

The Great I Am

John 8:48-59

One of the things we say about ourselves as a church is that we are a “Christ Centered” church. This is one of our core values, probably the most important one, because we depend on Christ so much for everything. He’s the one who died for us and rose again to give salvation and eternal life. He’s the one who became like us in every way and is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He’s the one who lives in us by his Spirit – never leaving us and giving us power to live the new life. He’s the one we’re to try to imitate. He’s the one coming back for us to take us to be with him forever.

So it’s very important that we are a Christ centered church and Christ centered people. In many ways, if we get that right, everything else will probably fall into place. So for the next several weeks leading up to Easter, we are going to set our attention and focus on Jesus – both learning more about him, but also trying to experience him in a deeper and more personal way.

I’ve often wondered what it would have been like to have known Jesus personally when he was on earth, to have walked with him like the disciples did and been able to experience a close relationship with him. But we have to realize that even though he is no longer physically present with us today, I do think we can experience a close relationship with him because he has told us that he is spiritually present with us – just as much as he was with his twelve disciples. We can’t see him, hear him, or touch him right now in person, but he is here. And he is with you wherever you go – available to be everything for you that he was to the first disciples.

So what I’d like to do in the coming weeks is to focus on helping us experience the presence of Jesus and who he is for us today in a deeper and more personal way. And to guide us in this effort I am going to preach through some statements that Jesus made to his disciples that were both a revelation of who he was for them and an invitation for them to experience him in a new way. These statements are known as the “I am statements.” In the books of John and Revelation, the apostle John, who had a close personal relationship with Jesus, records several statements Jesus made to help the disciples know who he was and how he wanted them to know and experience him. We are going to look at these

statements in the weeks leading up to Easter to help us draw near to Christ and grow in our relationships with him.

The first statement I want to look at isn't the first one he made, but it is the one that's the foundation for why he makes the rest of them. So I thought it would be a good one to start with. It's a statement of his identity.

A person can make a number of statements about their identity. For me, I could say: "I am a human. I am a husband. I am a father. I am a pastor." And because of who I am in these ways, I am also many other things. If I say, "I am a father" I can also say "I am a provider. I am a protector. I am a teacher. I am a leader. I am a helper. I am a chauffeur. I am a repairer of broken things." And so on. So the statement we are going to look at today is a statement of identity that Jesus makes, and because of who he is, he is also many other things that we will see in the other "I am statements" in weeks to come.

To begin to look at this first statement I want you to go with me to John chapter 8. At this point in Jesus' ministry people were wondering who in the world this guy was. Some people were genuinely curious and interested. Others were skeptical and uncertain. And others were opposed to him and trying to find some way to discredit him. This was especially true of the Scribes and Pharisees and Jewish religious leaders whose authority was being threatened by the way he was influencing people. If they could find out something about his identity that could discredit his ministry, they could turn the people against him and undermine his efforts.

So they accused him of different things. They said he was leading people astray and that he was an imposter. We'll see a couple more accusations at the beginning of our text for today. They wanted to know who he was and one day Jesus gave them an answer that I don't think any of them were ready for. I want to pick up the story in John 8:48.

Read John 8:48-50.

The Jews answered him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"⁴⁹ Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me.⁵⁰ Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge.

You can see they accused him of being a Samaritan, which was an insult in those days. Samaritans were the descendants of Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles and settled in the area of Samaria. They were seen as traitors and covenant violators. And if Jesus was a Samaritan, he would have been immediately rejected by the Jewish community. They also accused him of having a demon. But Jesus pointed out there were a couple things wrong with that. Demon possessed people brought disgrace upon their fathers because of how they acted, and they glorified themselves by drawing attention to themselves. But Jesus did the opposite. He told them he honored his Father and didn't seek his own glory. It was someone else who was seeking Jesus' glory, and Jesus refers to him as the judge. The judge of mankind was seeking Jesus' glory, and Jesus tells them why in the next verse.

Read John 8:51-53.

Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”⁵² The Jews said to him, “Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, ‘If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.’⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?”

The reason the judge of mankind was seeking to glorify Jesus is because Jesus spoke the words of eternal life and anyone who listened to him would never see death. This was a very bold statement that elevated Jesus to a very high position. Not only was he saying that the judge of the universe was on his side, but he was also saying that people who followed his teaching wouldn't die. The Jews rightly recognized that put Jesus in a higher position than even Abraham – the original Jew to whom God had given the promises: “You must have a demon to make such a claim! You think anyone who listens to you won't see death? Even Abraham died, as well as all the prophets! Are you saying that you are greater than Abraham and the prophets? Who do you think you are?” They were really getting riled up about what Jesus was saying about himself. And what he said next was even more upsetting.

Read John 8:54-57.

Jesus answered, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God.’⁵⁵ But you have not known him. I

know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. ⁵⁶ Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷ So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”

Here he makes three more bold statements that would have astounded them. First of all he tells them directly that the one they called “God” was the one he called “Father.” His Father, the judge of mankind who was backing him and seeking to glorify him, was the very God they worshipped. Second, he tells them they didn’t even know their God. They never knew him, but Jesus did. Jesus knew their God and if he said he didn’t, he would be a liar like them. Jesus knew their God and kept his word. Third, he tells them that Abraham, the one they revered as their father – the original Jew – actually knew about him. God had shown him the Messiah would be coming and he was filled with joy.

These things made the people even more upset. They couldn’t believe what he was saying. “How can you say you’ve seen Abraham when you aren’t even 50 years old?” And then Jesus shocked them with what he said next.

Read John 8:58-59.

⁵⁸ Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

This is the first “I am” statement for us to see and it’s different than all the rest because Jesus simply says, “I am” and leaves it at that. The rest of the I am statements have additional words, but this one doesn’t and that’s very significant. It was such a big deal that they picked up stones to kill him. Why did they do that?

They did that because all of a sudden, this 33 year old miracle worker who was causing such a stir was now claiming to not only know God and be sent by God – he was claiming to be God. The phrase “I am” brought them back to a story that was very familiar. It went back to Moses and the burning bush. Their forefathers were slaves in Egypt when God appeared to Moses in a burning bush and called him to go to Egypt and lead the Hebrew people out of bondage. God spoke to Moses and told him to go, but Moses was reluctant. And one of the things that held him back was knowing that if he went to the people and told them God had

sent him they were going to want to know: “Which God was he talking about?” There were all kinds of gods in ancient Egypt. So when they asked him which God had sent him, Moses was wondering what he was supposed to say.

Read Exodus 3:13-14.

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”¹⁴ God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

So God’s response to Moses was first to describe himself by saying “I am who I am.” This is a declaration of his divine self-existence. He wasn’t like any of the gods of Egypt with all their conjured up backstories of where they came from. He was the one and only true God who never came into existence because he always was. “I am who I am.” And from that declaration of his divine self-existence, God gave Moses a name to use: “Tell them: ‘I am has sent me to you.’”

This was one of the most important stories in Jewish history, so when Jesus stood before the bewildered crowd on that day and told them “Before Abraham was, I am” they knew exactly what he was saying. He was telling them that he was actually at the burning bush. He was the one speaking to Moses. He was the one that inflicted the terrible plagues against the Egyptians. He was the one who parted the waters of the Red Sea. He was the one who was present at Mount Sinai when the law was given. He was God.

It really bothered them to hear him say that. How dare he claim to be God! That was blasphemy. So they picked up stones to kill him, but it didn’t happen at that time. It happened later on. On the night when Jesus was arrested he was standing before Caiaphas the high priest and again they were questioning him to try to find something by which they could put him to death. They couldn’t find anything and they were exasperated when Caiaphas finally asked him: “‘Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?’⁶² And Jesus said, ‘I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’⁶³ And the high priest tore his garments and said, ‘What further witnesses do we need?⁶⁴ You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?’ And they all condemned him as deserving death.” (Mark 14:61-64).

They condemned him to die because he claimed to be God. He used exactly the same words as John 8:58: "I am." He claimed to be God. And why would he do that? Because he is God.

The humanity of Jesus made it incredibly difficult for people to believe he was God during his time on earth. But sometimes I think we approach him from the opposite direction. When we're first introduced to him, we're immediately told he is God and then it seems like we spend much of our lives trying to bring him down to our level and see him as just a human. He is human, and though it is very important for us to relate to him in that kind of personal, relatable way, we also have to remember that he is God!

And it's because of that very thing that he is also able to be for us many, many other things that we are going to look at in the upcoming weeks. Things that he couldn't be if he weren't God.

So this morning I want us to take some time to dwell on the God-ness of Jesus. I'm reminded of three of the disciples who went up with Jesus to a mountaintop and when they were there, this human companion and teacher that they hung out with was transfigured before their eyes his whole being was shining brilliantly and they saw him in his divine glory. It was an experience that rocked their world.

I think it would help us if we had our own personal transfiguration experience. As we take some time to worship him, I think it will do us good to imagine this man who lived on earth and died on the cross and rose again, but who is now highly exalted and seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven interceding for us – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Almighty Son of God. The Great I Am.