

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**John 1:29-42, “Relief Work”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/15/2023**

You know that anxious feeling when you are dreading a particular piece of news?  
When you’re expecting a terrible traffic fine? Or a late payment penalty?  
Or a medical exam result?  
Or when a loved one is traveling through a treacherous snowstorm,  
and their car has broken down?

After a sleepless night of worry the news comes:  
The thing you’ve dreaded will not come to pass.

Someone has intervened and it’s going to be okay –  
the judge dismissed your ticket, the company waived the late fee,  
the doctor says the treatment has worked,  
your child calls to say someone stopped to help fix the tire,  
and they’ve arrived safe and sound.

What a relief!

This passage in the first chapter of John’s gospel  
introduces what Dale Bruner calls “Jesus’ relieving work.”

When we are saddled with the dread of guilt, frailty, and death,  
Jesus has come to take away not only our sin, but the sin of the world.

What a relief.

I see five symbols of the relieving work of Jesus in this passage.  
Five distinctive metaphors for what it looks like when this relief arrives.  
Lamb, water, dove, wind, pebble.

I want to briefly explore each of these symbols  
and then consider how we might respond to the first question  
that Jesus asks his first disciples: “What do you want?”

## **lamb**

The symbol of the lamb comes to us from Isaiah 53:7-8:

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.”

Then in v. 8, “He was cut off (or “taken away”) from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was punished.”

If Jesus had been identified by John the Baptist as the lion of Judah,  
it would have foreshadowed a much different ministry.

Here the lamb of God is a contrast  
to the symbols of coercive power and dominance.

The lamb is a symbol of meekness, of innocence,  
and of taking away the sin of the people through sacrifice.

In his commentary on this passage, Dale Bruner writes,

“The faith of the Church finds its single greatest source of joy, of preaching,  
teaching, and singing, of social and ethical mission, and of everyday life in  
this sin-removing Lamb. This Lamb is the center of the Eucharistic Service  
each week in the Church, and his finished work is the power in the water of  
baptism that changes the estranged into friends and disciples.”

The first symbol of God’s relief work is a lamb.

The second symbol is water.

## **water**

John the Baptist came with a baptism of water.

The water protectors of the Standing Rock reservation in South Dakota  
taught me the phrase, “Water is life.”

The longer I think about it, the truer I find it to be.

Water cleanses, refreshes, hydrates, lubricates, and invigorates.

Water seeks the path of least resistance.

It can announce its presence and power loudly,

like in the crashing of an ocean tide,

but is more commonly a quiet, unassuming presence.

The lamb of God stands in the stream of cleansing water, like the River of Life which ran through the Garden of Eden.

## **dove**

Elsewhere in the Bible the dove symbolizes the renewal of the world in the story of Noah and the great flood.

This is by far our strongest connection to the symbol.

A dove with an olive branch in its beak is a global sign of peace.

King David prayed in Psalm 55, **“Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!**

**I would fly away and be at rest.”**

His son Solomon alluded to doves as symbols of beauty

in a lover’s eyes. (Song of Sol. 1:15)

But I was surprised to discover that the most frequent connection made to doves in scripture comes from their mournful cry.

Isaiah writes (59:11) **“We all growl like bears;**

**we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice,**

**but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away.”**

I see both the emphasis of peace and the mournful lament of injustice in the life of Jesus and the dove that joined him at his baptism.

Dale Bruner writes,

“That the Spirit comes down like a dove corresponds nicely with the earlier fact that the savior came as a Lamb. No lion there, no eagle here, but dove on Lamb. Surely the two animal pictures seek to depict the gentle, nonviolent Messiah... Gentleness, not obvious power, seems to be the most authentic mark of Christian messianism.”

## breath

In John's closing testimony about Jesus he emphasizes the Spirit  
three times in two verses. Twice

John speaks of the Spirit who came down as a dove  
and a third time he distinguishes his own ministry  
from that of Jesus in that John baptized with water,  
but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma*, which means breath.

Its corresponding Hebrew word is *ruach*, which means wind.

When I read of Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit

I think of our empowerment and gifting for joining in God's mission.

But I also consider that controlled breathing is the centerpiece  
of contemplative prayer and meditation.

Slowly take a breath now and hold it. Now slowly exhale.

Breathe in the life of the Spirit.

Theologian Rose Schrott writes in an article for Pittsburgh Seminary  
that science has revealed

“...the sacred power of breath. Research shows that deep, slow breaths –  
roughly six per minute – maximize ventilation, reduce waste, and stimulate  
our Vagus nerve, which is connected to our parasympathetic nervous system.  
The counterpart of our sympathetic ‘fight or flight’ nervous system, the  
parasympathetic nervous system helps us relax.”

If I'm going to talk about Jesus' relief work, the movement of God's Spirit,  
and the power of breath this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend,

then I must also draw our attention to the last words of George Floyd  
nearly three years ago: “I can't breathe.”

The breath of life is a gift.

The movement of the Spirit brings a fresh wind to our world.

But when we fail to live justly and equitably,  
the basic function of breathing can be denied  
by those who wield coercive power.

**The fourth symbol is a pebble.**

What name has Jesus given you?

Rocky? Stream walker? Fur ball?

Beloved. Chosen. Welcome. Trustworthy. Faithful. Known.

Cherished. Delightful. Forgiven. Encourager. Peacemaker.

Friend.

These are not the names given by the so-called powers of this world.

They are the names given by the One who's great power  
the world has failed to see.

Child of God, hear Jesus speak your name

and breathe in the fresh wind of the Spirit

for the lamb of God stands in the river of life

as the dove rests on its shoulders.

What a counterpoint these symbols are to the raging bull of the stock market,  
the vacuum bomb which suffocates in its violence,

the eagle of American superpower,

the baren landscape of climate catastrophe,

the arrogant name calling of public discourse.

Do these symbols of Jesus' relief work draw you in?

They drew in a couple followers of John the Baptist.

In v. 36 when John sees Jesus walking by he says a second time,

“Look, the Lamb of God!”

These two disciples waste no time.

They leave their first master, John,

and follow after a new and greater teacher.

Jesus turns to them and says, “What do you want?”

How would you respond today?

What is it you want from Jesus?

In response I encourage you to select one or two of these five symbols  
to remind you of the character of God's relief work  
in your own life and world.

The humility and gentleness of the lamb.

The cleansing vitality of life giving water.

The serenity and peacefulness of the dove.

The liberation and healing of the Spirit's breath.

The wonder and joy of Jesus' speaking your new name.

What do you want?

The disciples went to spend the day with Jesus where he was staying.

Where does Jesus make his home today?

Where can you go to sit beside him and learn from him?

Let's also look beyond ourselves.

Who else do you know who needs relief?

Where are there people bearing the burdens of injustice, grief,  
pain, or loneliness? You can join God in relieving them.

You won't eradicate the evils of the world. That's not our job.

But you can bring relief and hope as a sign of God's ultimate intention  
to make all things new.

Jesus, our brother, has gone before us to relieve our own

burdens, to put salve on our wounds, to show us the safe paths,  
and to lead us in the way of peace.

Living with the symbols of the lamb, water, breath, and dove before us

will help us to have eyes to see where God's relief work  
is breaking in around us today.

Our holy names will give us courage

to follow in faith, in hope, and in love.