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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Epiphany 2

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, I thought I would begin this sermon with a little Latin.

Maybe like me, you had to learn some Latin back in middle school or high school.

Perhaps, you had to learn some Latin phrases like...

Tempus fugit, which means “time flies,” a phrase reminding us that time quickly passes away.

Or how about *bona fide*, which means “good faith,” a phrase that highlights someone or something as genuine or real, as in “She is a *bona fide* celebrity. She’s got the popularity and fame to prove it.”

Or there is the ever popular Latin phrase, *carpe diem*, which means “seize the day,” because who knows if we will have the opportunity tomorrow.

So, those are some familiar Latin phrases.

But, I would have us consider another Latin phrase, one with which we are likely not familiar.

That phrase being *incurvatus in se*.

Incurvatus in se.

The phrase means to be turned inward on one’s self.

To be turned in on one’s self.

And it is a phrase that is believed to have originated with St. Augustine way back in the late fourth or early fifth century.

But later in the 16th century the phrase becomes hugely important for Martin Luther.

This phrase, *incurvatus in se*, serves as the means by which Luther understood sin. Sin is the result of the heart turned in on itself.

The opposite is the heart that is turned out toward God and the neighbor.

So in essence there are two possible orientations for us as human being.

We are either turned inward such that we are selfish, self-centered, self-absorbed.

Or we are turned outward and are selfless, self-giving, self-denying.

The first orientation, that inward orientation, is the result of the power of sin.

Indeed Luther describes the heart turned in on itself in this way...

“Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, being so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them...or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.”

PAUSE

Now, I bring this Latin phrase to our attention today...

I bring this up because interestingly enough, this is how God's self was once understood.

In the course of faith history, there was a time when even God's self appeared to be turned in on itself, or at least that is how people described God.

And it all has to do with the understanding of “the lamb.”

For we see, there was a time when lambs, and other animals, and even grains and wine were offered to God.

Such things would be placed on the altar and they would be consumed by fire, and offered up to God as sacrifices.

To be sure, the altar was understood as a sort of transport station where the things of this earth were transported to heaven for God's sake.

Animals, grain, wine was burned up on the altar and our ancient ancestors understood that those animals, grain, and wine rose up to God, because our ancestors observed the smoke from those burnt offerings as rising up to God.

And so, our ancestors understood the altar as the transport station from here on earth to God in heaven.

And in effect, what our ancestors were doing through those burnt offerings, was providing food for God.

Here is a lamb, which we will burn up and send it up to God.

Here is some grain, which we will burn up and send it up to God.

And here is some wine, which we will pour around the altar and send it up to God.

And this is why then we get passages in the Bible like Leviticus 1:9 which says, "The priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord."

You see, our ancestors had quite a different picture of God.

For our ancestors, God was one who needed to be served.

God was one who needed to be fed.

God was one who even needed to have a house built for him, namely the Temple.

All of the focus was toward God, as if God's heart was curved in on itself, as if God was bending everything in toward God's self.

It was almost as if God couldn't do for God's self.

It was as though God had to rely on others.

And thus what we have is a very narcissistic image of God—a very self-centered, selfish, self-absorbed God.

PAUSE

But somewhere, at some point, somehow that perspective changed.

And we suddenly start hearing things like the prophet Hosea's words in chapter 6, verse 6.

God says these words, "I desire steadfast love and NOT sacrifice. I desire the knowledge of God RATHER THAN burnt offerings."

So, the practice of sacrifices and burnt offerings were being revisited, reconsidered, rethought.

If God is truly God, does God really need to be served?

And then by the time we reach the New Testament, the turning away from that inward orientation was complete.

God doesn't need a temple built for him, because Jesus himself is the Temple.

Our Lord Jesus says as much in John 2:19, when he confronts his opponents saying, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Jesus here is referring to his own person as the Temple.

And God does not need to be fed, for indeed God is the one who feeds us.

Jesus says at the Last Supper, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you."

And the whole transformation from the image of God as one who is depicted as turning everyone and everything toward himself to serve him, to the image of God as one who is turned outward, as the one who comes to serve and not to be served...

The whole transformation hinges on the idea of the lamb.

Lambs, along with other animals, and grain, and wine were once sacrificed to God.

Our ancestors had once viewed God, as though God turned or bent everything in on God's self.

But now, God is turned outward, such that Jesus is the lamb who dies for us, so as to take away the sin of the world.

We see the transformation, don't we?

We see the change in perspective here, yes?

It all hinges on the understanding of the lamb.

PAUSE

Now, it was only a couple weeks back when we were celebrating the birth of baby Jesus.

And we recall that Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem.

We often highlight the fact that Bethlehem was the City of David, which is why Jesus was born here.

The Messiah was prophesied to be of the line and lineage of David, and so Jesus was born in Bethlehem, David's city.

But there is something else significant about Bethlehem, something that often gets overlooked.

Bethlehem was the place where the lambs used for the Passover celebration in Jerusalem were born and raised, which is why of course there were shepherds near Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth.

Each Jewish family needed a lamb for the Passover celebration, so quite a lot of lambs were needed.

I imagine it to be something on par with our Thanksgiving Day celebration, where every family in our society has a turkey.

And all those lambs for Passover were processed into the Jerusalem like a parade, which is why Jesus gets in line in the parade on Palm Sunday. He, too, is a lamb.

And all those lambs needed by families for Passover had to be raised somewhere, and that somewhere was in and around Bethlehem.

And just like the infant Jesus is wrapped in bands of cloth to keep him warm and to help his limbs grow straight...

Similarly were newborn lambs wrapped in bands of cloth to swaddle the lamb and protect it from hurting itself by thrashing around and bruising itself.

Which could make for blemishes, and thus those lambs would be unfit for Passover, they would be unfit for sacrifice to God.

The birth story of Jesus therefore, and the story of Palm Sunday, alludes to the fact that Jesus is the lamb of God that is not sacrificed by us to satisfy God's hunger, but Jesus the lamb is God's sacrifice of himself FOR US.

The Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, is God's heart turned outward to the world.

God in Jesus Christ comes not to be served but to serve.

It all hinges on our understanding of the lamb.

PAUSE

This transformation in understanding God, reveals a certain evolution in thought about God.

Or, if we are not comfortable in talking about human beings rethinking God, as if we make God up as we go along...

If we are not comfortable with that mode of talk, we could say it another way, that the transformation in understanding God, is human beings getting our understanding about God finally right.

However we look at it, it comes down to the two orientations, inward or outward.

Do we serve God, such that then everything is bent in on God?

Or does God serve us, whereby God is reaching out for us and the world?

Do we approach life, such that it is all about us?

Or, is it all about the neighbor and about God?

It all hinges on how we see the lamb.

Is it a sacrifice for God's well-being—is the sacrifice an act of humans for a self-centered, selfish, self-serving God?

Or is the sacrifice of the lamb God's sacrifice for our well-being—a selfless, self-denying, self-giving act of God?

How do we see the lamb as it relates to God?

Sacrifice for God.

Or, sacrifice for us.

How do we see the lamb as it relates to God?

This is such an important question! Such an important question!

Because how we see the lamb is how then we see ourselves?

It is all about orientation.

It is all about how we are turned, inward toward ourselves or outward toward God and the neighbor.

“So, look! Look!” as John the Baptist said, “Look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

The Lamb is God turning towards us.

Look and do likewise. Turn outward.

Thanks be to God. Amen.