamb; this is the lamb of non-violence. Most New Testament scholars believe that the Lamb is the suffering servant of Isaiah and the paschal lamb sacrificed in the Temple. Time for biblical memory drill: Scripture says that Jesus *tabernacled* (a temple term) among us, that he is the mercy seat – the place in the temple where the blood of lambs was sprinkled, that he was like a lamb that is led to the slaughter. Remember Isaac, hands tied, lying on a makeshift altar of wood sticks and over to the side stands a white lamb, waiting. “God will provide.” Did you know that Jesus was condemned to death at noon on the day before the Passover, and this was the exact time when the priests began to slay the paschal lambs in the Temple? Did you know that none of the bones of Jesus were broken on the cross, and that no bone of the paschal lamb was ever to be broken? “Christ our Passover has been sacrificed,” says Paul in I Corinthians 5:7. Jesus is the non-violent lamb of sacrificial love. Forget symbols of worldly power and violence. Our symbol is the Lamb of God. And this lamb is the temple of God.

Look, this metaphor has creative power. In fact, I argue that it has reality-producing power because it creates a reality different from the world: a lamb not an elephant or a donkey, a lamb not a fox, a lamb not a goat.

Poet Mary Oliver writes, “If there’s a temple, I haven’t found it yet. I simply go on drifting, in the heaven of the grass and the weeds.” Well, according to the Gospel, Jesus is the temple we have all been seeking: the temple of God, the temple of peace and wholeness. Somewhere in all of us there is the deep-seated need to experience God, the desire for the vision of Isaiah: I saw the Lord and his glory filled the temple. And according to John, Jesus is the Temple we all seek.

The Gospels indicate that Jesus chose the way of non-violence – the sword over the cross. “He could have called twelve legions of angels, but he went to the cross.” Our problem in America is that rather than actually believing in Jesus we believe in believing. Stanley Hauerwas says, “Americans do not have to believe in God, because they believe that it is a good thing simply to believe: all they need is a general belief in

belief. The god most Americans say they believe in . . . is only the god who guarantees them life, liberty, and wealth.”

I ask you to believe something specific – that Jesus is the non-violent Lamb of God. “As Christians, we must maintain that peace is a gift of God that comes only by our being a community formed around a crucified savior – a savior who teaches us how to be peaceful in a world in rebellion against its true Lord.” (Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*). At the very least it means that the church must make sure that Peace has a place at the table of nations, that, even if you personally believe in war, you want your preacher to speak for Peace.

Dr. King was one of God’s sacrificial lambs. Martin preached that we should be governed by our dreams and not our fears. Tell that to the fear mongers populating the halls of Congress and the television studios. Martin preached that gentleness takes more courage than violence. How many are ready to be that courageous? Martin preached that compassion is more valuable than any ideology (William Sloane Coffin, Jr.). Tell that to a Muslim terrorist or a gun-toting American.

We can’t claim to follow Jesus by worshipping the gods of war and the shrine of “national security.” It is time to end the badly named war on terrorism and wage peace with bread, medicine, and education. “Love your enemies” is not optional advice for casual believers. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves” means never.

Our nation must break her addiction to being entertained by violence. Our political process has become “a shoddy, unplanned city that looks like it killed all its architects before it approved a master plan for its construction” (Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*). Rather than attempting to take superficial advantage of every crisis, of using and manipulating and demeaning people, we have to once again find that common ground rooted in a spirit of peacefulness. Rather than ranting and spewing emotionally-based charges, we have to reject the ruminations of disrespect that dominate our national dialogue. Sure, it is sad to hear people defend the low road rhetoric in America, but people find it entertaining. They have little interest in our national character, only interest in the characters that populate our airwaves.

Of course, there’s too much violence in America. Someone needs to once again teach us the gospel of non-violence. Dr. King was my first teacher of the gospel of non-violence, followed by Will Campbell; William Sloane Coffin, Jr. and his campaign for nuclear disarmament; John Yoder, Anabaptist theologian; William McClendon, Baptist theology professor; and Stanley Hauerwas, especially his work, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and I would be honored to participate with any number of you willing to read through the book with me.

What happened in Tucson, Arizona reminds us that violence is a form of madness, but we can’t make a scapegoat of one mad shooter and pretend that he is the caricature of our opponents. This young man doesn’t represent who we are as Americans. I believe

our national character is still strong because there are so many good people like those of you sitting here. This is not a time to silence dissent. Please dissent with passion, precision, and persuasive argument. Dissent until content, but do so with dignity and respect. Argue the details, the facts, and the evidence. Stay away from propaganda, deception, and lies. Winston Churchill said, "A lie goes half way around the world before truth can get its pants on."

A good argument stands on a tripod: logic, character, and emotion. We have lost the art of arguing. (I believe there is a book worth writing around this theme of argument being reduced to emotion while elevating demagoguery. The so-called presidential debates, for example, have no relationship to an actual debate. They are "gotcha" soundbites not a debate.) American argument is now a middle school food fight. Throw everything and hope something nasty sticks. Emotion, intended as a supporting character to logic and character, has taken over the drama. It's not so much the bad language as it is the sheer vacuity of the pathetic words that now pass for argument that we should bemoan. I am not making a moralistic attack on common profanity. After all, working for a bunch of Baptists is enough to make a preacher cuss. I'm referring to our loss of logic and character/credibility (logos and pathos – God bless you Aristotle, wherever you are).

And we all bear responsibility for the excessive emotionalism of our culture: rudeness, bad manners, blatant exaggerations, caricatures of our opponents, out-of-control arrogance, and refusal to listen to one another. Attacking a person's character is not argument; it is an assassination.

This country needs more lambs of God and fewer wolves, foxes, and skunks. There are rules for the behavior of lambs: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, cling to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty."

Oh, it is not easy to be a sheep of God's pasture in a world of wolves. Wolves, by nature, still devour lambs as they did Jesus and Martin. But God has not called us to follow the Lamb of God. Yet as God's lambs we are not being sent unarmed into the world. Our armor is "lambware": the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. Onward Lambs of God!