

## I AM

John 8:21-59

**Call:** John 12:12-15, 13b

**Scripture:** Col 1:15-20

### I. Intro

It is good to be with you today on Palm Sunday as we continue in our studies in John, chapter 8. We are not in John's Palm Sunday account today unfortunately. As we read in our Call to Worship this morning, John's Palm Sunday account is in chapter 12. What is unique about John's Palm Sunday account, though, is what happens after Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey. Some Greeks arrive and they want to see Jesus. Jesus, the light of the world, was drawing these Gentiles to himself. And, they want to see him. They don't want to simply catch a glimpse of Jesus. They don't want to simply walk over and shake his hand, or do a "COVID elbow bump." These Gentiles want to understand who Jesus is. These Gentiles want to understand what makes him tick. These Gentiles want to know the real Jesus. Isn't that what you want – to see and know the real Jesus? Isn't that why you and I are here today on this Palm Sunday? To understand who Jesus really is?

In today's text, we come to holy ground, as we hear who Jesus really is from his own lips.

### Review

We come now to our fifth week and final week in the Gospel of John for now. Through these five weeks, we have been looking at John chapters 7-8, which are set during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. We will pick up John again in September where we'll spend one more week in the glow of this feast with chapter 9, the healing of the blind man. Next week, we will celebrate the feast of Easter by exploring the Road to Emmaus from Luke's Gospel.

As I've been saying during these five weeks, the Feast of Tabernacles remembered the exodus of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. And, the Jews primarily remembered that experience through three key rituals at this feast:

1. A water ceremony each morning
2. A light ceremony each evening
3. An affirmation of the presence of God

### II. Presence of God Theme at the Feast

#### A. Huts

Today we will focus on this last component, the theological affirmation of the presence of God, which was remembered in different ways during the feast. One way was that each participant at the feast would build a hut for themselves, and live in this hut all week. These huts were a tangible reminder to the Jews, not only that their ancestors lived in the huts as they traveled through the wilderness, but, more importantly, that God traveled with them in a hut as well. He chose to dwell among the people in a hut, called the tabernacle.

After leaving Egypt, God commanded Moses to raise funds from the people saying, *“And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst”* (Ex 25:8). This is the great passion of God, to be present with his people. As AW Tozer once said, “God’s presence is the central fact of faith” (Fitch, 20). The rest of Exodus then explains the Tabernacle and the rituals surrounding it. In chapter 29, God tells Moses, *“I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. 46 And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God”* (Ex 29:45-46). So, as Israel traveled across the wilderness, they had an assured, confident, abiding sense of the presence of God being with them in the tabernacle.

## **B. Spoken Word**

Therefore, at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Jews remember this fact by living in huts. But, they also remember God’s presence verbally during the Feast liturgy. A number of Old Testament texts are read by the priests during the week, celebrating the presence of God.

- For example, many texts from Isaiah 40-55 were read, such as:
  - Is 41: *“I, the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he” (Is 41:4)*. In Hebrew, “I am He” is “ani hu,” literally “I – He.”
  - Is 43: *“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior” (Is 43:10-11)*.
  - Is 46: *“... even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save” (Is 46:4)*.
- Even on the Sabbath of the Feast, the priest would sing the Song of Moses from Deuteronomy 32. The highpoint of that song is verse 39: *“See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me.”*
- At another point during the feast, a choir of priests would sing at the altar, “God is in his holy temple.” Then a priest, speaking for God, would say, “Be still and know that I am God.” Then, the other priests would chant, “I am. I am He. I am. I am He.”

So, throughout the feast, the Jews would read these texts and many more, remembering God’s presence among his people. God is the great I AM whose great passion was to dwell with his people. And according to one scholar, “By the first century, I AM He (ani hu) had become the all-inclusive summary of God’s self-revelatory declarations in the rituals of the Feast of Tabernacles” (Stauffer, 177). Therefore, at this feast, along with the images of water and light, the words “I AM He” are filling the minds of all the worshippers as they remember God’s presence among them.

Now we enter into our text today. In last week’s text, Jesus made his claim to be the light of the world, and the religious authorities engage in intense debate with him about his claim. This week, the debate intensifies greatly. We’re not going to read every verse of our text, but I’m going to walk through it and give you a flavor of some of the arguments from the authorities along with Jesus’ responses.

### III. I AM

#### A. The Belief in I AM (21-25)

Jesus begins in verse 21 by saying that he will soon go away. They will search for him but will not find him. The Jews question what this means. Jesus replies in verse 23, *"You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins."*

Did you hear what he said? *"Unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your sins."* The Greek is "ego eimi," literally "I AM." The authorities heard him loud and clear. I think they get very angry right here. Why? No one except the priests would dare utter those words, and no one, let alone this outsider from the hills of Galilee, would have the audacity to use the pronouns for God in reference to himself! They immediately respond with, *"Who are you" (25)?* Come on Jesus! Who do you really think you are?

#### B. The Knowledge of I AM (28-30)

More debate ensues. Then Jesus says, verse 28, *"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he..."* We know Jesus is referring to himself as the Son of Man, because this is his favorite way of referring to himself. And, we know from throughout this Gospel that "lifted up" means "lifted up on the cross." Jesus is saying, "When I am lifted up on the cross, then you will know that I am he." Now John says that many do believe in him at this point, verse 30. However, as we have seen in previous texts, the question is whether it is genuine belief? Jesus knows what's inside every person so he presses this point. What does genuine belief really mean?

#### C. The Freedom I AM Brings (31-47)

The debate continues to intensify. Jesus presses his point by making several comments about genuine belief in Him, the Son of the Father God, which involves belief, abiding, truth and freedom, topics which we will return to at the end. The Jews respond by bringing Abraham into the conversation. They are offspring of Abraham, and therefore they already belong to God. Nothing more is needed! Jesus, we don't need you, we're already God's children through Abraham.

It's like this document from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century written by a Christian apologist named Justin Martyr. He's trying to explain the supremacy of Christ to a Jew named Trypho and Trypho says this, "The eternal kingdom will be given to those who are the seed of Abraham according to the flesh even though they are sinners and unbelievers and disobedient to God." This is the argument coming from Jesus' opponents. We are children of Abraham and that's all we need. But, before we judge them too harshly, don't we sometimes do the same thing? How easily this mindset can slip in even for us? We think that because our family is Christian, or because we attend church regularly, or because our grandfather was a pastor, or because my grandma prayed for me everyday, we belong to God. Jesus says, "Nope. Doesn't matter. You must believe in me. That's the only thing that matters."

He, then, moves the conversation here toward the real problem. What's the real problem? Sin. Being offspring of Abraham, doesn't deal with the darkness that shades all of us. The root problem for all of us is sin, and that can only be dealt with by Jesus, who enters Jerusalem as the king on a donkey, but ends the week as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

#### **D. Before Abraham Was, I AM (48-59)**

After more back and forth, Jesus is accused of being possessed by a demon, before his opponents come back to Abraham. And, they ask Jesus if he is greater than our father Abraham? Jesus responds, verse 56, *"Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw it and was glad."* His opponents say, *"You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"* And, it's at this point that Jesus drives home the magnitude of his great claim, verse 58, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am."*

Whoa! We *are* standing on holy ground.

His opponents heard him loud and clear. Verse 59, they *"picked up stones to throw at him"* (8:59). They had to. This is too big to ignore, because if Jesus is not telling the truth, he has committed outright blasphemy.

#### **IV. I AM Elsewhere**

Now although I think this is the clearest place where Jesus makes his claim, this isn't the only place Jesus makes this claim.

- Back in chapter 4 with the woman at the well, she says she's waiting for the Messiah (4:25). Jesus responds with, *"I AM, the one who is speaking to you."* I think he's saying that he's the Messiah yes, but he's even more. He's the I AM.
- In chapter 6, when the disciples are struggling through a storm on the sea of Galilee, Jesus walks to them on the water and says, *"I AM. Do not be afraid"* (John 6:20). In other words, God is with you, I made these seas, I can control them. You don't need to be afraid anymore.
- Later in John, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas leads a group of soldiers to arrest Jesus. When they find him, they ask for Jesus the Nazarene. Jesus responds with, *"I AM."* And, the whole group, after hearing the divine name, draw back and fall to the ground (John 18:1-6).
- But, even outside of John, Jesus makes this claim as well, not only in the walking on the water passages (Matt 14:27, Mk 6:50). But also in Mark 14, which I think the ladies are studying this week, during Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. The high priest asks him, *"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"* Jesus responds with *"I AM"* (Mark 14:62). The high priest then tears his clothes, accuses Jesus of blasphemy and condemns him to death.

But, here, during the Feast of Tabernacles, when the people are remembering the real presence of the great I AM who traveled in a hut with his people through the wilderness, Jesus dares to say I AM.

## V. Implications

What a text? What a text the week before Easter, as Jesus sets himself apart from everyone who has ever lived. The temple police had it right: No one in the history of the world ever spoke like this man speaks (John 7:46). So, we are once again confronted with the crisis of Jesus. What will you do with him?

I want to end this morning with three implications of Jesus' great claim for us.

1. **The Trinity:** This is one of the texts which leads to the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is saying he is the I AM, the living God. But, throughout this text, he speaks about God in the plural, as the Father and the Son. Just yesterday at the feast, he spoke of the Holy Spirit as the living water. God is a plurality of persons, which stretches our brain. It stretched the early church's brain too as they wrestled with how to say it well and how to protect the mystery. This is why we say the Creeds to remind us of this profound mystery. I didn't have room to write the Apostle's Creed in the Worship Guide this week, but I would encourage you to soak in one of the Creeds this week, especially because it's Holy Week.
2. **The Center:** If what Jesus says is true, that he is the I AM, then it makes sense why the rest of the New Testament puts Jesus at the center of everything. It makes sense that he is worshipped as God throughout the rest of the New Testament.
  - For example, this helps make sense of the scene at the end of John on the evening of the first Easter. Jesus appears to the disciples inside a room with locked doors and says, "*Peace be with you*" (John 20:26). Jesus then has Thomas feel his hands and his side. And, Thomas responds with, "*My Lord and My God!*"
  - This helps make sense of the Philippians hymn where Paul says that Jesus was in the very form of God (Phil 2:6).
  - This helps make sense of Paul's other Christ hymn in Colossians which we read for our Scripture reading: "*He, Jesus, is the image of the invisible God... And God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him*" (Col 1:15, 19).
  - And, this helps make sense of Titus 2, which says: "*... we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ*" (Titus 2:13).

If what Jesus says is true, that he is the great I AM, then it makes sense that the rest of the New Testament places him at the center of life. In this text, the Jews were trying to fit Jesus into their system. That didn't work because it can't work. If Jesus is the I AM, he must be at the center, and everything else must be rearranged around him. This leads to my third point.

3. **Genuine Discipleship:** If what Jesus says is true, that he is the I AM, then it makes sense for us to put him at the center of our lives. CS Lewis once said, “Jesus produced mainly three effects [on people in the Gospels]: hatred, terror or adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval” (Lewis, 158). Of course! Given what Jesus says here, how could anyone express mild approval! If Jesus is who he says he is, if he is the living God, he has every right to walk into our lives, interrupt them and command us to “*Come and see and follow him,*” even command us to “*lose our lives for his sake*” (John 1:39, Matt 4:19; 16:25). If he is who he says he is, then it makes sense to follow him as a genuine disciple. And, what does genuine discipleship look like? Jesus defines the nature of genuine discipleship using four words: belief, abide, truth and freedom.
- **Belief (24):** In verse 24, he says, “*Unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.*” If he is the great I AM, forgiveness comes through him. And, didn’t we just see that with the woman caught in adultery? His first words to her were words of forgiveness: “I do not condemn you!” Without belief in Jesus, we will die in our sins. But, by believing in him, we have forgiveness and eternal life.
  - **Abide (31):** In verse 31, he says if we are genuine disciples, “*we will abide in his word.*” Of course the word for “word” here is logos (John 1:1). Genuine disciples abide, they remain, in Him and his word. The word abide communicates what? To remain present. This is the primary posture of a genuine disciple, remaining present to the Word and his word. As God’s great passion is to be present with us, so we are present with him.
  - **Truth (32):** Jesus goes on, verse 32. When we abide as a genuine disciple, “*We will know the truth*” (8:32). Jesus will call himself “the truth” in only a few chapters (John 14:6). Which means at the end of the Gospel, when Jesus is brought before Pilate, and Pilate asks him the famous question, “*What is truth,*” Pilate is asking the wrong question (John 18:38)! Truth is not a what-ness. Truth is a who-ness. It’s not “*What is truth.*” The right question is “Who is truth?” For if Jesus is who he says he is, then he embodies ultimate truth. What he says is truth, but the way he lives is also truth, what he values is truth, and the way he dies is also truth and the way he’s resurrected is also truth. So, truth refers not just to Jesus’ personhood, but also to his whole way of existence. And, where does truth begin? It begins with grace. Jesus is the ultimate truth of reality. And, when we believe in him, then we know the truth. We have an intimate fellowship with the truth of ultimate reality.
  - **Freedom (32):** And, in knowing Jesus, the truth, we are set free. Freedom. In our post-modern western culture, freedom is probably the deepest held value in life. However, freedom to our culture is very different from Biblical freedom, and we need to be clear about this. To our culture, freedom is absolute autonomy, to be free from any responsibility, mixed with a desire for maximum choice. It is to be sovereign, to make of oneself what one chooses, to self determine, to basically do whatever I want whenever I want. It is highly individualistic, and leads to isolation, hedonism and paradoxically, the slavery of addiction.

This is absolutely **not** the Biblical view of freedom. Freedom in Scripture is very different, and it comes into focus with the Exodus. Do you remember God's command to Pharaoh? God doesn't just say, "Let my people go." God says, "Let my people go *so that* they may serve me" (Ex 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1). The emphasis is on "that they may serve me." That's the foundation of freedom in Scripture. Freedom in Scripture is more about freedom *for* something than freedom *from* something.

Now, in this text, Jesus says that if we believe, we will know the truth and truth will set us free. Free from what? Sin. We will be set free *from* that which we are in bondage to, sin, *for* service to him. We will no longer be slaves of sin, we will become servants of I AM. If Jesus is who he says he is, the great I AM, then he made us, and we were created to serve him in loving obedience. Paradoxically, true freedom is found in serving a new master, no longer serving the master of sin, but now serving the I AM in loving obedience. That's true freedom.

Paradoxically, true freedom is found in serving a new master, no longer serving the master of sin, but now serving the I AM in loving obedience. Jesus, the I AM, loved us and gave himself for us, and we respond in the free obedience of love, love to him and love to others. We are freed *for* love. Paul says it like this in Galatians, "*For you were called to freedom... Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another*" (Gal 5:13). True freedom is found in the free obedience of love, because true freedom takes our focus off ourselves and puts it onto others. And, that's the invitation in these verses, an invitation to true freedom of genuine discipleship.

And, what does this look like practically? Well, since we are sitting on Palm Sunday, looking forward to Jesus being lifted up on the cross on Good Friday, let's take an example from Holy Week. During that first holy week, Jesus is in an upper room with his disciples. And, Jesus, knowing that he had come not to be served, but to serve, and knowing what is about to happen to him, got up from supper and took a cloth and some water. Then, he got down on his knees and washed his disciple's feet. He does what even Jewish servants aren't required to do. What has struck me this week about this passage is that John is very clear that after this, Judas goes away to do what he has to do. That means that Jesus has just washed his betrayer's feet. He washes his enemy's feet. He then instructs his disciples to follow his example. And, he concludes his teaching there with guess what? When these things come to pass, ie. when he is lifted up, then you will know that I AM (John 13:19).

Genuine disciples *believe* in Jesus, they *abide* in him and his word, they know the *truth* and the truth sets them *free from* slavery to sin *for* service to the great I AM in loving obedience.

Nowadays, in this pandemic, how we serve may look a bit different. Some of us have been cooped up with the same people for a year now, but what great opportunities for service? Or maybe God has put new people on little squares on a screen for you to serve? Or maybe there is a neighbor which could use some service right now? Whoever it is, we've been set free for love and service to them.

## **VI. Conclusion**

And, what is the ultimate destiny for genuine disciples? It's verse 51, physical death will not be the end for those who believe. Those who believe will not die in their sins. The genuine disciple will experience eternal life, the very reason the Father sent the Son, John 3:16: "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" By belief in the Son, we all become daughters and sons of the Father. And, like those Greeks who showed up on that first Palm Sunday and wanted to see Jesus, we will really see Jesus, the great I AM, face to face, and live be in his presence forever and ever. Amen.

## **VII. Benediction**

Now, receive this benediction from Hebrews:

"Now the God of peace,  
who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep  
through the blood of the eternal covenant,  
even Jesus, the I AM,  
equip you to serve and love in every good thing,  
working in us that which is pleasing in His sight,  
through Jesus Christ,  
to whom be the glory forever and ever  
Because He is the I AM.  
Amen."

## **Resources**

Bauckham, Richard, *The Bible in the Contemporary World*

Bauckham, Richard, *God and the Crisis of Freedom*

Burge, Gary, *Jesus and the Jewish Feasts*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Johnson, Darrell, *Who is Jesus?*

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Reeves, Michael, *Delighting in the Trinity*

Stauffer, Ethelbert, *Jesus and His Story*