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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

When we say that St. John's Church is a classic, historic, liturgical church, part of what we are saying is that St. John's Sunday morning worship follows the liturgical format that the church at large has followed for centuries. That liturgical format includes various pieces, many of which are rooted in passages of the Bible. They give us opportunity every Sunday morning to sing or pray or speak from the Bible.

One of the primary pieces of that liturgical plan for Sunday morning worship is the musical piece that frequently continues to be known by its original Latin name, "the Agnus Dei", in English, "the Lamb of God". The traditional place in our worship for it to be sung, for the last 1,400 years, is just prior to receiving the bread and the cup at Holy Communion. We will sing it at that point in our worship again this morning.

The Agnus Dei is rooted in this morning's Gospel reading, from the Gospel of John, the first chapter. In this reading it is the day after John had baptized Jesus in the River Jordan. And John sees Jesus coming toward him. And as Jesus is coming toward him, John gives witness as to who he believes this Jesus to be, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

For centuries the church has sung John's words as the people of the church prepare to receive the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. "Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy upon us. Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; grant us peace." And as we sing John's words we are giving testimony that we believe that what happened to John on that first occasion when he spoke the words, that John saw Jesus coming toward him, is also what happens to us in Holy Communion. We, too, see Jesus coming toward us in and with the bread and the cup. First and foremost, as we sing John's words, we declare that we believe it is Jesus who comes to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

And, furthermore, John's words, which we sing as we anticipate receiving this holy meal, give testimony to what we believe Jesus is going to do as he comes to us in Holy Communion. We believe that he is going to come to us as the Lamb of God, the Agnus Dei, and take away our sins. Secondly, and equally important, we believe that the reason why Jesus comes to us in the sacrament of Holy Communion is to take away our sins.

John the Baptist was a Jew. John the Baptist knew the Jewish Scriptures which make up our Old Testament. And John's words about Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world were rooted deeply in an understanding of the history of the worship of the people of God in the Old Testament.

An extensive system of sacrifices was included in the practice of Jewish faith in the Old Testament. Frequently the animal that was used in these sacrificial rituals was a lamb. For the people of Israel, the lamb symbolized, among other things, innocence and gentleness. In the use of the lamb for sacrifice, there was an understanding that there was nothing inherent in the character of the lamb that caused the lamb to be sacrificed. The lamb was innocent. The sacrifice of the lamb was on behalf of the people.

The purpose of the sacrifice of the lamb, in the case of a sin offering, according to Jewish practice, was for the forgiveness of sin. The sacrifice of the lamb, then, became the means whereby the ancient Israelite might receive the forgiveness of sin.

This is the primary way that Jesus is understood to be the Lamb of God. First and foremost, Jesus was innocent. Jesus had no sin. As the Son of God, Jesus was perfect. There was nothing inherent in Jesus' character that would declare him to be guilty and deserving of punishment, much less death.

So, when Jesus suffered and died, it came to be understood that his suffering and death was an offering for sin. Except in the case of Jesus it was a once-for-all-time offering for sin. And it was an offering that was meant to atone for the sins of all who would believe in him. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Dear friend in Christ, it is one reason why you have come to worship today. You are about to receive in the bread and the cup the body and the blood of the Lord Jesus, which is another way to say that you are about to receive Jesus himself. And as Jesus comes to you, he brings his gifts to you, the gifts of grace and the forgiveness of sin. When you kneel at the altar this morning, as you are able, you observe a holy moment. It is the Lamb of God who comes to you.

I am currently, on Sunday mornings during the Education period, assisting the fifth grade teachers of our Firelight Sunday School program in preparing our fifth graders to receive Holy Communion. One of our

parents had observed that upon receiving the bread and the cup, there are those who respond each time, "Amen." The question was asked if this was appropriate. Yes it is. The word, "Amen", is a Biblical word of affirmation. It means, "I believe it. Let it be so for me." As you receive this morning, you are invited to respond with, "Amen." And you will be acknowledging that you believe that it is the Lamb of God who is coming also to you, to take away your sins. Amen.