

Second Sunday after the Epiphany – 2026

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42a

My garbage barrel doesn't smell nice. I keep the lid closed. How about you? How many of y'all intentionally keep your garbage barrel lid open to dazzle your neighbors with the fragrance emanating from your trash? I don't spray Febreze in the barrel. I don't squirt Pierre Cardin cologne into the barrel. I don't tape a car freshener to the inside of the lid. The garbage barrel stinks. I put it on the curb once a week and a very nice gentleman takes away my garbage (it's a sweet deal). I've been to the dump. A total of one time, I've been to the dump. It's not a resort type destination. No one is selling tickets to the garbage dump for a pleasant getaway. In the OT, on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the High Priest would place his hands on a pathetic creature called a "scapegoat." The High Priest would then confess the sins of Israel, and a transference would take place (Leviticus 16). This pathetic creature would then bear the sins of Israel out into the wilderness, and it would be abandoned there. The garbage man bears away the refuse in my barrel. The scapegoat would bear the sins of Israel out into the desert.

Perhaps you think this is "icky." It *is* icky. God did not design the scapegoat as a lasting vessel of transference. The Day of Atonement in the OT was preparatory, a shadow of the Good Thing that was coming (Hebrews 10:1-10). Imagine the refuse that came out of the mouth of the High Priest as he confessed the sins of Israel while his hands are placed on that pathetic animal's head. My garbage barrel doesn't smell very nice. Imagine the stench of the sins of Israel. Does sin have a stench? Is there any doubt that our sin is a radical affront to holy God? Spiritual corruption; man's violence against the innocent, the vulnerable; sexual decadence, and grooming the young for perversion; planning and executing theft, robbing others of the means necessary to navigate this life; do these things have an odor? We use those Bounce sheets in our dryer. The laundry smells nice when it comes out of the dryer. How about our sin? The lies we tell; the judgmental thoughts we think; the foul talk we allow into our ears; the lust of our hearts; the covetousness of our eyes; the pride that dances in our minds; does that smell nice? None of you leave your garbage barrel lid open – for good reason.

John the Baptist lifts his boney finger and his transcendent voice: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "Bears away" is a better translation. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who *bears away* the sin of the world." On half of our bulletins there is a classic painting of this episode. On half of our bulletins there is a painting of the Baptist pointing to Christ on the cross (the two paintings beautifully interpret each other). As He dies on the cross, Jesus *bears away* the refuse of our wretchedness. Jesus is crucified and takes our sin into His death. He doesn't go into the desert. The Lamb is slain. The sinless Son of God takes our sin into His death. Jesus is the real scapegoat. Every ill thing that you have ever done was put on Him and He took it into the black hole of His death. At the same time, the Holy Son of God atones for our sin. His blood; the Lamb's blood; it was shed to cleanse us, shed to ransom us (1 Peter 1:18-19). Once! On the cross; once! His is a sacrifice that extends across time and space to every human being. Once! It is completed, perfected, finished! Once! Good Friday is the fulcrum of history. Good Friday was the day of days. Easter too. He is risen! Death has no

victory. Death has no sting (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Sin and death are vanquished. The Lamb that was slain has begun His reign (Revelation 5:17).

How wonderful it is to baptize Claire Helena today. That's four weddings that Grant and Marilyn are going to have to pay for. Awesome! Babies are awesome. Let's have lots of them and baptize them all! Claire, fresh from her baptism, is the aroma of Christ, the fragrance of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14-15). She is a child of grace, a daughter of the Most High, claimed by the blood of the Lamb which has washed her and she is robed with the garment of salvation, clothed with Christ (Isaiah 61:10; Galatians 3:27). All of us, with Claire Helena, live two thousand years after the Lord walked this earth, two thousand years after His crucifixion in Jerusalem. How do we receive what our Lord has done? How do we come in contact with the wonder of Christ's death and resurrection? How does Jesus bring His once-for-all work to bear on us? Is that even important? Do you care?

"What do you seek?" Those are the first words of Jesus in the Gospel According to John. What do you seek? In the biblical story, Jesus is asking this of those who were hesitatingly in His wake. The Lord Christ saw them and bluntly asked them: "What are you seeking?" (John 1:38). It's in the bible. The account is accurate. In other words, it happened just the way it describes. But is there more here? Does *God* intend more here? You; you are the more that God intended. You are so important. You are so important to our Father. He addresses you. Directly, forcefully, gracefully – Christ addresses you. What do you seek? It is as though He is asking you: "Do you seek what this story (the Gospel of John) tells of me?" Do you seek the One whose life invades your own, the One who bears away your sin, who restores you to the Father, who opens the Kingdom of heaven? What do you seek? The answers are legion. There are plenty of people who are seeking wealth, or fame, or the next jolt of pleasure or the next thousand likes. What do *you* seek? Those are Jesus' first words in the Gospel of John. Christ's church answers only one way: You! We're seeking You, the promised Messiah! What else would we be seeking in this life? What holds our heart, what inspires our soul, elevates our mind, turns us toward truth and love and the wonder of God with us?

"Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1:36). John said it. It not only happened exactly that way, but it's also an address to you, the hearer of the Gospel. Behold; look! And the eyes of your heart are enlightened by the Holy Spirit to see the Lamb of God who, out of pure love for the lost, laid down His life to ensure that you are forgiven and to bring you to heaven. Behold, this crucified Savior is the one who removes evil by bearing it away into His death. Behold, this crucified King remains among us, serves us, ministers to us through His Word and Sacraments in order to share His life. Scripture says: Behold, the Lamb of God! And faith beholds the Lamb of God! It is happening exactly as God intended. You know it! You see it! You have been blessed by it!

"Where are you staying?" That's how the ESV translates the Greek phrase, the question that these two disciples asked Jesus. But the word is better translated remain – like it is in a zillion other places in John's Gospel (μενω). "Where are you remaining/abiding?" Seems like a pretty reasonable question to ask Him *now*. Are you in Your church? Where are you remaining? It's sort of like, "Where can we find you? Where, how can we access you, be with you, stay close to you?"

Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus said this: “Where I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). Is it true? In a concrete way, is it true? Is it true now? Is it true for us? Will it be true for Claire’s children? Was it true for St. Augustin and Clement of Alexandria and for the martyrs Perpetua and Felicity? Where are you remaining? Are you present in the Sacrament of the altar? Are you present in this Divine Service – where two or three are gathered in Your name? Yes! I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matthew 28:16-20). The Lamb of God is truly present with us through the Word and the Sacraments. He is present to enliven our hearts with His divine love, present to draw us from the dead end of hedonism and idolatry and loneliness and pride. Behold, the Lamb of God, who bears away the sin of the world. What is His aroma? He is the aroma of life. Christ crucified is the fragrance of truth and forgiveness and fidelity. That aroma fills this holy house. His fragrance is on you. And you spread His aroma, the aroma of the resurrection to the world. Andrew was one John’s disciples who beheld the Lamb of God. Elated, Andrew went and found his brother Simon. We have found the Messiah! That’s what we are seeking. He is most certainly in this place. Thanks be to God, the Messiah is in this place.