

You may have noticed that more people than ever are getting tattoos. It's incredibly common, much more than it was just a couple decades ago. But with that rise in people getting tattoos has come another phenomenon: people regretting their tattoos. In fact, one poll found that close to 75% of people with tattoos regret getting at least one of them.

And while tattoo removal is possible, it is not easy. It is painful, time consuming, and expensive. One tattoo can require 12 sessions over 2 years to remove and cost between \$1500 and \$5000. Over ten times more than the tattoo itself cost to get. Which is why most people, even if they hate their tattoo, will just consider it permanent.

With the permanence of a tattoo in mind, I want you to imagine something. Imagine if every one of your sins appeared on your skin as a tattoo. When you looked in the mirror, when you looked down at your arms and legs, your hands and feet, what would you see?

The face of someone you hurt? Money that you spent on frivolous things? Time that you could have spent teaching your children God's Word? Talents that you let go to waste? Vices that you let run wild? Anger? Arrogance? Selfishness?

Would there be any untattooed skin left? Would you become one giant crossword puzzle of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, all running together? A full-body collage of moral depravity. It would be rather horrific, actually. And it would be on display for everyone. Everyone would know exactly what kind of corrupt sinner you really are. Everyone... including yourself.

And that, more than anything else, would probably get to us most of all. Because we don't like confronting our sins. And when forced to look upon it, we generally react in one of two ways.

We become defensive. Think about what you would say or do if you actually had those sin tattoos for other people to see. You'd probably immediately set to work ranking them. Those aren't so bad. Everybody does that. Those... I can make up a good excuse for those. And that one. Ugh... that one I just need to cover up. No one can know about that.

The thing is, we do the same thing throughout our lives even without a sin tattoo. Some sins we brush off as no big deal, some sins we make excuses for committing, and some we hide away like a skeleton in the closet. But all of these reactions are just ways of being defensive about our sins. Ways of acknowledging the existence of our sins without actually repenting of them.

The other reaction to sin is the exact opposite. We can feel defeated by it. Day after day of looking in that mirror and seeing your sins staring back at you, tattooed all over your face, you might eventually come to the conclusion that you are your sins. And that's all you are. You are one giant mistake. You are nothing but your unrighteousness and shame.

And having become your own judge, jury, and executioner, you would conclude that there is no hope for you. No reason for you to exist. No way that you can be loved.

Once again, you don't need sin tattoos etched across your face to end up in that place. One shameful sin replaying in their memory over and over again is really all it takes for many people to feel this way.

Defensive or defeated. This is how the world handles sin. This is, unfortunately, how many Christians handle sin. But John the Baptist points out a better way of regarding our sin in our Gospel lesson today.

Our sermon series for Lent this year is called "Witnesses of Christ: People from His Passion." And during these next few weeks we'll be discussing the various people who are part of the passion narrative. People who did and said things that shaped Jesus' last hours before his death, and in so doing help us to understand what Jesus did and why he did it.

Our first one is a little odd though. Because John the Baptist was not present at Jesus' crucifixion. He is not present anywhere in the passion narrative. In fact, by the time Good Friday rolls around, John the Baptist has been dead for a couple years. So why bring him up?

Well, partly because he's just such a great guide during Lent. We normally associate John the Baptist with Advent, preparing the way for Christ's birth. But that's largely because, in the past, both Advent and Lent were penitential seasons. Seasons for confessing our sins in repentance. Today, much of that penitential tone has been lost from Advent. But it's still very much present in Lent.

And John the Baptist's entire ministry is one of repentance. Because meeting John the Baptist was like going to a tattoo artist for a sin tattoo. Day after day, people came out to hear John preach. Day after day, he took a tattoo gun to their forehead and wrote their deepest, darkest sin across it. Day after day, he called those same people to repent.

Until one day, Jesus comes along, and John says something incredible: "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*" That word "behold" is one that we often gloss over. It's just one of those things that Jesus and John and the prophets like to throw out there at the beginning of a sentence.

But it actually has a meaning. The word that we translate as "behold" is just the imperative form of the verb "see". So John is saying, "See! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." "Look at this man! Pay attention to him! Take note of everything he says and does! Gaze upon him! Stare at him!" And don't stare at your sins. Because he is the Lamb of God who takes them away.

He is the Passover lamb who takes them away. The perfect male lamb without blemish or defect. The lamb who dies that we may be freed from slavery and exile and returned to the kingdom that God promised to us. The lamb who's blood marks us as those redeemed by Christ the crucified.

And he takes our sins away. Takes. Not took. Not will take. Takes. Present tense. He continually, perpetually, eternally takes our sins away. As soon as the sins are committed, just as quickly they are swept up and place on the lamb.

And this is what he does for the whole world. For all who look at him. All who behold him. Like the bronze snake that Moses lifted up in the wilderness that brought healing to the Israelites whenever they looked upon it, so Jesus is lifted up that anyone may look upon him and be saved. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Why are we talking about John the Baptist to begin Lent? Well, because when John the Baptist looks at Jesus, he doesn't see a healthy thirty year old man just beginning his ministry. No, when he looks at Jesus, all John can see is Jesus dying on the cross. John is the very first witness of the crucifixion, three years before it happened.

And John's message to us, to we who sometimes feel like we have our sins tattooed all over us, is look at Jesus. When you try to defend your sins, look at Jesus and the way he suffered for those sins. Even the little ones that you try to brush aside like they don't matter. When you feel defeated by your sins, look at Jesus and what he did to forgive you. To take them away. To wash you clean by his blood.

You see, for you and I, our sins are tattoos. In fact, they're worse than tattoos. They're permanent. They're eternal. Nothing we can do will erase them. There is no treatment made by man that we can receive that will remove them. No money we can pay to any person that make them go away.

But for Jesus? For Jesus they're like... well... the ashes we all have on our foreheads this evening. Black and ugly, yes. But not beyond what he can wash away.

So when you go home this evening and you stand before your bathroom mirror. And you take a washcloth and you wet it down with water and soap. And you wipe that cross of away. Remember: That's what Jesus has done for you. That's what His baptismal waters did. That's what this Holy Supper does. That what my words do to you when I proclaim, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Don't look upon your sin tattoos. Look upon the Passover Lamb who by his death continually, perpetually, eternally washes away your sins. Amen.