

Jesus in the Gospel of John

“The ‘I Am’ Sayings of Jesus”

[Exodus 3:13-14 & John 8:56-58](#)

The first scripture reading for today is part of a conversation Moses had with God. While Moses was tending sheep, God appears to him in a bush that was burning yet not consumed. God asks Moses to go liberate his people, the people of Israel from their captivity in Egypt. In response, Moses says to God *“Suppose I tell the people of Israel that the God their ancestors worshipped has sent me to them. But, what should I say if they ask me your name?”* To which, God replies, *“I am the eternal God. So tell them that the Lord, whose name is ‘I Am,’ has sent you. This is my name forever, and it is the name that people must use from now on.”*

So, “I Am”, which is “Yahweh” in Hebrew, became the name of God for the Israelites. This name was so revered in fact that very devoted Jews would not even dare pronounce the word. To avoid pronouncing God’s name, people used a different word, “Adonai,” which meant “Lord.”

The second scripture reading for today is part of a long conversation between Jesus and religious leaders of his time, which occurred while he was teaching in the Temple. Jesus says, *“Your father Abraham was really glad to see me.”* To which, they say, *“You are not even fifty years old! How could you have seen Abraham?”* And Jesus responds by telling them, *“I tell you for certain that even before Abraham was, I was, and I AM.”* Upon hearing Jesus says this, the scripture states that people picked up stones to kill him. ‘How dare he,’ they must have thought. How could he dare to call himself by God’s holy name, when even pronouncing the word itself was considered to be blasphemy? In God’s house, the Temple no less?

However, this was not the only time Jesus said the words, “I AM,” which were considered so holy that they were even blasphemous to use. In fact, Jesus declares “I AM” again and again throughout John’s Gospel. In some places, like in today’s scripture reading, the statement stands alone. But, in other places in John, the words, “I AM” are followed by a metaphor or metaphors that describe identity and mission of Jesus. Collectively, these statements are known as the “I AM” sayings of Jesus, and there are 7 of them recorded in the Gospel of John, as we read them together a few minutes ago.

As I did last Sunday, I now invite you to take out the pew Bible or the Bible app on your phones and follow along with me, as we examine each of the seven “I AM” statements.

Jesus’ first “I AM” saying, “I am the bread of life.” is found in chapter 6, verse 35. Jesus had just miraculously fed a multitude of hungry people with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish. When people came back to Jesus the next day, Jesus directs their attention from the physical bread that fills their bellies to the spiritual bread that gives them eternal life.

Bread was the essential food for life in the ancient near east and still is for many people around the world. Throughout history, bread has been at the center of meals -- we speak of breaking bread together when we talk about sharing a meal. Bread is a staple of life, though nowadays we often can’t eat it if we’re on

certain diet programs. Bread, along with water, represents the daily essentials without which we cannot survive.

So when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believe in me will never be thirsty,” (6:35) he is saying that he is essential to our lives, the source of our spiritual sustenance. He is revealing himself as the true bread that satisfies our deepest inner longings and all of our spiritual hungers.

Now, let’s turn to chapter eight for Jesus’ second “I Am” saying. In verse 12, Jesus says to those who are gathered at the Temple, *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won’t walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*

To fully understand the implication of what he is saying, we need to know the context. You see, Jesus was in Jerusalem for the festival of Sukkot or booths. This was a festival that commemorated Israel’s 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. So, for the festival, tents or booths as well as 4 giant lampstands were set up at the temple. The light from the lampstands dramatically illuminated the city of Jerusalem and served as a reminder to its residents of the column of light that assured their ancestors of God’s presence among them in the wilderness, as recorded in Exodus 13:21. People sang and danced throughout the night with burning torches in their hands. It was at this festival, celebrating the light of God which was with their ancestors leading the way out of the wilderness, that Jesus is making this dramatic statement: *“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me won’t walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”*

Darkness and light are prominent themes in the Bible, but particularly so in John’s Gospel. For John, darkness represented evil as well as our spiritual blindness and lost-ness. So in John’s Gospel, when we believe in Jesus, it is receiving the light through which our eyes are truly opened.

In the Exodus narrative, God was the light for his chosen people, the 12 tribes of Israel. However, in John’s Gospel, we hear how Jesus announces that he is the light for the whole world. Jesus lights our lives as well as the world. And how does Jesus light the world? It is through us. If you will recall, Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew, *“You are the light of the world... let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:14, 16)

Now, let’s examine the next two “I Am” sayings of Jesus together, since both are found in chapter 10: “I am the gate of the sheep” in verse 7 and “I am the good shepherd” in verses 11 and 14. “In the Middle East, shepherds did not drive the sheep but led them” with their voices. (J. V. Fesko, *Who is Jesus? Knowing Christ Through His “I Am” Sayings*, p. 41) When baby lambs are born into the world, the person whose voice they first hear becomes their shepherd. For the rest of their lives, they follow the voice of their shepherd who leads them out to the fields and back to their pens and protects them from any predators.

What did Jesus mean by “I am the gate of the sheep”? Well, Shepherds in the ancient world often built temporary pens for their sheep to sleep in at night. And those pens would have a small opening where the shepherds laid down in front of their sleep. They blocked the entrance with their bodies, so no sheep could go out during the night. Literally, the shepherd becomes the gate, or door, and no predator can get in

without first killing the shepherd. This is the image that Jesus is drawing upon when he says in verse 11, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

These two images of Jesus as the gate of the sheep and the good shepherd reveal who he is in relationship to those who follow him. Jesus is our good shepherd, in whom we find true rest and life, the gate which keeps us from wandering away, who lays down his life for us.

The 5th "I Am" saying of Jesus is found in chapter 11:25: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.*" Jesus says these words to Martha, who was grieving the death of her brother, Lazarus. After having the stone removed from in front of Lazarus' tomb and thanking God for hearing his prayer, Jesus calls out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." And, Lazarus does!

Through Jesus, death has been defeated. The grave is merely a passway to eternal life. But, as the apostle Paul declares, in Christ, we are also new creatures. In Christ, there is transformation. We are new creations here and now. The old has gone, and the new has come, for anyone who is in Christ!

The 6th "I Am" saying of Jesus is found in chapter 14:6. Jesus was in the upper room with his disciples the night before he was crucified. He tells them that he would soon be going to his Father. In response, the disciple Thomas says to Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going." How can we know the way?" To which, Jesus replies, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. Without me, no one can go to the Father."

I am sure you can't help but ask some fundamental questions about this statement. If Jesus is the only way to God, to be saved, to go to heaven, if Christianity is the only true religion, how about the people who never had an opportunity to know Jesus -- how about those who were born before Jesus' time, how about those who never heard of Jesus and his gospel? How about all the devoted believers of other religious faith? Does this mean that all of these people can't be united with God? Are they all condemned to hell?

To take up these questions and to fully mine the deep meaning of this text, we need to consider the context in which the statement was said.

By the time the Gospel of John was written, several decades had passed since the life of Jesus on earth. The Christian movement had been quite successful. While it made inroads into the gentile world, the Christian Jews maintained their Jewish identity, continuing to worship alongside non-Christian Jews in the synagogue. However, when the city of Jerusalem fell to the Roman army, and the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, tensions arose between the Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews, causing conflict within the Christian community.

It was then that Christian Jews were expelled from the Jewish synagogue. You have to remember that to be excommunicated from the synagogue meant to be no longer considered an acceptable Jew. So, those that were expelled were facing social ostracism, becoming marginalized in their communities. In the midst of this harsh reality, some of these Christians were probably tempted to abandon their allegiance to the Christian sect and return to their community of origin.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” These were words of comfort and refuge given to Christian believers in the first century who were living through intense conflict and harsh persecution. Through the words of Jesus, they were encouraged not to abandon the Christian community, but to stay together, living out their faith in the time of trial.

Finally, let’s turn to chapter 15 for Jesus’ last “I Am” saying. Jesus says to his disciples, *“I am the true vine.”* And, in the following verses, he says, *“I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit.”* When Jesus dwells in us and we in him, the Holy Spirit produces fruit in our lives. The apostle Paul lists the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians. They are love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If you notice, these fruits are those which improve the relationships with whom we are connected with. Our growth in Jesus Christ leads to abundance, and this abundance enriches the lives of those we touch. In fact, we become the fruit that others may taste and see, which reveals the goodness of the Lord.

And so this last “I am” saying of Jesus Christ serves as an invitation. It is an invitation to new life, one in which the fruits that we produce are not our own, but gifts of the Holy Spirit, which are to be shared with those around us.

For Jesus’ “I am” sayings are for our sakes, not his own. He is the bread of life for *us*, the light of the world, for *us*, the gate and the shepherd *for us*, the light and the resurrection, for *us*. And if God is for us, who can be against us? Thanks be to God. Amen.