

## “Lamb of God”

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Isaiah 53:1-9      Mark 1:9-15

Gong Hey Fat Choy! And welcome to the year of the sheep... or goat... or is it a ram? Which one is it anyway? The Chinese (or Mandarin) word is “yang.” It’s a general word that could mean any of those: sheep, goat, or male sheep or goat, which is a ram. It could even mean antelope. I read that most Chinese people don’t really care. It was probably originally a goat, because goats were most common in the Han Dynasty. But sheep are more common in Korea. And many people would rather buy a good luck charm that’s a sheep, because sheep are cute and soft. So you choose!

If you will be turning 12, 24,36, 48, 60, 72, 84 or 96 in this coming year, starting last Thursday, then you were born in the year of the sheep (or goat.) Who out there was born in the year of the sheep? If you confess, then we can figure out how old you are! Don’t be shy! People born in this year are generally believed to be calm and gentle. They tend to be shy, stable and sympathetic, with a strong sense of justice and kindness. They are not snobbish, and they prefer to be in groups and to work in a group. They tend to be healthier than others because they are so calm. Does that describe you?

Last week, Hong Kong’s Chief Executive C.Y. Leung, broadcast a New Year’s message to his people, urging them to be more like sheep in the coming year, that is, more “mild and gentle,” living peacefully together, and presumably not organizing any more protests. You may recall that the city of Hong Kong was shut down for several months last year, by people protesting for a more democratic process in picking Leung’s successor. So you might imagine these New Year remarks were not well received by everyone. One University professor said that it seems like Leung “wants the people to blindly follow what he says, like sheep following the shepherd,” but that this is ironic because “many people see him as the guy causing a lot of conflicts in Hong Kong.”\* Who wants to be a sheep when you’re being led by a wolf?

Some people say the sheep is the least desirable of all the zodiac animals, even less popular than the rat or the pig. Many parents don’t want their child to be born in the Year of the Sheep. Yes, sheep are known to be gentle and kind, but gentle and kind *people* can also be indecisive, timid, moody and meek. Sheep are raised to be slaughtered, so some people believe those who are born this year are destined for bad luck and failure. Recently in China, health workers reported a sharp increase in the number of people asking about C-sections and early deliveries, apparently to avoid delivering a child in the year of the sheep.\*\*

But we Christians see things in a different light. We use the name of this least desirable animal as one of the names for our Lord and Savior. We call Jesus the Lamb of God. Now this has nothing to do with which year he was born in. But in some ways Jesus was like a lamb or sheep. Jesus lived a life of justice, mercy and kindness. He

welcomed those whom others despised and rejected. And he taught his disciples that the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, they may seem to be unlucky now. But in fact, they are blessed by God. The Kingdom of God *belongs* to such as these. In God's kingdom, power and success won't get you any special treatment. What counts is to trust God and to follow in the way of Christ, to be gentle with others, and kind, as the prophet Micah wrote, "God has showed you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8).

Today Fumio led us in reading from the prophet Isaiah, the song of the suffering servant, "... He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief... He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away.... although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth."

Many Jewish and Christian scholars believe the suffering servant in this passage refers to Israel as a whole, the people who serve God and are oppressed for it, yet through their suffering bring blessings to the world. But Christians also recognize a prophecy pointing to Jesus Christ. Jesus was innocent, yet despised and rejected. When he was put on trial, he didn't try to defend himself, but was silent. And he was killed, like a defenseless lamb, led to the slaughter.

The gospel of John (1:29) writes that when John the Baptist first saw Jesus, he declared, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Jesus is like a lamb who takes away sin.

In Old Testament times, priests would sacrifice a lamb in the Temple every day for the sins of the people. This was a way for sinful people to "come clean" before God, by the vicarious offering of life, symbolized by the blood. Some people believe that God's wrath against sinners can only be appeased by a sacrificial death. So (the thinking goes) God sent Jesus to die as a sacrifice for sin, which then allows God to forgive us. But does God really demand blood in order to forgive? Didn't God also forgive people before Jesus was crucified, simply out of generosity and mercy? Why then require such a violent act as the crucifixion?

When John the Baptist called Jesus "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world," he was re-defining the role of the long-awaited Messiah. The Messiah was not going to be a warrior-king who would come to destroy the enemy and save the people. The Messiah would be more like a lamb, a gentle person whose life would be taken from him. It's not that God demanded or required Jesus to die to pay a debt or take a punishment so we could be forgiven. It's just that people are sinful. Jesus came to teach us a new way of life, and in doing that, he shook things up, claiming that the last would be first and the first would be last, and the meek would inherit the earth. Jesus exposed hypocrisy and demonstrated the love of God, and God's mercy and forgiveness, not just

for the privileged few, but for all people. And for this he was crucified, rejected and killed in a perversion of justice. But God raised him up and sent him back with the same message of forgiveness and the same offer of life.

Today Lisa read the beginning of the story of Jesus' life according to Mark: Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River, a quick version of his temptation in the wilderness, and his first proclamation, the main message of his ministry, "The time is now; the Kingdom of God is near; Turn your life around and believe the good news." And what is this good news we're supposed to believe? It has nothing to do with religious doctrines of blood sacrifice or atonement. The message is that God is here, and we have a chance to turn around. When God is here, even the timid and meek, even those whom others despise and reject, and even sinners can rejoice. Because when God is here, mercy and forgiveness, blessings and life abound.

Now we call Jesus the Lamb of God, but we also call him Shepherd. Psalm 100 (vs. 3b) says, "We are his people and the sheep of his pasture." And in the gospel of John (10:11) Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd... I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. (vs. 10) ... and I lay down my life for the sheep (v. 15)."

Even if your personality is more like a dragon or rat than a sheep, we are all called to follow the Good Shepherd, who leads us into life. Some people may have bad luck, but no one is *destined* for failure. All of us are precious children of God. In this New Year of the Sheep, may we follow the Lamb of God in the path of life, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with our God. Amen.

\* Market Watch, "Hong Kong's Leader Urges People to be More Like Sheep," 2/19/15.

\*\* William Wan, [The Washington Post](#), May 9, 2014.