



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

January 18, 2026; Epiphany 2A: [Isaiah 49:1-7](#) [1 Corinthians 1:1-9](#)

Last week we had the story of Jesus' baptism from the Gospel of Matthew. Today we have a variation on the same story from the Gospel of John. Let me give you a little background that might help you understand why these differences exist. Gospels are books that tell the story of Jesus's life. There are four gospels in the Bible and several other gospels that didn't get included when the Bible was put together. They were all written 40-60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Each had a different author with access to different source material. Each was written to a different audience with a different purpose, with a different message, and a different meaning in mind. To use a modern example, imagine yourself as a student given the assignment of writing a paper on Martin Luther King. There is about the same distance in time between Martin Luther King's death and today as there was between Jesus' death and the writings of the gospels. If you went to Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr King grew up and served as a pastor and asked someone about his life, you would get a very different story than if you asked the same question to someone who was on the march with him in Selma. If you asked a member of the police or FBI who served in the south at that time to tell you about Dr. King, you would get a very different story than you would if you asked the same question of someone who during that period was going to college in the north. If you go to a Martin Luther King Celebration today or tomorrow, chances are that people will hear less focus on details about his life than about his vision, his dream, and his personal impact on them and the meaning of all that on the world today. (It's not just MLK, you could do this same thought exercise with JFK or other leaders, but you get my point.) Go back now to the gospels. Matthew was written to a Jewish audience and focused on making sure his gospel showed Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets and all the prophecies of Jewish scripture. Luke was written to a gentile – that is a non-Jewish – audience. Luke's Jesus lives in the middle of an amazingly diverse Roman world, interacts with women, lepers, and centurions, and even uses Samaritans as examples of what is good. In the Book of Acts, Luke describes how the Holy Spirit moved, the disciples were able to speak other languages, and Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Scholars think that Mark's gospel was written for a worshiping community, written to be read in services much like we are doing today. Mark's gospel didn't include a lot of details – even about the resurrection – because his audience already knew them, understood them, and experienced them every day. John didn't care about any of that. John's gospel was theological. John was focused on the Passion. John's purpose was to show Jesus was God.

A subtext in the Gospel of John is putting an end to the competition between the disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus, something that was still going on when John's gospel was written. The Gospel of John clearly puts John the Baptist in a subordinate role. Our reading today gives an example of this, with John the Baptist seeing Jesus saying, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes one who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' " "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." We say those words every Sunday. Did you notice, however, the difference? In the Agnus Dei, "sins" is plural. In the gospel of John, sin is singular. This is sin with a capital S. For the Gospel of John Jesus' coming is what physicists call a singularity, a moment in time when everything in the universe shifts. The Lamb of God didn't just come to deal with our private and personal peccadilloes, or even our more salacious public sins. The Lamb of God came for something far bigger than all that. Jesus came to heal the separation between human and divine. He came to repair the relationship between people and one another and people and God, once and for all. He came to get the world back to the way God created it to be.

There are lots of people around us today who don't want this to happen. They are willing to use violence, intimidation, messages of hate, and manipulation of the truth to keep others frozen in fear, stuck in suffering, nailed to the cross, and blocked in the tomb. They miss the message that both are already empty and that the stone has been rolled away. They miss the point of the Book of Revelation (attributed to but probably not written by John the gospel writer), that as bad as things look, the Lamb will win, that love will win, and that it already has. With Jesus' resurrection, death is wiped out forever. They miss the message that in the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed, tears are wiped away from every eye, the leaves on the tree by the water of life are for the healing of the nations, and people from every tribe, language and nation are gathered together around the throne of God singing, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever! Amen." (Rev. 5:13)

This is the image, the message, and the metaphor that inspired the Hallelujah Chorus. This is the image, the message, and the metaphor that inspired Martin Luther King. We forget that Martin Luther King was Dr. Martin Luther King. He had a doctorate in systematic theology from Boston University which he used to systematically dismantle the systems of injustice and hate. We forget that Martin Luther King was the Rev. Martin Luther King. His vision was founded and formed in the stories of Jesus, the reading and study of scripture, and the worship of the church. His dream that "his four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" comes from confidence that Jesus is the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world, whose light will shine in the darkness, whose healing will give hope to all, and whose love will transform the world itself. Today's gospel concludes with Andrew, excitedly going to his brother, Peter, and telling him "What John said is true! We have found the Messiah. He is the answer we have been looking for." That's what Martin Luther King was saying. Could you, would you, say the same thing?

Martin Luther King's last sermon was delivered at the Episcopal Church's own National Cathedral, just four days before his death. In it, he described the hope that was in his heart. He said "*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*" Like John the Baptist, Martin Luther King pointed to Jesus as the one who can heal the hurts, bridge the gaps, and take sin with a capital S away. He then did his best to follow Jesus' example and do those things himself. As we honor him today, it is time for us to do the same. Like John the Baptist, our task is to point to Jesus and say "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Like Martin Luther King, our task is to live as if we believe that is true.