

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – January 14, 2018
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor

This year, January and February are very busy months. We just crowned the college football champions. Professional football playoffs are underway as is the professional basketball season. The Winter Olympics are just around the corner. And, of course, it is the season of award shows. We've already had the Golden Globes and the Critics' Choice Awards. Now all we have left in the next few weeks are the Writers' Guild Awards, the Director's Guild Awards, the Screen Actors Guild Awards, the BAFTAs (don't ask), the Independent Spirits, the Grammys, and the Oscars. Whether in sports or in entertainment, the events of the next few weeks are designed to draw attention to the participants – to make sure that they are noticed, for their great play on the field or on the court or for humbly accepting the award they never expected they would receive even though their publicist has been actively campaigning for it for the last three months. Yes, over the next few weeks, there will be plenty of people vying for our attention – trying to get us to notice them, to buy a ticket to see them or to purchase their product. "Look at me," they all seem to be shouting, and – whether we want to or not – most of us do.

In our gospel passage today, Jesus isn't the one saying "Look at me." He isn't trying desperately to capture our attention. It is John the Baptist who identifies him, who draws the attention of the disciples to him. "Behold," John says, "Behold, the Lamb of God." Now of all of the images John might have used, all of the descriptive phrases John might have spoken, "the Lamb of God" is not exactly one designed to make Jesus the most popular. John might have said – "Hey, look at Jesus, he's the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior, the Redeemer, the King. He is the one we have waited for, hoped for, longed for." Instead, John says simply, "Behold, the Lamb of God." A lamb, you recall, is a small, vulnerable creature. Not yet a fully grown sheep, the lamb needs the protection of the other sheep in the herd, and of the shepherd. A lamb can easily be left behind, can fall prey to foxes and wolves. And in the Jewish culture in which John and Jesus lived, a lamb was the preferred animal of sacrifice. It was the lamb who was led to the slaughter, and it was the blood of the lamb that was spilled on the altar in the temple; the blood of the lamb that was sprinkled on the people in expiation of sins. So when John said – Behold, look at Jesus, the Lamb of God – he wasn't saying, "Look at the conqueror, the mighty warrior, the all-powerful One." He was saying, "Look at Jesus, the innocent one, the sacrificial victim."

Now let's face it. Being compared to a lamb, even to the Lamb of God, was not helpful for your image – then or now. You don't see many football teams being named the Memphis Lambs; you don't hear politicians being praised for being as

gentle as a lamb – as though that were ever true these days. A lamb is weak, and our society, like that of the ancient world, values strength, not weakness; values victory, not sacrifice. So when John said to his two disciples, “Behold, the Lamb of God,” it should surprise us that they actually followed Jesus; that in a culture that emphasized power, they were attracted by an image of weakness. And it should surprise us even more that Andrew, having followed Jesus, the Lamb of God, was able to say so quickly to his brother Simon – We have found the Messiah. We don’t know what time Andrew and his companion began following Jesus, but by four in the afternoon, Andrew already recognized Jesus as the Messiah, as the one promised by God, as the anointed one who would bring victory for Israel. All of Israel was expecting that a great king, that a powerful warrior would appear as the Messiah, and Andrew was telling Simon – Look at this sacrificial victim, at this Lamb of God. He is the one we’ve been waiting for.

Is Jesus the one *we’ve* been waiting for? Like Andrew, are we inclined to follow the Lamb of God? Or do we follow him just long enough – hoping that the lamb will turn out to be a lion, hoping that weakness is just a cover for strength? It isn’t, of course, at least not in the way that the world means. Jesus is strong, powerful, a king – but his kingdom is not of this world. In this world, he reveals himself as weak, as one who turns the other cheek, as one who willingly surrenders to death, even death on a cross. It is no accident, I suggest, that Catholic churches always feature a cross with an image of the crucified Christ. In the kingdom of God promised by the Lord, we recognize Jesus as our king – as the lamb seated on the throne. But here in this world, we proclaim Jesus at his most vulnerable, in the midst of his sacrifice. It is as the sacrificial victim, as the one who offers his life on the altar of the cross, that our eyes should be opened, that we should see him truly as the Lamb of God, as the one sacrificed for our offenses. It is in his weakness that he reveals the perfection of his love; in his weakness that he reveals his divine nature.

At each celebration of the Eucharist, the priest holds up the Body of Christ, the paschal victim broken for our sake. And he echoes the words we hear in this gospel: Behold, the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb. Are we too busy looking for Christ in the halls of power or on the fields of glory? Do we recognize the Lamb of God in the broken, in the weak, in the vulnerable, in those rejected by others? Christ is to be found in the poor and the lowly, in the unborn and the elderly, in those who cannot defend themselves. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Behold the Lamb of God.