

- I Am

Exodus 3:13-15; John 8:53-58

Sunday, September 3, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction: The Pastor's Sermon Title

I recently read about a discussion a pastor had with the church office manager about his sermon for the next Sunday. Its title, "Jesus was the Greatest" and the office manager took exception to it and suggested that he change the title. The pastor was confused. What was wrong with it? It seemed to be grammatically correct and the Lord Jesus certainly loomed large in history. The office manager said that the problem was theological. Jesus is never "was." He is eternal and so He is always "is." Always present Always remembering. First-hand witness to everything we can imagine and much more than that. He even said that He is the "I am," not the "I was." The pastor changed the title.

- The "I am"

The most sacred of several names for God in the Bible is translated "I am" and was revealed to Moses when he encountered a burning bush that was not consumed by the flame. With God's revelation of Himself came a new calling and a new purpose in life for Moses. Centuries later, Jesus, in the presence of humanity at its cheapest and worst, revealed that He is the "I am," and makes the boldest claim to divinity possible, taking the most sacred name for God for Himself. Let's take a look at the passages. We'll take a look at Exodus 3, then John 8. Then make a couple of points, first from John 8 and then from Exodus 3.

- Set the Stage:

Exodus 3

Moses was born in Egypt at a time when the government was making an attempt to systematically murder every baby boy born among the people of Israel. In the midst of great danger, his parents placed the baby boy by the water's edge and waited to see what would happen. Miraculously, he was adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh himself and raised in the courts of Egypt, then one of the greatest empires every to exist. He was a person of intellection, great education and power. He had tremendous political authority, but when he tried to take action on behalf of the people of Israel he murdered a man and had to flee for his life. He ends up herding sheep out in the desert, working for his father in law. Now approximately 80 years old, 40 years out from his departure from Egypt, Moses find a bush that is on fire. That alone is not that unusual, for the desert is tremendously hot, but this bush is aflame but is not consumed by the flame. It does not burn up. Moses investigates and hears the voice of God coming from the bush. He is told to remove his sandals, for he stands on holy ground. Then he is given the task of returning to Egypt and liberating the people of Israel, having endured slavery for over four centuries. Moses talks God into letting his brother Aaron come along, and the course of Moses' life changes forever. In the midst of the conversation, Moses asks God His Name. He replies, "I am Who I am." Tell them "I am" has sent you.

John 8

The ending of John 8 includes the words God said to Moses, but the beginning shows humanity at its worst in tawdry contract to the revelation of Jesus. Most of the chapter consists of Jesus defending His self-witness, but for today I would like to contrast what happens at the beginning and at the end of the chapter. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus is teaching in the Temple when a group of scribes and Pharisees bring to Him a woman caught in adultery. They point out that the Law of

Moses commands such a person be put to death (It does.) They ask Jesus to weigh in, most likely in an attempt to trap Him. Jesus pauses and then suggests that the person who has not sinned throw the first stone. Everyone else leaves. Jesus tells the woman to go and sin no more. Later, Jesus' conversation with the religious leaders turns violent when He tells them that "before Abraham was, I am." Some of the same people (possibly) who chose not to stone the person caught in adultery quickly picked up stones to kill Jesus but He escaped. They knew exactly what He meant. He is the "I am."

- Points

Now, after that brief overview of the passages, I'd like to make a couple of points, starting with John 8 and then moving to Exodus 3 before we conclude.

*John 8*

Scholars reviewing the episode of John 8 have long noted that adultery, a grave sin that was punishable by death according to the Law of Moses, was to be inflicted upon both parties committing the sin. So where is the other person? Why did the scribes and Pharisees bring only the one? Ethics and moral purity were not the point, though they probably would have happily stoned the woman to death if not for the intervention of Jesus. They wanted to trap Him. They valued not the life of this person, sinful though she may be, but rather they hoped to use her as a pawn. Even after thwarted by Jesus, they continued to argue with him until He made, in stunning contrast to their cheap, viscous and craven behavior that He is God. He is the "I am," and the fact that people were at their worst did not diminish Him in the least. When people are at their worst, Jesus is still Jesus. He is the "I am." It is one of the boldest claims to divinity in the whole Bible.

*Exodus 3*

My second point is back in Exodus 3. God did not just speak with Moses in order to have a social call. He revealed Himself as the "I am" in order to tell Moses who he is. He is no longer the failed prince of a great nation, now reduced to herding sheep in the desert. He is the deliverer of his people, chosen by God to restore the nation of Israel to freedom and in doing so becomes one of the greatest figures in history. When God reveals, He calls. As you grow in your spiritual life, expect to know God better, and expect in the process to be put to work with a new calling and a new purpose in life. I knew of an elderly woman, so frail that she spent the last several years of her life confined to a bedroom in her daughter's house. She spent her days praying, and then she would write the people for whom she prayed. By the time of her death she had a ministry of prayer and encouragement that reached around the globe. She had limits. We have limits. The "I am" has no limits.

- Conclusion

The pastor at the beginning of this message wisely listened to the office manager and changed the title of his sermon from "Jesus was the Greatest" to "Jesus is the Greatest". He lives in an eternal present and is the "I am," the boldest claim to divinity in Scripture. Jesus is the "I am" no matter what, even when people are at their worst, and when He reveals Himself as the "I am" don't be surprised if you find yourself with a new work, a new calling, a new view of self and a new purpose in life.