

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’³¹ I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.”³² Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him.”³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?”³⁹ “Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour.⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). (John 1:29-41)

How Do You Know if the Gospel is True?

The other day, one of the kids in catechism class asked a tough question: how do you know the Bible is true? What if someone just made it up? Maybe the fact that a seventh grader would ask questions like that says something about the society we live in – a society that doesn’t believe in anyone or anything anymore. But I think there’s more to it than that. It’s almost inevitable that this question will come up. I’ve heard it many times before. I’ve even asked it myself. In our gospel lesson for today God shows us his solution to that question because he shows us hearing the gospel and believing it. **How do you know if the gospel is true?**

- I. Remember the source.
- II. Go back to the source.

I.

The lesson opens with John the Baptist testifying to the gospel: “**Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**” Of course, John was pointing to Jesus when he said this. He wanted the people to know that what he was saying was true. So he told them how he knew this was the Savior of the world. Understand, the people of John’s day had heard this claim before. A number of people in their lifetime had claimed to be the Messiah and had organized revolts against the Romans. Always, they had failed.

John needed to show them that Jesus was different. He said, “**I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’**” The one who sent John to baptize was God. He told John to prepare the way for the Savior but he did not tell John who that Savior was. John probably did know Jesus personally, at least a little bit. They were relatives. John’s own mother had recognized that Mary’s unborn child was the Savior and John the Baptist himself had even leaped in his mother’s womb when the pregnant Mary entered his house. But John’s parents were quite old when he was born and it’s possible that they had died when he was very young. However much he did or did not know Jesus personally, however much he had heard from his parents, whatever he believed about Jesus before this, to publicly proclaim Jesus as the Messiah required certainty. So when God called him to preach and baptize, he promised a sign to indicate the real Messiah.

John saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus in the form of a dove and rest on him when he baptized him. That was the sign that God had promised. John got his message directly from the source: from God himself. So when we hear John’s testimony, we’re hearing the testimony of God himself. John stands as a part of a special class of people whom God called to give us his message. The Church stands on the foundation of the prophets and the apostles. All these men – Moses and Isaiah, King David and John the Baptist, Peter and John and Paul – got their message directly from the source, from God himself. That makes it true in every age.

But does that answer my student’s question? What if someone made up the Bible’s message and claimed that it came from God? There is no scientifically provable answer. There is no argument I can bring

that will convince an unbeliever. There is no proof that I can show. I realize that what I'm going to say next sounds like circular reasoning, but it is the only answer. We grasp all this by faith. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God because the Holy Spirit worked through that very Word and convinced us. We can't prove it. But we do know it is true because we have experienced the work of the Holy Spirit. He did a miracle through his word. He reached into our hearts and gave us faith. Now we know.

But it's human nature to seek for the truth somewhere else – anywhere else but the Bible. In America today, the primary place that we seek for truth is in our own hearts. What we feel must be true. Several years ago, I saw a news report about a young woman who had disappeared. Her father said, "I know in my heart she's still alive." Sadly, he was wrong. He wanted her to be alive and my heart went out to him. But he didn't know. Very often, when Americans look for spiritual truth, we look into our own hearts. We want to believe that what we feel about God must be true, but, my friends, that simply is not the case. The only place for us to find truth is the source: the Bible, the Word of God. It is true that the Holy Spirit convinces our hearts so we know the truth. But for our heart to know that truth, God has to change us. God has to break our sinful hearts and make them accept things they don't want to believe. That is absolutely different from searching your feelings and believing what they tell you.

Do you think that you're immune from doubting the Bible? Well, consider the doctrines you have trouble with. Think of what God's word says about the husband being the head of the house or about the Bible's teaching on fellowship – that it's wrong for us to worship at a church that teaches false doctrine, like Northridge. Think of all the things that we teach that bug you. We struggle with those things because we don't like those doctrines. We don't want to think of ourselves as totally sinful. But that's exactly the way our hearts are when we're born. When we dare to disagree with God, we prove that we're sinners. We prove that God should throw us out of his kingdom. We prove that we deserve hell.

But God sent John the Baptist to say, "**Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**" In the Old Testament, when people sinned, God required them to offer an animal sacrifice. That sacrifice paid for their sins. Those animals were just symbols of the real sacrifice. On the cross, Jesus gave his life for all sinners everywhere. He took away the sin of the world. He paid for every sin of every human being. My friends, are you human beings? Are you part of the world? If the answer is yes, then Jesus paid for you, too. He took away all the times we listened to our hearts instead of the Word of God. He took away the record of our desire to find truth anywhere but where God speaks. He took away the guilt of our sinful hearts. Now, in God's eyes, we're holy and righteous. That's the message God put into the Bible. **How do we know the gospel is true? Remember the source!**

II.

All that the Church does on this earth needs to center on the gospel message. That begins, of course, with what I do up here. John the Baptist is a wonderful example of true gospel ministry. On one day, he pointed Jesus out, apparently to the whole crowd of people who had come to hear him preach. On the very next day, John directed two of his own disciples to Jesus. Those men followed Jesus home and spoke with him and became convinced that this was the true Messiah they had been waiting for. Now, humanly speaking, this was not a very bright thing for John to do. John had generated a great following in Israel and many people were ready to accept him as the Messiah because he was such a great preacher and because he stood up to the corrupt religious leaders of his day. But John didn't capitalize on their support. Instead, he directed his own followers to Jesus. Within a matter of months, the crowds were far more interested in Jesus than they were in John.

John wanted that to happen because he was a faithful preacher of the gospel. The gospel is never about my fame or glory. No matter how gifted or how ordinary the guy up here is, our job is always to point you to Jesus. John the Baptist could do that by actually sending two of his own disciples to Jesus to learn from the master himself. Guys like me have to send you to Jesus through the Word. But we must send you to Jesus. We must send you to the source. Faith that depends on me and my gifts or on any of the pastors who have served here before I did, is not focused on Jesus. In the end, it will fail if Jesus does not take his rightful place.

When you doubt, when you struggle with the truth, that is when it's most important for me to send you to Jesus because the power of God is in the gospel. When God says things that are hard for us to accept, when our church's practices seem most out of touch with our society and we chafe under that reality, then, too, we need to come and hear the Word. We need to study the Word on our own. The Word is the source that shows us Jesus. And St. Paul told us to take every thought captive to the Word of God.

That means that the people who have the most to say about what our church should or should not be doing are those who come and hear the word. Your faith is always getting stronger or getting weaker. As your faith grows, your understanding of what God commands grows. Your commitment to living a Christian life and to having your congregation run itself in a Christian manner grows. But no matter how many years you've been coming here, if you stop hearing the word regularly, your faith will weaken. The more your faith weakens, the more you will think like a child of this world. Then you'll want different things here. You'll become restless in your membership and you'll advocate practices and positions that disagree with God's Word.

Now, that does not mean that any time you disagree with me you're acting like an unbeliever. In practical matters, we can disagree, as long as we put the gospel first. In Christian freedom, we can make many different decisions about how and when we preach the gospel. But the wisdom to use our Christian freedom for the good of the gospel only comes when we hear the gospel. When someone who never comes to hear the Word complains, the fact that he doesn't come and hear automatically calls into question his understanding of the work Jesus gives us to do.

John knew that maturity comes from going to the source. So he sent his disciples to Jesus to learn more. Did you see what happened then? They told others what they had discovered. Andrew went and found his brother Peter and told him, "**We have found the Messiah.**" Going to the source brings excitement about the truth we've found and a desire to share it with others. In the short time that I've served you, it's become clear to me that Peace is a congregation that wants to share the gospel. We want people to hear the good news and believe it. We want them to reach heaven. But we struggle with how to share that good news. Many of us feel very uncomfortable sharing it personally. How can we change that? Only by going to the source. The gospel is God's power to give us faith and it is God's power to strengthen our faith and to change our lives.

Do we come to the source and grow in our faith so that we know what's best for our congregation? Do we come to the source and grow in our faith so that we can bring others to the truth? Or do we have to confess that we've been spiritually lazy? Do we have to confess that we give Jesus an hour a week or less and we figure that's enough? My friends, God does not specify how many hours a week you need to spend in the Word. He tells you that you should live it, that it should be on your mind constantly, that you should think about it and meditate on it and study it. Do we do that?

If the answer is no, then it shouldn't surprise us that we lack the spiritual maturity to guide our congregation or that we stumble through our outreach efforts. It shouldn't surprise us that we feel guilty about our commitment to the Lord. What is the solution? The source: the gospel. Jesus died even for our neglect of God's word. Jesus died even because we're too lazy to make it a part of our every day life. God has wiped even that sin away. In Jesus' name, I forgive you for your sin. Now, God calls you to put forgiveness to work in your life. Lifted up by his love, return to his Word again and again so that you can know the truth, so that you can share the truth, so that you can guide your congregation with the truth. Return to the gospel so that you can conquer the power of doubt and unbelief when it challenges you. **How do you know the gospel is true? Go back to the source!**

A good pastor leads his people back to Jesus. He leads them to the Word where we find Jesus because only in the gospel do we find the power of God that overcomes all the doubts and questions that rise in our sinful hearts. When we get to heaven, we won't have any doubts any more. We'll see Jesus. We'll have perfect hearts and perfect trust in him. Right now, we don't see Jesus. We live by faith. We have the source of faith: the gospel of Jesus Christ. Remember that source when the devil tries to undermine your faith. Go back to that source day after day. Amen.