

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 13, 2005

Sermon by Pastor Jonathon Micheel

Exodus 3:13-15

13 Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?"

14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

15 God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation." NIV

John 8:56-59

56 "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

57 "You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

58 "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" ***59*** At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. NIV

It's early January 2002. David Frum, a speechwriter for President Bush, is crafting language for the president to use in his State of the Union address, the first since 9/11. Frum comes up with a phrase to describe countries that are a threat to the United States because of their oppressive regimes and their potential to cooperate with terrorists. The countries are Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Frum calls them the "axis of hatred." Later, chief speechwriter Mike Gerson changes the phrase to—you know this—"axis of evil."

Then the firestorm begins. "How could he say such a thing?" Only three little words, but they caused a stir around the world. The word "axis," of course, hearkens back to Hitler and those with him in World War II—people hated for what they did. "Can you compare these three countries to Hitler?" people wondered. And the word "evil"—that's not a word that gets thrown around in a secular society. "Evil" has biblical connotations. And absolute connotations.

I'm not going to take poll this morning to ask what you thought of those words. There are likely many opinions about them among us, and that's okay. But, no matter what our political views, can we say this: these three little words ended up being a big deal?

Today I'd like to look at two little words that caused a big stir. They were spoken by Jesus. (Note: I'm not trying to make some veiled comparison between our president and Jesus. I respect the president, but not on the same level as our Lord!) In John 8 we find our Lord speaking two little words and then getting this response: At this, they picked

up stones to stone him. What could he have said? Actually, he said one of the shortest complete sentences possible in any language. He said, “I am.”

He said, “I am.” And we say, “So what? What’s the big deal about two little words?” Let’s find out.

What’s the Big Deal about Two Little Words?

What they claim

Let’s quickly get a feel for the conversation Jesus was having with these Jewish people who did not believe that he was the Messiah, the Christ. These people evidently felt pretty secure spiritually. They seem to have felt confident that they were in good standing with God. Why? Because they were members of the right family—the family of Abraham. Abraham was the granddaddy of God’s people. And so, being a descendant of Abraham—so these people thought—was what you needed to get you right with God.

Jesus, however, disagreed. He said, “If you hold to my teaching, then you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Not just being a part of the right bloodline, but believing and practicing the words of God, words that center on Jesus—that’s what counts, says Jesus.

Jesus’ opponents continue the argument. “We don’t need you, Jesus. We’re in the bloodline of Abraham.”

Jesus responds (I’m summarizing here) by saying, “Guess what? Abraham was waiting for me. He believed God’s promise to send a Savior. And, in a way, Abraham did see me—his trust in God’s promise assured him that I was coming. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad. You, however—I stand right in front of you and you don’t believe.”

They don’t see his point: “What? Jesus, you’re not even fifty years old! How can you have seen Abraham?”

Now, here it comes—the sentence that sets them off. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”

Did you notice how Jesus phrased that? “Before Abraham was born, I am.” Not, “Before Abraham was, I *was*.” That is, “I existed before Abraham did”—though that would have been an amazing claim. No, he said, “Before Abraham was born, *I am*.” Then they picked up the stones to kill him.

But why? What’s the big deal about two little words?

To get a sense of that, let’s bounce back to the other part of the Bible we’re looking at today: Exodus 3. Do you know the story? Israelites slaves in Egypt. Brutalized.

Oppressed. They cry out to God for help. Moses, an Israelite who grew up in the palace of Egypt’s Pharaoh, tries to rescue the Hebrews by killing an Egyptian—he takes Israel’s rescue into his own hands. He fails. No one follows him. Moses runs for his life, having enraged Pharaoh. Moses adopts a second career as a shepherd and figures he’ll just stay that till retirement. God has other plans. He comes to Moses, appearing to him in a burning bush. “I’ve heard my people,” says God. “I will deliver them. And you are my man to do it.” Moses voices some objections. One of them is this: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" See why they picked up stones? They knew what Jesus was claiming when he said, "I am." He was claiming to be the very same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He was claiming that Abraham, the ancestor they revered, had worshiped him. This Jesus was claiming to be God, their God. The God who had said through the prophet, "Apart from me there is no Savior."

"I am." See what these words claim? They claim that Jesus is the true God and the only one who can save human beings.

Jesus is still making this claim. Every time he comes here among us in his Scriptures, he is making that claim. Every time we see the sacraments in action, he is here, making that claim.

A question: Without God intervening, what would our reaction to Jesus be? "Better than the reaction of these people." Right?

Wrong. God says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God." Hostility—that's our natural reaction to Jesus and his claims. By our nature we're so messed up by sin that we are anti-God. So how would we react to Jesus' claim "I am"? We'd start looking for stones to throw at him.

Thank God. Thank God that he broke through our hostility. We were sinners, but in spite of that Christ died for us. Then he came to life again. Then he came to us, and with no cooperation from us, won us over. Thank God. Thank God we can now listen to Jesus say, "I am," and, in faith, respond with our hearts, "Yes, you are."

What they promise

These two little words claim something. They also promise something.

They certainly did for Moses and the oppressed people he was called to lead. WELS author Mark Paustian says about God's name I AM: "This was God's marvelous self-expression dawning on a lost, suffering, skeptical land. His name was the single thing they most desperately needed to know, the answer to their truest questions. 'God, are you who they say you are? Are you watching us, remembering us and all the promises you made? Are you somewhere listening to our crying, somehow crying along with us? Are you on your way to deliver us and bring us home...or...are you even there?' 'I AM.'" (*Prepared to Answer*, © 2005 NPH)

"I am." It's a perfect name for God. You and I, of course, can say, "I am." But it's not quite the same as when God says it. When we say, "I am," there are conditions. "I am, as long as I have air to breathe. I am, as long as I have food to eat. I am, finally, if and only if God allows me to be." We can say, "I am," but a whole lot of conditions have to be met.

It's not like that with God. God can say, "I am," and really mean it. God does not need anything or anyone. The whole universe could disappear, but God would still be. He could still say, "I am." He just is, no matter what.

By the way, when you see this name LORD in all capital letters, it means the Bible is using this special name God gives himself. The name might have been pronounced Yahweh, which comes from the old Hebrew word for "he is". We follow the tradition of

saying “LORD”—a tradition Jewish people started; they thought this name of God so holy that they didn’t say it out loud. When you see LORD in all caps, think “He is”, God as the great “I am.”

See what this name means for us?

God doesn’t need us. He could get rid of us if he wanted to. But he does no such thing. Why keep us around? More than that, Jesus, the great I AM, came into the world, took on human flesh and died with the weight of our sins on him. Why? Not because he had to. Because he wanted to.

Later in the book of Exodus we find God talking to Moses again. God essentially gives Moses a short sermon. The theme of the sermon is God’s name, the LORD. Here’s how God explains his name: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 34:6,7a)

“I am.” These two words promise you forgiveness for every one of your sins. These two words promise you love like no other. The eternal God, who needs nothing and no one, wants to love you. He wants to have your company forever. He came into flesh to make that happen.

There’s another thing we can note about this name I AM. Let me give you a quick lesson in Hebrew grammar, since Hebrew is the language God wrote the Old Testament in. Our language has tenses. Past tense: I was. Present tense: I am. Future tense: I will be. But Hebrew doesn’t have tenses. Rather, it has a couple basic forms. One of them describes actions that are complete. They’re done. The other forms describes actions that are incomplete; they’re ongoing, continuing in some way. (Are you bored yet?!) My point is this: when God says that his name is I AM, he uses the form that describes an ongoing action. God was in the past. He is in the present. He will be in the future. I WAS, I AM, I WILL BE—God is actually saying all these things when he gives us his name.

See what this means for us? This God who wants to love us is always there. Has always been. Will always be. His grace had its eye on you before you came into being. His grace knows you now. His grace will be nestling you in its arms every day to come.

One of my favorite Bible passages is at the end of Romans 8. Paul the apostle, who knew what it was to feel like you were dying every day, wondered out loud if anything could be so bad that it could cut him off from God. Here’s his answer: “No. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:37-39) Death won’t cut us off from him. Neither will going on living—which is sometimes scarier than dying. Neither the present nor the future will cut us off from his love—because our God, the great I AM, will be there, and is there now as he has always been.

“I am.” These two little words promise you God’s constant, never-ending, never-failing commitment and love—past, present and future.

It’s good to memorize Bible verses. We know that. Maybe we’ve even made resolutions to learn more Scripture by heart. But who has time?

This morning, let's memorize some Scripture together. I promise it won't be painful.
It's just two words: "I am."

"I am." Remember who said it. Believe his claim. Face tomorrow confident in his promise. Amen.