

2nd Sunday after Epiphany, January 18, 2026
John 1:29-42

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. I once knew a guy who worked for IKEA. He was Finnish and he worked in Russia. His job was part of the company's effort to get access to the vast Russian forests to supply lumber for IKEA's furniture. Now turning trees into furniture is a very concrete and results-oriented kind of job. Even if you have no idea of the precise steps or tools or logistical arrangements involved, that kind of a job makes intuitive sense to most people. Contrast that with my job at the time, which was teaching at a seminary in order to train pastors to lead churches. That part is understandable enough, I suppose, but my Finnish acquaintance couldn't understand the *point* of church. "What does the church actually *do*?" he wanted to know. It's a good question, one we might be tempted to answer by talking about how the church helps people. You might point to our food pantry if someone asked that question about Grace. And while it is not *wrong* – the food pantry is a beautiful, necessary, tangible thing that the people of this congregation do week in and week out – it is not the defining activity of church. In other words, if we didn't have a food pantry, we would still be a church, and I have no doubt many of you who are here on Thursday mornings would find yourselves helping out in other food pantries and charitable organizations around town, because that's just the kind of people you are, thanks be to God. But I want to believe that it's because of what the church does do as its central task that the food pantry came into being 41 years ago and continues its beautiful work today.

The question of what the church does is directly connected to who Jesus is and what *he* does, and that is what our Gospel reading is focused on today. We started hearing about John the Baptist six weeks ago on the second Sunday of Advent, and he's still hanging around in our readings this morning. He is with his own followers here, and when Jesus walks by he identifies him as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." John the Evangelist, the writer of this Gospel, doesn't tell us what John the Baptist's followers thought of his calling Jesus the Lamb of God, or of his vision the Spirit's descent upon Jesus. But the next day it happens again. "Here is the Lamb of God." So, they follow Jesus to find out for themselves and end up spending the day with him. But when Andrew goes to tell his brother about it, he does not repeat John the Baptist's words. Instead, he says, "we have found the Messiah!"

So, what gives? What made Andrew say Messiah and not Lamb of God? Because they are not the same thing. At this point in the story, I don't think anyone would have known what to do with the claim that Jesus was the Lamb of God. It wouldn't have made sense. A lamb was food – good food, to be sure. And that's why it was also used in religious ceremonies, none more important than the Passover, when people ate lamb to remember the liberation of the Israelite slaves from Egypt, in which lambs played an important part. The doors marked by their blood had stopped the angel of death from entering their houses. The meat of their bodies had fed the children of Israel for their journey of escape. Andrew and the others would have known all of this. They had been hearing that story for their entire lives.

But Andrew and Peter, and James and John, were looking for something – someone. They were looking for a liberator like Moses, a conqueror like Joshua. Most of all they were looking for a king. THE king, the one promise, the one anointed like David to defeat their enemies and secure their land. That's what a Messiah was to them. And at this moment they were expecting that Messiah to save them from the brutal Roman occupation and make their people a great nation again. That's what Andrew thinks he's found in Jesus. So, Andrew and

Peter leave John to become Jesus' disciples, but they hang onto the image of who they expect and want Jesus to be, and they ignore or dismiss what John told them about him being a lamb.

But this is only chapter one of John's Gospel, the beginning of their story. These new disciples will continue to hang out with Jesus, to "abide" with him in the older English of our beloved hymns, and that will prove to be an important theme of this Gospel. Abiding with Jesus, remaining with him, in the language of today's text, will eventually transform them into true disciples, like the branches of a vine in Jesus' later imagery, who will bear fruit because of their connection to him. And in that process of abiding with Jesus, they will, finally, come to bear witness like John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus' death and resurrection as the means by which he is taking away the sin of the world. They will finally get what John meant by Jesus being the Lamb of God, the ultimate Passover Lamb, and their witness to that saving reality will give birth to the church that will carry that witness to the world.

And here we are, the result and the continuation of that witness in the church today. But if we are honest, we know that we can still be a lot like Andrew here in John chapter one. We too would like a conquering hero to save us from the disaster of our national dysfunction, from injustice, from anxiety, from the sense that things are spinning out of control, which may be more than just a sense. These are real problems that cry out for real solutions, and we want someone to *do* something about them. Of course we do.

But that is not what God provides us in Jesus. And that's not because those problems don't matter, but because something even deeper is at stake. Jesus has bigger fish to fry than the crises of any one nation or moment in history. He comes to take away the sin of the world, the deeper disease that keeps producing violence and injustice and fear no matter who is in power or how well things might seem to be arranged for a time. And he doesn't do that as a conquering hero. He does it as a lamb, who gives up his life so that others might live.

That means the church's central task is not to offer the world a better strategy or a cleaner ideology or a more effective program. The church exists to do what John the Baptist does: to point. And more than that, to promise. To say, again and again, "Here is the Lamb of God who is saving you." To proclaim that Jesus gives himself into the hands of sinners in order to redeem sinners by dying for them, and that in his death and resurrection God is already doing the decisive work that brings life to the world.

When the church attends to that task, people do not do nothing. Far from it. Freed from the burden of having to save the world ourselves, we are released to love our neighbors, to care for those wounded by our present reality, to share our time and resources, and to work for change where we can. We do those things not to bring the kingdom of God into existence, but because God's kingdom has already drawn near to us in Jesus Christ.

And so we point. We bear witness to the promise. And we abide, dwelling in God's word and sacraments in these weekly assemblies, so that, trusting the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, we may bear the fruit of God's love into a world starving for love.

This, dear people, is what the church *does*: it bears witness to God's strange, counterintuitive way – a way that doesn't give us what we think we want, but gives us what we ultimately need. May we stay true to this way in our life as the church and as God's beloved people in the world. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life. Amen.