

What's your favorite name for God? When you pray, do you call God Father, Lord, Almighty? Or do you pray to Jesus or to the Spirit? There are many ways in which we can address God. Today's Gospel includes one of them. It's a title we use frequently when referring to Jesus, but it may have seemed odd at first. John the Baptist introduces Jesus to some disciples, and he calls Jesus the name of an animal.

At first that seems peculiar, even though we call people animal names. Pigs, if they're sloppy, apes if they're fat, chickens if they're scared, dogs if they're dirty, and foxes if they're cute. John the Baptist calls Jesus a lamb. Not because Jesus was cuddly, although I'm sure that's possible, but because Jesus was pathetic, he was a tragic figure who came to a violent end.

Lambs, you will recall, are passover food. Innocent, they are led to the temple, where they are slaughtered. They remind us that just before the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were spared the final plague, the death of the firstborn child. They were spared that plague if they sacrificed a lamb and spread its blood on the doorpost. Lambs died so that others might have life. On passover, people eat the slaughtered lamb to celebrate their freedom.

At the very beginning of Jesus' career, when he's first collecting disciples, John the Baptist announces the kind of man Jesus is--a lamb, who will die that others might have life. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

At Mass, just before communion, the priest takes a large host in his hands, and as we sing or recite, "Lamb of God," he breaks it. The lamb who was broken (\*), the lamb who shed its blood (\*), the lamb who was slaughtered (\*), died so that we might have life.

It is to this lamb that the disciples of John the Baptist go. It is to this lamb that we go. The Lamb who says, "Follow me," the lamb who says, "Now, you be broken, now you suffer, now you die so that others may have life." In many ways we share the fate of the Lamb of God. Parents sacrifice for children, breadwinners suffer for the family, parents inconvenienced by pregnancy keep their children, teenagers tempted by drugs and the lure of casual sex just say no, often at personal embarrassment. We die to ourselves so the world may have a better life.

There are many names by which we call God. But there is one name by which we disciples follow him without reserve. One name for the one who was slain that we might have life. He is Jesus, the Lamb of God.