

The Lamb, a dove, and the rock

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Our gospel reading for this morning comes after a description of John the Baptist baptizing people in the Jordan River. Unlike the other gospels, the Gospel of John does not provide a narrative of Jesus' own baptism. Instead, we have this story of John the Baptist seeing Jesus and proclaiming to his disciples who Jesus really is.

### **John 1:29-42**

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."

And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Chosen One."

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.

When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

### INTRODUCTION

It is good to be back with you all after my week in the wintry upper Midwest. I attended the annual meeting of the American Society of Church History where I was

part of a panel discussing Moravian settlements in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And then I led a retreat for Moravian pastors in the Western District at the Mt Morris Moravian conference center in Wisconsin. The theme of the retreat was “Who’s Afraid of the Moravians?” We examined periods of Moravian history when various ecclesiastical and political authorities tried to repress or extinguish the Moravian Church. It was a lively discussion especially when we asked ourselves the question who is afraid of the Moravians today?

## PUNS

You may have wondered about the title of the sermon in this week’s bulletin. I really hoped I could turn that into a joke by saying a lamb, a dove, and a rock walked into bar, but I never came up with a good punchline. That, however, does remind me of the time that a minister, a priest, and a rabbi walked into a bar. The bartender looked up and said, is this a joke?

Dad jokes aside, this passage from John is interesting and challenging. In just a few verses we read about John the Baptist calling Jesus the lamb of God, the Holy Spirit descending like a dove, and Andrew’s brother Simon being renamed Kephias, which is Aramaic for rock. The Gospel writer’s use of puns to communicate gives a light-hearted touch to some very serious issues. Rather than giving us a lot of complicated philosophy, John relies on word play to help us see things differently.

## LITERAL TRANSLATION?

One of the challenges Moravian and other missionaries face when translating the Gospel of John into different languages is deciding what should be translated literally and what should be left as a name. For instance, should Simon Peter’s name be changed to Simon the Rock in English or as Simon Peter? Often, we miss the puns in the Bible and their meaning by not translating them.

But we do have to be wary and not take statements in the Bible too literally. We need to guard against letting people think that Jesus was *literally* a talking lamb. Churches often use the descending dove in artwork and baptismal fonts, but I wonder if some people misunderstand that image and think that the Holy Spirit is literally a dove.

Puns and metaphors don’t work if you are too literalistic. My children loved books about a maid named Amelia Bedelia who always took statement literally, which led to

some ridiculous situations. When told to “dust the furniture,” for instance, she would put dust on the furniture rather than wiping it off.

I think some of the problem in Christian churches today is that we have too many Amelia Bedelia preachers. We get confused if we read John’s gospel too literally instead of seeking the metaphorical and spiritual meaning of his text. This morning I’d like us to dig a little deeper into this story and look at three puns. We don’t have time to unearth all the nuggets in this passage, but we will examine these three images.

### KEPHAS – THE ROCK

I’m going to start with the last pun, because it is the simplest. Among of the first disciples to follow Jesus, according to John, were brothers named Andrew and Simon Peter. It was Andrew who convinced Simon to meet Jesus, and it was Jesus who convinced Simon to become a disciple.

We know from the other gospels and the book of Acts that Peter was one of the most important apostles and was head of the early Christian Church. Each gospel includes a story about Jesus singling Peter out for a new name, but in the other gospels, this comes at a climactic moment after Jesus’ transfiguration. In John the naming happens at the very beginning of the gospel. Without any explanation, Jesus nicknames Simon Peter “Kephas,” which is the Aramaic term for a rock.

Today we would just call him Rocky, like the fictional boxer. It’s a strong name. The boxer was called Rocky because he was able to endure punishment without breaking. That may be what’s going on in our passage. Jesus began his ministry by telling one of the first disciples that he expects him to be as strong a rock; to be a pillar of strength in times of trouble. I bet some of you right now are thinking of Dwayne the Rock Johnson, or perhaps Bob Seger’s song Like a Rock, and that’s okay. That’s what Jesus is saying about Peter: “Like a rock I was strong as I could be. Like a rock, Nothin’ ever got to me. Like a rock.”

From the beginning, Jesus encourages Peter to be strong and faithful. This makes Peter’s denial of Jesus later in the gospel even more poignant. The one who was supposed to be the Rock faltered and failed. Peter recovered his faith on Easter, and in the last scene in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Rock that he will have to learn how to care for lambs. Being strong is not enough; the Rock must learn to care for others if he is to be head of the church. Jesus tells the Rock has to learn how to nurture others rather than crush them.

## THE DOVE

The second metaphor, technically a simile, in this passage is that the Holy Spirit appeared as a dove that John the Baptist saw descending on Jesus at his baptism. Matthew and Mark say that it was Jesus who heard God's voice. In Luke, the crowd saw the dove and heard a proclamation from the sky that Jesus is the Son of God. But here in John's gospel, the Baptist was the only witness. The vision of the descending spirit was for John's benefit to show him that the chosen one was ready to begin his ministry in the world. John's mission was complete, and Jesus' mission had begun.

“Why a dove?” Elsewhere in the Bible the Holy Spirit is described as fire or like lightning piercing the sky. In the story of Pentecost in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit comes upon the apostles like tongues of fire. So, it seems like fire was the best metaphor for the Spirit. So it's a little strange that here at the beginning of the Gospel of John, the Spirit appears as a dove.

There is another place in the Bible where a dove plays a big. In the story of Noah's ark the sign that the flood is over was when a dove leaves the ark and finds land. Here in John's gospel the dove flies from the heavens over the waters of the Jordan to identify Jesus as the one that John has been expecting. Like a dove, the Holy Spirit is unburdened by the gravity of the world.

But there is more to this simile than just wings and flight. The dove is and has been for centuries, a symbol of peace. We must understand that the Holy Spirit did not descend on Jesus like a screaming eagle with talons extended. The Roman Empire's symbol was the eagle; the kingdom of God is identified by the dove.

John tells us that the Holy Spirit came into the world quietly and peacefully. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus as the Prince of Peace at the beginning of his ministry. After John saw the dove, he told his disciples they should follow Jesus who is the greater one because he is the Lamb of God. This leads us to the most important of the three symbols.

## LAMB OF GOD

The first time that Jesus appears in the Gospel of John is when John the Baptist calls him the Lamb of God. In Latin, the phrase Lamb of God is *Agnus Dei*, a phrase that shows up a lot in church music. In Christian art, the *Agnus Dei* usually has a victory

banner with a cross on it and is often sitting peacefully. This is an important symbol for Moravians.

Some of the earliest Moravian hymnals, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century have the Lamb of God on them, as does our current hymnal. But we Moravians prefer to have the lamb walking rather than resting. The Moravian Church's seal has a lamb in the center and the words Our Lamb has Conquered, Let Us Follow Him around the edge.

Why did the Baptist declare that Jesus is the Lamb of God to begin with? We need to turn again to the Old Testament. You may remember that in the book of Exodus, Moses told the Israelites to mark their doorposts with a lamb's blood to avoid the tenth plague when the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed.

Each year during the first full moon of spring, Jews commemorate the Exodus from slavery by sharing in the Passover meal, which includes a roasted lamb to remind them of the lambs whose blood saved their ancestors from slavery and death.

The Gospel of John identifies Jesus as the Passover Lamb at the beginning of the Gospel - long before Jesus was arrested and executed. John the Baptist wanted the disciples of Jesus to understand that the Messiah would conquer the world through sacrifice rather than violence. Salvation comes through the blood lamb, not the roar of the lion.

It is also important to recognize that John tell us that Jesus is not merely the savior of the Israelites or even of the disciples. John declares that this Lamb of God takes away the sin of the *whole* world. Jesus' salvation is not just for a few, but for all people.

## CONCLUSION

Every time we celebrate holy communion here at Home Church, we pray that Christ the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world will grant us peace. Later in the John's we read that Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world; he came to take away the sin of the world. John urged his disciples to follow Jesus who was the Chosen. The lamb will be their shepherd who will teach. The Messiah who was anointed by a dove will be their teacher, their master, their friend, their savior. Even Simon the Rock will learn what it means to be an apostle of peace in a violent world. As our Moravian seal says, our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow. Amen.