

## **Gospel – John 1:29-34**

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said,  
"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.  
He is the one of whom I said,  
'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me  
because he existed before me.'  
I did not know him,  
but the reason why I came baptizing with water  
was that he might be made known to Israel."  
John testified further, saying,  
"I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven  
and remain upon him.  
I did not know him,  
but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me,  
'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain,  
he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'  
Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

## **Homily**

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

*The Avowal*, by Denise Levertov.

Denise was a British poet, she was born in 1923 and she died in Seattle in 1997. She emigrated not only from Britain to the United States where she taught at Stanford for many years, but she journeyed from Agnosticism to Christianity, to Roman Catholicism. Her father was an Orthodox Jew then he converted to Christianity, and became an Anglican priest. Themes of her poetry are filled with her search for God in the Holy.

The poem I just recited for you is called *The Avowal*. An avowal is an affirmation of a deep faith, of what we believe in. The questions for today's liturgy in Ordinary Time are, "Who are we? And

who is the Christ?" Who are we? Who is the Christ? In today's Gospel we hear John the Baptist pointing to Jesus and calling his disciples to follow him. He names him: "Behold, there he is, the Lamb of God!" John uses that image, which is so rich, *the Lamb of God*.

We like to use animal images for ourselves don't we? Think of Chicago sports teams: The Chicago Bears! The Chicago Cubs! The Chicago Bulls! Even the shortened version of the Chicago Hawks. Nations love images and totems—we identify with their spirit. The bald eagle! The lord of the sky. The fierce king of the skies. Benjamin Franklin suggested that a better animal totem for the United States would be the turkey because we would be less likely to rush into war with a turkey as our motto.

But for Russia, it's the bear; for China, it's the dragon. These are fierce images. Even our political parties have animal totems: Donkeys and Elephants. What's the image for Jesus? The Lamb of God, a gentle lamb. Can you imagine a high school football team being called, *The South Barrington Lambs* or *The Inverness Lambs*? Can you imagine what our image of ourselves would be as Americans if were the *American Lambs*? No, a lamb is gentle. A lamb is meek. And when John uses that image, he evokes, in his listeners the story of Exodus chapter 12: The Israelites are slaves and they're instructed to slaughter the lamb and smear the blood on their lentils, on their door posts, so that when the Angel of death passes by their children would be saved.

Another image is from the *Suffering Servant* psalm in Isaiah 53: Like a lamb led to the slaughter he was pierced for our offenses—wounded for our sins. This image of the Lamb of God is so important that we recite it on Sundays when we proclaim the Gloria and twice right before we receive communion at the fraction rite: "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" and the priest holding up the host, "Behold the Lamb of God" echoing those words of John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb who takes our sins upon himself." Who is this lamb and who are we?

John says that he came baptizing with water—a baptism of repentance to wash away sin. But he said the one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me. In Johannine theology it points to the divinity of Christ. *He existed before me though he was born after me*. It points to the pre-eminence of the Christ—a hint at the trinity; [a hint] of this God who baptizes not simply with water, but with the Holy Spirit. And what did Jesus hear at his baptism when the skies were ripped open and the Spirit descended like a dove?

John saw that image of the Spirit descending like a dove. He had had some charismatic experience, some mystical experience, and he was given part of the image. It was like part of a map, and his part of the map was: "Your job is to proclaim that he who is the Lamb of God, the one who is coming who will be the Son of God. He's coming into the world. Get ready folks. That's your job," but John was only given part of the map. He didn't know who it was [that was coming].

Did you catch not once but twice in today's Gospel John says, "I didn't know who he was." He knew his cousin Jesus, but he didn't know his cousin's deeper identity. That [hidden identity] had to be revealed by God. The father gave him a hint. He said, "When the Spirit comes down like a dove and remains upon him." The image of a dove would certainly evoke in John's hearers the

image of Noah and the ark. And you remember the waters cover the Earth and Noah sends out a bird, and it comes back. He sends out a bird and it comes back. He sends out a dove and it comes back with an olive branch in its beak. And then Noah knows that the waters have receded [leaving] the beginnings of a new earth. God is starting over again. And so when this dove descends and comes to rest on Jesus, there's a new beginning—a new creation in Christ Jesus, this Lamb who takes away our sin. This is the Lamb who comes to baptize not simply with water but with the Holy Spirit. And what does John hear about Jesus? What does Jesus hear when that Spirit of God descends upon him but, "You are my beloved."

As we grow into our baptism we grow in the knowledge of who we are, not just as individuals but as a people. We are God's beloved. And the Lamb of God comes to wash away our sin. Are we broken? Yes. Are we sinful? Yes. Are we God's beloved? Yes.

I love the way that Fr. Richard Rohr puts it, he says: "We are not loved because we're good, we become good because we're loved."

Do you remember the book from many years ago back in the 70s, *I'm okay, You're okay?* The Gospel says, "I'm not okay, you're not okay." But I am beloved and you are beloved. This journey that we make together as a holy family of faith is a journey into believing the truth of our baptism. The sacrament of baptism is received once in our life, but what is the task of Ordinary Time? It's to grow into believing the grace of our baptism, that you and I are God's beloved, despite our brokenness, despite that fact that we're not okay, despite the fact that we do terrible things to one another and to ourselves. God never, ever, turns his back on us and the promise is Jesus' blood. Jesus shed his blood not to appease some angry God, Jesus' death changes nothing in the heart of God because God's promise is eternal love. But that blood shed for us is the eternal promise that we might believe and never forget how much God loves us.

Despite our faults and our failings and our inconsistencies as individuals, as a church, as a city, as a state, as a nation and as a world, we are a broken people. And still Jesus comes to say, "I love you, I forgive you, let me wash you clean. Let me renew the power of your baptism everyday."

This is the task of Ordinary Time, to grow in the knowledge of who we are, and we do that as a people. I love what Saint John XXIII wrote in his spiritual journal. He wrote, "We are saved or lost, like grapes in a cluster."

We are saved or lost like grapes in a cluster. We're in it together folks. We can destroy one another with our nitpicking, and with our judgments, and with our categories of who's in, who's out, who's good, and who's bad. Or, we can grow to look at one another with softer eyes and surrender to this grace that we cannot earn, but open our hearts to receive.

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,

*Behold the Lamb of God*, a homily by Fr. J Michael Sparough, SJ, presented by Heart to Heart

so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

Amen.

(Amen.)