

BEHOLD THE LAMB

Sermon for Epiphany 2A—Jn 1:29-42

LPC, 1/19/14

I bring you greetings from the saints at Virginia Theological Seminary at Alexandria, Virginia.

In case it has dropped off your radar screens (and I do realize that you all have lives that continue and engage you even when you are outside my company,) I have been away for the last two weeks attending classes in the first stage of my journey toward a Doctorate of Ministry in Christian Spirituality.

I have never worked so hard in my life.

This is saying something because I have always applied myself assiduously as a student, as my academic record will show, but this session was particularly arduous.

The preparatory reading alone amounted to a total of ten books. Because of the eccentric organization of the website from which we students were supposed to obtain our assignments, I was unaware of four of these books until arriving in class. Finding time to catch up was complicated by being in class seven to nine hours every day. In addition to class, attendance was also expected at daily chapel and communal lunch. Even the weekend brought no relief as a ten-page paper was due Sunday evening.

There's also homework: I have one paper due February 15, and another three papers due by March 1. There is also the groundwork for what will become my dissertation project. This involves an in-depth analysis of current ministry situations. You'll be hearing more about this in the weeks to come, since I am supposed to gather a group of parishioners to help me do this so-called institutional study.

Amidst all of this, I slowly became aware of something at the periphery of my consciousness. This thing was at first tentative and frail, but it grew in substance until I thought I almost recognized it. I am still not absolutely sure of its identity, because discernments like this calls for some humility. But I am pretty sure, and what I lack in certainty, I am resolved to make up in faith.

What has been present in the whole harrowing experience of my first doctoral residency is, I believe, the Lamb of God.

The workload for this degree is terrifying. But the classes in this first module were fascinating. No matter how tired I was, when the instruction and discussion began I was drawn in. We had 21 hours of Old Testament study, which I loved. We had 16 hours of desert fathers

and mothers and medieval solitaries. Right up my alley. We had 8 hours of Ignatian spirituality and 14 hours of Carmelites. I was in heaven. Behold the Lamb of God.

The professors were both knowledgeable and gifted, visibly excited by their subjects even after years of study, and able to share that excitement with their students. The administrators bent over backwards to address students' anxieties and concerns. Behold the Lamb of God.

Daily worship was thoughtfully planned and well-executed. The music was beautiful and varied. I got to sing the alto part, which is the best part. Behold the Lamb of God.

My classmates (there are eleven of us in this cohort) were kindred spirits. Among these were a Disciples-of-Christ hospital chaplain, a Methodist minister serving three yoked churches in Central Pennsylvania, a chaplain at an Episcopal school for boys, a priest from Mozambique who is married to a bishop, a Taiwanese who was only the second woman ordained in her diocese, an expert in Eastern religions, and a bi-vocational priest whose other job as a diplomat has taken her around the world.

The degree of cooperation between this disparate group of ministers was phenomenal. We shared sources, stories, books, strategies, chocolate. We felt an immediate affinity with each other and are all looking forward to being together again. Behold the Lamb of God.

Despite the nearly frantic level of activity, the seminary environment is fundamentally centered and prayerful. Here is one place where being a devoted Christian is the norm rather than the exception. Here is a place where people practice what they preach: hospitality, forgiveness, respect for every human being. Behold the Lamb of God.

Perhaps it's not surprising that the Lamb of God should be present in this good stuff, but I gradually became aware of Lamb of God in the hard stuff too. As the assignments mounted, as fatigue compounded, I began to feel as if I was being stripped of false expectations and pride. There is no way a person can face a workload like this and not feel humbled. But it was actually as I began to feel weak that I became aware of my total dependence on God. If I am to do this thing, it will be because of God's support. I will certainly be unable to do it without God's help.

When things get as hard as they were for me these past couple of weeks, it doesn't mean that Jesus is not there. The Lamb of God is not only present in the gaps between the hard stuff. The Lamb of God is *in* the hard stuff: when we realize we can't go it alone.

That the Lord appears to us in our weakness rather than in our strength is surely one reason we speak of the Lamb of God rather than the lion or the tiger or the bear of God.

The past couple of weeks have been a blessing, as I have rediscovered by dependence on God. Will I be able to sustain this awareness of Lord's presence in my "normal life?" I think so. Because the Lamb of God is here too. Isn't he?