



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, January 19, 2020**  
*The Second Sunday After the Epiphany*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Dr. Patrick S. Cheng, *Theologian in Residence*  
on  
John 1:29-42  
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### **Behold the Lamb of God**

During my decade of theological studies, I read a lot of Karl Barth. Barth, as you may know, is considered by many to be the greatest theologian of the 20th century. I also wrote a lot about Barth. In fact, my doctoral dissertation was on Barth's hamartiology, or theology of sin.

But I never gave much thought as to what Barth was looking at when *he* was writing his theology. It turns out that Barth had a painting that hung over his desk for nearly fifty years. Barth gazed upon this painting as he wrote the eight thousand pages and six million words of his magisterial *Church Dogmatics*, which changed the trajectory of contemporary theology.

The painting that hung over Barth's desk was a reproduction of the crucifixion scene from the Isenheim Altarpiece by the 16th century German painter Matthias Grünewald. In some ways, the painting looks like every other crucifixion scene. We see the cross, the crucified Jesus, his mother Mary, the Beloved Disciple, and Mary Magdalene.

But there is something rather odd about this particular crucifixion scene. In the lower right hand corner of the painting, we see John the Baptist standing there with a little lamb at his feet. Now we know that John wasn't at the crucifixion because he was beheaded earlier by King Herod. Yet John is standing right there at the foot of the cross in Grünewald's painting – with his head fully attached – and he is pointing to Jesus with his bony index finger.

The Grünewald painting is basically a visual depiction of John the Baptist's proclamation from today's gospel reading: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." But instead of taking place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (as is the case with today's gospel reading), this proclamation takes place at the end of Jesus' earthly life.

Now any first-century Christian who heard the phrase "Lamb of God" would have automatically thought of the Passover Lamb. Like the Passover Lamb in the Book of Exodus – and the subsequent Passover Lambs that were sacrificed each year in the Jerusalem Temple – Jesus was slaughtered to liberate God's people and to save them from the forces of evil and death.

As the fourth century theologian Cyril of Alexandria wrote so powerfully in his commentary on today's passage:

[T]he very Lamb, the spotless Sacrifice, is led to the slaughter for all, that he might drive away the sin of the world, that he might overturn the destroyer of the earth, that dying for all he might annihilate death, that he might undo the curse that is upon us. . . . For one Lamb died for all, saving the whole flock on earth to God the Father, one for all, that he might subject all to God.

Karl Barth recognized how important the Grünewald painting was to his own theology. In the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth reflected upon what he called the “prodigious index finger” of John the Baptist. “Could anyone point away from himself more impressively and completely?” Barth asked rhetorically. For Barth, the simple act of pointing to the Crucified One as the Lamb of God summed up the entire task of Christian theology – and, indeed, all of Christian discipleship.

Instead of pointing to ourselves – and congratulating ourselves for what wonderful Christians we are – John the Baptist models what we are all called to do. And that is to constantly point ourselves and others towards the Crucified One, who takes away the sin of the world. As the Baptist says later in the fourth gospel, “He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease.”

This weekend we honor the life and ministry of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Most people think of Dr. King as a great civil rights leader and social justice activist. And they are right to do so. But not many people know that Dr. King was, first and foremost, a theologian. He held a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Boston University. But Dr. King was not your run-of-the-mill ivory-tower theologian, locked away in a seminary cloister. Rather, he was a theologian of action.

According to the late great theologian James Cone – the father of Black theology, the author of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, and my own *doktorvater* (or dissertation adviser) – Dr. King should be seen as a candidate for “America’s most outstanding theologian.” Cone writes:

If theology is a disciplined endeavor to interpret the meaning of the gospel for the present time . . . then I would claim that no one has articulated the Christian message of freedom more effectively, prophetically, and creatively in America than Martin Luther King, Jr.

Like John the Baptist’s bony index finger in the Grünewald painting, Dr. King’s entire life and ministry consisted of pointing himself and others towards the Crucified One – the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

The cross was central to Dr. King’s theology. First, the cross was an instrument of racial reconciliation. In a sermon that he preached in 1959, Dr. King said that the cross is the “eternal expression of the length to which God is willing to go to restore broken communities.”

Reflecting upon the sin of segregation, Dr. King said that “[t]hrough our sin, through our evil, and through our wickedness, we have broken communities.” And churches are by no means exempt from this brokenness. Dr. King, of course, famously said that “[i]t is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.”

But there is hope. The cross is God’s promise that our brokenness is never the last word. As Dr. Cone described King’s view of the cross: “[T]he cross was God’s way of saying no to segregation and yes to integration, no to the alienation between blacks and whites and yes to their reconciliation.”

But the cross symbolized much more than just reconciliation for Dr. King. The cross was also a sign of the suffering that is borne by all who are transformed by the gospel. In an address that he delivered in 1964, Dr. King said: “Jesus Christ gave his life for the redemption of the world. . . and as his followers, we are called to give our lives[,] continuing the reconciling work of Christ in *this* world.”

In other words, Dr. King challenges us to “bear the burden of the cross.” By following Jesus, we ourselves might very well be crucified for doing what is right. In fact, Dr. King notes that “whole churches may be crucified.”

And that was the case with Dr. King himself. During his lifetime, his home was bombed twice, he was jailed 29 times, he received hundreds of death threats, and he was nearly stabbed to death. And his life was ultimately cut short at the age of 39 by an assassin’s bullet – his blood poured out for the sin of the world.

Last Sunday, we saw Christ’s light manifested in the Manger and in the Star of Bethlehem. We also saw Christ’s light manifested in Jesus’ baptism and in his first miracle at the Wedding of Cana. Today’s gospel reading reminds us that Christ’s light also shines forth from Calvary – through the redemptive suffering and the reconciliation of the cross.

Where do you see the crucified ones in the world today? What does the cross mean for you in terms of redemptive suffering? What does the cross mean for you in terms of racial reconciliation? And how does your life, like the bony finger of John the Baptist, point to the Lamb of God?

Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.