

Behold the Lamb of God

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Jeffrey R. Holland

Our modified Sunday service is to emphasize the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as the sacred, acknowledged focal point of our weekly worship experience.

I was doing just fine until I saw the tears in the eyes of those young people in this choir. Those tears are a more eloquent sermon than I could ever give.

Looking up from water's edge, past the eager crowds seeking baptism at his hand, John, called the Baptist, saw in the distance his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, striding resolutely toward him to make a request for that same ordinance. Reverently, but audible enough for those nearby to hear, John uttered the admiration that still moves us two millennia later: "Behold the Lamb of God."¹

It is instructive that this long-prophesied forerunner to Jesus did not call Him "Jehovah" or "Savior" or "Redeemer" or even "the Son of God"—all of which were applicable titles. No, John chose the earliest and perhaps most commonly recognized image in the religious tradition of his people. He used the figure of a sacrificial lamb offered in atonement for the sins and sorrows of a fallen world and all the fallen people in it.

Please indulge me in recalling just a little of that history.

After expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve faced a devastating future. Having opened the door to mortality and temporal life for us, they had closed the door to immortality and eternal life for themselves. Due to a transgression they had consciously chosen to make in our behalf, they now faced physical death and spiritual banishment, separation from the presence of God forever.² What were they to do? Would there be a way out of this plight? We are not certain just how much these two were allowed to remember of the instruction they received while still in the garden, but they *did* remember they were to regularly offer for a sacrifice unto God a pure, unblemished lamb, the first male born of their flock.³

Later an angel came to explain that this sacrifice was a type, a prefiguration of the offering that would be made in their behalf by the Savior of the world who was to come. "This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father," the angel said. "Wherefore, ... thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son forevermore."⁴ Fortunately, there was going to be a way out and a way up.

In the premortal councils of heaven, God had promised Adam and Eve (and all the rest of us) that help would come from His pure, unblemished Firstborn Son, the Lamb of God "slain from the foundation of the world,"⁵ as the Apostle John would later describe Him. By offering their own little symbolic lambs in mortality, Adam and his posterity were expressing their understanding of and their dependence upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus the Anointed One.⁶ Later, the wilderness tabernacle would become the setting for this ordinance and, after that, the temple that Solomon would build.

Unfortunately, as a symbol of genuine repentance and faithful living, this ritualistic offering of unblemished little lambs didn't work very well, as so much of the Old Testament reveals. The moral resolve that should have accompanied those sacrifices sometimes didn't last long enough for the blood to dry upon the stones. In any case, it didn't last long enough to preclude fratricide, with Cain killing his brother Abel in the first generation.⁷

With such trials and troubles going on for centuries, no wonder the angels of heaven sang for joy when, finally, Jesus was born—the long-promised Messiah Himself. Following His brief mortal ministry, this purest of all Passover sheep prepared His disciples for His death by introducing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a more personal form of the ordinance that had been introduced just outside of Eden. There would still be an offering, it would still involve a sacrifice, but it would be with symbolism much deeper, much more introspective and personal than the bloodletting of a firstborn lamb. To the Nephites, after His Resurrection, the Savior said of this:

"Ye shall offer up unto me no more the shedding of blood. ...

"... Ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost. ...

"... Therefore repent, ... and be saved."⁸

My beloved brothers and sisters, with the exciting new emphasis on increased gospel learning in the home, it is crucial for us to remember that we are still commanded to "go to the house of prayer and offer up thy sacraments upon my holy day."⁹ In addition to making time for more home-centered gospel instruction, our modified Sunday service is also to reduce the complexity of the meeting schedule in a way that properly emphasizes the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as the sacred, acknowledged focal point of our weekly worship experience. We are to remember in as personal a way as possible that Christ died from a heart broken by shouldering entirely alone the sins and sorrows of the whole human family.

Inasmuch as we contributed to that fatal burden, such a moment demands our respect. Thus, we are encouraged to come to our services early and reverently, dressed appropriately for participation in a sacred ordinance. "Sunday best" has lost a little of its meaning in our time, and out of esteem for Him into whose presence we come, we ought to restore that tradition of Sabbath dress and grooming when and where we can.

As for punctuality, a late pass will always be lovingly granted to those blessed mothers who, with children and Cheerios and diaper bags trailing in marvelous disarray, are lucky to have made it to church at all. Furthermore, there will be others who unavoidably find their ox in the mire on a Sabbath morning. However, to this latter group we say an *occasional* tardiness is understandable, but if the ox is in the mire *every* Sunday, then we strongly recommend that you sell the ox or fill the mire.

In that same spirit, we make an apostolic plea for the reduction of clamor in the sanctuary of our buildings. We love to visit with each other, and we should—it is one of the joys of church attendance—but it ought *not* be pursued so vocally in space specifically dedicated for worship. I fear that visitors not of our faith are shocked by what can sometimes be noisy irreverence in a setting that is supposed to be characterized by prayer, testimony, revelation, and peace. Perhaps heaven is a little shocked as well.

It will add to the spirit of our sacrament meetings if the presiding officers are on the stand well before the meeting is to begin, listening to the prelude music and reverently setting the example the rest of us ought to follow. If there is chatter on the stand, we shouldn't be surprised at chatter in the congregation. We congratulate those bishops who are eliminating announcements that detract from the spirit of our worship. I, for one, cannot imagine a priest such as Zacharias—there in the ancient temple of the Lord, about to participate in the one and only priestly privilege that would come to him in his entire lifetime—I just cannot picture him pausing before the altar to remind us that the pinewood derby is just six weeks away and registration will soon be due.

Brothers and sisters, this hour ordained of the Lord is the most sacred hour of our week. By commandment, we gather for the most universally received ordinance in the Church. It is in memory of Him who asked if the cup He was about to drink could pass, only to press on because He knew that for *our* sake it could *not* pass. It will help us if we remember that a symbol of that cup is slowly making its way down the row toward us at the hand of an 11- or 12-year-old deacon.

When the sacred hour comes to present our sacrificial gift to the Lord, we do have our own sins and shortcomings to resolve; that's why we're there. But we might be more successful in such contrition if we are mindful of the other broken hearts and sorrowing spirits that surround us. Seated not far away are some who may have wept—outwardly or inwardly—through the entire sacramental hymn and the prayers of those priests. Might we silently take note of that and offer our little crust of comfort and our tiny cup of compassion—might we dedicate it to them? or to the weeping, struggling member who is *not* in the service and, except for some redemptive ministering on our part, won't be there next week either? or to our brothers and sisters who are not members of the Church at all but *are* our brothers and sisters? There is no shortage of suffering in this world, inside the Church and out, so look in any direction and you will find someone whose pain seems too heavy to bear and whose heartache seems never to end. One way to “always remember him”¹⁰ would be to join the Great Physician in His never-ending task of lifting the load from those who are burdened and relieving the pain of those who are distraught.

Beloved friends, as we unite across the globe each week in what we hope is an increasingly sacred acknowledgment of Christ's majestic atoning gift to all humankind, may we bring *to* the sacramental altar “more tears for his sorrows [and] more pain at his grief.” And then, as we reflect, pray, and covenant anew, may we take *from* that sacred moment “more patience in suffering, ... more praise for relief.”¹¹ For such patience and relief, for such holiness and hope, I pray for all of you in the name of Him who broke the precious bread of forgiveness and poured the holy wine of redemption, even Jesus Christ, the great and merciful and holy Lamb of God, amen.