

## Epiphany 2A: John 1.29-42

January 18, 2026

The Rev. Scott Walters

What's the strangest, most outrageously inappropriate thing you ever saw in a church? And don't say Waffle Shop. If you think that you just need a more expansive, maybe a more gelatinous definition of Lent. Consider this scenario, described in a letter by a 15th century Parisian who thought his parish's annual Feast of Fools, a common tradition in Europe at the time, was getting out of hand:

In the very midst of divine service masqueraders with grotesque faces, disguised as women, lions and mummers, performed their dances, sang indecent songs in the choir, ate their greasy food from a corner of the altar near the priest celebrating the mass, got out their games of dice, burned a stinking incense made of old shoe leather, and ran and hopped about all over the church.

I had to look up what "mummers" were. They were mimes. Which I would find so much more terrifying than drag queens and lions in church, wouldn't you? I also hope you feel better about the little outburst your child made in the pew last Sunday. At least she didn't set your shoe on fire.

Sociologists have different theories about what purpose transgressive celebrations like the Feast of Fools served. For today, I just want us to imagine ourselves in a place like church, where we know what kinds of characters one might expect to find at an altar or in the choir and what kind of behavior is deemed acceptable, only to see all the wrong people doing all the wrong things. I decided it was better to describe a weird medieval tradition than to wolf down a plate of aspic in the pulpit while singing obscenities at you. But are you with me?

I want us in that headspace for a few minutes because I think something similar happens in the Bible all the time. We look to a place where one thing is expected, only to find something else. Something completely, and sometimes offensively, wrong. Take John the Baptist. He just said something really, really strange. "John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" If you think about it, that's weirder than a mime throwing dice at our altar. What could it mean?

I know. You're used to hearing about lambs in church, so what's so strange about that? But John does not say "Here is the Good Shepherd." That would make more sense. A shepherd might not have had much social clout in first century Palestine, but at least he was in charge of the sheep and might set things right among his herd. But John calls Jesus a sheep.

Not only that, he calls him a sheep who takes away the sin of the world. Which is only more absurdity. Answer me this. If C.S. Lewis had written a book titled "The Lamb, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," do you think anyone would have read it? Sheep are not a species of creature we would recruit to set everything that's wrong with the world right again are they? We want lions or something equally fierce. I suppose sheep do trot around bleating that the world is "Baaaaahd," but it doesn't seem to be helping. Sorry. The only thing worse than a mummer in church is a dad joke.

You might say, "Well, there's that thing about lambs being sacrificed in the Old Testament. Doesn't God need blood for sins to be forgiven?" Actually, no. What we read in scripture over and over again is that God does not need sacrifices. "In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure," we

just heard in our psalm today, "Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required." In Hosea it's, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Jesus riffs on that verse twice in Matthew and tells us to go and learn what it means. Humans, it seems, are the ones who go around making scapegoats and projecting our need for sacrifice onto God.

So, if this Lamb of God that John announces has anything at all to do with our sacrificial systems, it only makes the lamb even less powerful. Here comes a helpless lamb who dies on an altar to a God who doesn't need or want sacrifice. A God who only wants things from us like steadfast love, mercy, knowledge of the strange ways of God.

Alright, have we made John's description of Jesus absurd enough? Let's take it seriously now. What does it do to your Christian imagination to hear Jesus called the powerless victim of an unnecessary system, and that in him the sins, not just of his followers but of the whole world, are simply taken away? Taken away by a lamb, by someone we can't imagine taking the world by force. Forget whether you think that's possible for a minute. Just sit with the image. What does it do to you? What does it stir? Provoke? Soothe? Disturb?

I've realized something recently about Instagram. I pretend not to spend time on social media because I really don't do Facebook, but here's my confession. As much as I like to watch carpenters fit dovetails and sharpen chisels, lately more and more of my feed is short clips of someone I agree with making some apparently devastating point that humiliates someone I disagree with. Anybody have any idea what I'm talking about here? The mic drop meme? Well, this powerless lamb who just takes away a person's sin is really messing with this guilty pleasure of mine. Because I don't want the sins of my enemies just taken away, removed from the equation, divine or otherwise. I want them exposed. I want blood. I want them to suffer for their badness and their wrongness. I don't want sin taken away. I want someone to make things right by making someone else get what they deserve. Am I the only one?

But the Christian good news is of a God who will not take the world by force. God, not as a lion, but God as a lamb. A lamb slain from the foundation of the world, is what will appear to John in his revelation on Patmos. If a lamb isn't weak enough for you, how about one that's been dead since the beginning of time? How many layers of absurdity does scripture need to pile on to make this central point?

As I was mulling on all this strangeness, the first season of Ted Lasso somehow came to mind. If you don't know it, the show was about a bumbling American football coach who's given a job coaching an English soccer team as an act of revenge by the team's former owner against his ex-wife. Ted is hired to make them lose. What was so beautifully surprising in that first season was the way Ted takes away the sin of one character after another. The unbearably arrogant young star Jamie Tart; the bitter veteran with anger issues, Roy Kent; the insecure and eventually Judas-like betrayer Nate ... The sins that make each character insufferable are simply set aside by Coach Lasso. He doesn't give their sins the time of day and, one by one, the human being behind each of these terrible facades begins to emerge. Friendship, trust, actual community begins to form on the team.

It hit me how countercultural this really was when the season's most conventionally satisfying scene occurred. I now think it's the moment the show lost its nerve. Ted challenges Rupert, the creepy ex-husband and former owner, to a dart game in a pub to settle a score. Rupert has been watching Ted throw, so he agrees. But when the game begins, Ted, who has been playing pretty well all night with his right hand, suddenly "remembers" that he's left handed. He makes the adjustment and saves the day by humiliating the evil Rupert. Ted wins the bet and reminds us all, with a wink, to stay curious. It was delicious, of course. That's the way I like to see sin taken away. By

force or skill or some other power that teaches those miserable sinners a lesson. I want a sacrifice. Inconveniently for me, that's the way sins are dealt with on television and in social media memes. Not in the gospel. I think John called Jesus a sheep to make sure we understand that Jesus is not going to address sin in the familiar old warlike ways we're so fond of in our newsfeeds, in our storylines, in our lives.

What I'm wondering is what it would truly look like in my life to trust Jesus as the lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Think about your own enemies and rivals. The people whose sins you think are making the biggest mess of things. What would it do to your identity ... what would it do to your feeling of righteousness to simply take those sins away, even for a moment? To not let your enemies' sins define them? I don't mean to refuse to step in to protect a vulnerable person when that's required. But seething at the news in the comfort of my living room and then venting eloquently to my like-minded friends is not that. What would it look like to live like that lamb who took away the sin of the world?

Because, honestly, I like the sacrificial system when I get to decide who will be sacrificed and for what. In Jesus, God refuses to play along. In Jesus, God shows up in exactly the wrong place as exactly the wrong creature behaving in exactly the wrong ways. God will only show up as the victim of our violent, sacrificial impulses, refusing to let even the ones doing the sacrificial violence to him on the cross be defined by their sin. Even then, even there, he takes their sin away.

Dr. King said, "There is nothing more majestic than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom and dignity." He lived out the absurd, but liberating conviction that the only place in a sacrificial system a follower of Jesus will faithfully occupy is as its victim, its lamb. As the one who lays down her life for a friend. As one who lays down his privilege, his power, his position. Even as one who takes away the sin of the enemy that I've been using to prop up my own sense of righteousness. At least I'm not a racist. At least I have my citizenship papers. At least I'm not like that sinner, was the prayer Jesus put on the lips of a self-righteous character in a parable, whom I wish I did not resemble. But I do. Every single day I do.

The good news is that there really is abundant life and liberation in the way of Jesus. We really can be freed from the sacrificial mindset from which all our violence arises. But that freedom won't come from joining the right party or righteous cause. It will come from heeding John's call, day after day, to follow the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It will come from returning to that Lamb, and letting him be the one to lead us out of our old death dealing sacrificial ways and into a truly everlasting way of being alive.