

Epiphany 2A, 2011

Text: John 1:29-42a

Title: Messy Religion

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Our religion is a pretty neat, clean, and tidy thing. We get a dressed up, we come to a nice clean building. We stand up and sit down a few times, we speak, we sing we listen. We come forward to the altar and back to our seats, and then go back home without getting too dirty or messy. It's really quite sterile.

For most folks, religion is something in your mind, in your head or in your heart. It's what you think, what you believe, what you feel. It's all inside of you. We think of religion as a set of beliefs- what do you think about God? Or maybe feelings in your heart. But it's usually just an internal thing.

And that's where it usually stays. It may or may not make any difference on how you live your life. And even when it does, we live out our faith in neat, tidy ways. It might change what we say to people, or it might mean avoiding certain things, most of the time, you don't need to get too dirty or messy.

But that's not the way things were in ancient Israel. In Israel, religion wasn't just something inside of you- in your heart, or in your mind, but there were specific rituals that enacted what was inside of you, and that connected you to the world around you. Your religion wasn't just what you thought about God, but it involved real, physical rituals that connected you to God and His grace.

Often these rituals were dirty and messy, even bloody. They involved things that you would be shocked to see going on in church today.

They used lots of fire and incense and big basins of water. There was always something being killed, and the blood being poured and splashed around, sprinkled on things and even people. Flesh was separated from skin and fat. Some was burned. Some was eaten. Some was waved around in the air. It was a big mess. Something was always getting killed.

More often than not, lambs were getting killed.

At a bare minimum, two lambs a day were offered to the Lord at the temple- one lamb in the evening and one lamb in the morning. This was the daily routine- two lambs a day, every day.

On festival days, like the day of the atonement, there were many more lambs being slaughtered. There were offerings for sin, for guilt, and for purification. There were offerings of thanksgiving and offerings for peace and fellowship.

The most lambs were probably killed on Passover, as each Israelite family was to slaughter one, to spread the blood on their door, and eat the flesh for their meal.

Sacrificing lambs goes all the way back to Abel, the second born son of Adam and Eve, who offered the best of his flock to the Lord.

Abraham continued the tradition, when he sacrificed a lamb in the place of Isaac, his son.

In the days of Israel, religion was a bloody, messy thing. There was lots of killing, lots of death, lots of lambs lost their lives.

Religion was a physical thing, because sin is a physical thing.

Sin does not just affect your insides- your heart or your mind or your soul. Sin is not just a mental condition. Sin affects all of you. Sin affects your body. Sin is why you get sick or feel pain. Sin is why your hair turns gray and falls out. Sin is why your eyes and ears and joints don't work the way that they used to. Sin is why you die.

Religion was messy, because sin is messy. There's no easy way to get rid of the stain of sin. No water, no bleach, nothing can get you clean.

The only way to get rid of sin is to kill it. Put it death. Destroy it. Not just spiritually. Not just in your mind. But physically.

What do you do when cockroaches invade your house? Do you ignore them and just try to live with them? Do you try to tame them? Do you ask them nicely to leave? Do you just imagine that they aren't there? No, you kill them; you get rid of them.

The wages of sin is death. Those who sin deserve to die. No fine. No jail time. Death penalty. There are no excuses, no pardons. Just death. There is no other way to get rid of sin, other than by killing it, putting it to death.

But God is gracious, and He is willing to accept a substitute. He allows sin to be transferred from one to another.

In the days of Israel, the lamb was a substitute. The people didn't have to die, only the lamb. The lamb took their place. But someone, something had to die. That's the only way to get rid of sin.

Your sins have earned you the same death sentence. You can't just pay a fine. You can't do time in jail. Death, that's what you deserve.

But the Lord will accept a substitute. He will allow your sins to be transferred to someone else. He will allow someone to die in your place.

That's why John points you to Jesus Christ. He is the very the Lamb of God. He takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is your substitute. All your sins are borne by Jesus.

Jesus bears all of our sin. Every last lie. Every last lustful thought. Every last angry word. Every greedy action. Every single sin that you have ever committed, all of it has been laid upon Him.

And How does Jesus get rid of it? Through His death on the cross. Your sins die there on the cross with Jesus. In Jesus, sin dies.

When John points to Jesus and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," John is saying that Jesus is going to die. Just like all the other lambs. That's the only way to take away sin, by dying. The only way to get rid of sin is to kill it. Lambs died. Jesus died.

Jesus' life-blood was shed on the cross. It was a messy thing. It was a physical thing, a real event. It was not pleasant for Him, and it was not pleasant to watch. But it was necessary for your salvation.

Salvation involves much more than just your mind or your heart or your spirit. It involves all of you- body and soul- because that is what Jesus Christ gave for you.

Jesus didn't just give up His mind, Jesus didn't just give His heart, Jesus didn't just give His spirit. Jesus gave His body and His blood for you, dying on the cross for you.

And so when we practice our faith, it's not just in our head, or in our heart or in our soul, but in our bodies, too. We worship in physical, messy ways.

The messiest part of our service is the Lord's Supper, as we receive the very body and blood of Jesus Christ here at the altar. It's not just a mental or emotional or spiritual thing. It's a real, physical, bloody, messy thing.

In case there was any doubt about what we are about to receive, we sing three times, "O Christ, thou Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world..." as we approach the altar. We echo John's words and confess that here we receive the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, slain for our sins.

And because we have received this blood, this physical, messy thing, we know that our resurrection will be a physical thing, too. It's not just that our souls will live on, but we believe a bodily, physical resurrection. Since Jesus' body rose from the dead, yours will, too. You will be there in heaven, clothed in white, with your robe washed in the blood of the lamb.

Such news is too good to keep to yourself. Twice John proclaimed, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Andrew went and found his brother Peter and brought him to Jesus, saying, we have found the Messiah!

As you go your way today, you will meet many who don't know Jesus as the Lamb of God, who think of their religion as something only in their head or in their heart. You will have opportunities to be like John and point them to Jesus, not just a teacher, or someone with good ideas, but as the Lamb of God, who sheds His blood for you, and who offers you that very blood here at the altar.