

The "I Am" Statements of Jesus

"Before Abraham was born, I am"

John 8:58

--CEFC 12/20/20

There is something very familiar about the Christmas story—

so familiar, in fact, that we hardly notice just how strange and foreign it really is.

Think about it--

First, there is the prominence given to angels.

Angels show up all over the place—

an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, not once, but twice.

And in Luke the angel doesn't need a dream—

he comes in person and he is given a name—Gabriel,

This Gabriel announces the birth of both John and Jesus,

and then a whole host of angels appeared to the shepherds in the field.

I can't say I've ever seen an angel—in a dream or otherwise.

And what about that star—

drawing the Wise Men from the East,

then guiding the shepherds to manger—some star.

But, of course, the biggest miracle of the Christmas Story is the virgin birth—

and we're not talking about in vitro fertilization here.

A child born to a virgin--Now that's not something you expect to see every day.

Joseph certainly didn't know what to make of it.

This is no ordinary story—not at all.

But the Christmas Story just sets the scene for what follows—

the story of the ministry of Jesus,

where even more amazing things happen.

Jesus routinely heals the sick,

he gives sight to the blind,

he raises the dead,

he stills a storm, and walks on water.

And to top it off, on the third day after his execution,

he is raised from the tomb to a new and glorious form of life.

Now, that's a lot to swallow!

Too much to swallow for many people's tastes.

That's why many people through history have tried to create a Christianity

without the truth of Christmas--

a form of faith stripped, or some would say, "freed,"

from its miraculous elements.

I think of Thomas Jefferson, for example,

and his famous version of the Bible

in which he cut out all the miraculous bits in the Gospels,

and preserved only the edifying snippets of Jesus' moral instruction.

Jesus is to be revered as a great man of love and peace, they say;

but he is no more divine

than any other of the world's great religious leaders.

We can celebrate Christmas, they say,

so long as we recognize its legendary and mythical accoutrements.

Is that a viable option?

C. S. Lewis, when faced with this question, answered with an emphatic No.

Could there be a Christianity if you take away the miracles?

Lewis wrote,

“Now, it seems to me that precisely the one religion in the world,
or, at least the only one I know,
with which you could not do that is Christianity.”

Buddhism would still be Buddhism

if you took away the miracles attributed to Gautama Buddha.

And the same goes for Islam and the presumed miracles of Muhammed.

“But you cannot possibly do that with Christianity,” Lewis writes,

“because the Christian story is precisely the story of one grand miracle,
the Christian assertion being that what is beyond all space and time,
what is uncreated,[and] eternal,

came into nature,

into human nature,

descended into His own universe, and rose again,

bringing nature up with Him.

It is precisely one great miracle.

If you take that away there is nothing specifically Christian left.

There may be many admirable human things
which Christianity shares with all other systems in the world,
but there would be nothing specifically Christian."¹

The one grand miracle—
the one miracle that stands behind all the others,
and which, in fact, makes sense of all the rest
and gives them their credibility.

That one grand miracle is what we call the incarnation—
the amazing and astonishing claim
that God has come among us as a human being.

Without it, I say, Jesus remains an enigma;
Without this one grand miracle, his life, his teaching, his resurrection--
they all become inexplicable nonsense.

The essential miracle of Christmas—
It is Immanuel, God with us—the Word become flesh. /

The early Christians tried to capture something of this mystery
in the words of the 4th century Nicene Creed
that we read earlier—

**We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,**

¹ *God in the Dock*, pp. 80f.

begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

God the Son became a man.

You may ask, and many people do—

Where in the world did those early Christians get such a crazy idea?

The answer has to be, from Jesus himself.

Where else could it come from?

Though the Nicene Creed was formulated in the 4th century,
the truth that it captures didn't originate then.

It's there from the very beginning—

already in the writing of Paul the Apostle

in his letter to the Philippians, written within 25 years of Jesus' death--

He refers to Jesus as **"being in very nature God."**

And writing to the Colossians, Paul speaks of Jesus as one

"in whom all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9).

The first description of Christian worship from a non-Christian outside the church
written in about AD 110 by the Roman governor of Bithynia, Pliny the Younger,
to the Emperor Trajan
reinforces this early view of Jesus as divine.

Speaking of the Christians, Pliny wrote,

"They were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn
and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god" (*Epistulae* X. 96).²

No, it's there from the very beginning—

this strange idea of incarnation.

And certainly those first Christians would never invent this strange notion

that Jesus was fully divine.

Remember, all of the first Christians were Jews.

And again, you have to appreciate just how difficult it would be for Jews

to make such an affirmation.

Jews held as a fundamental theological axiom that there is one God

and there is no other.

They totally rejected the pagan myths which spoke of many gods,

and that even the Roman emperor could be a god.

That was blasphemy.

But somehow these first Jewish followers of Jesus determined

that nothing less than a declaration of divinity would do

when it came to describing him.

And why would they say that if Jesus himself

² He also reports that the Christians refused to worship any others as God.

had not forced them to that conclusion?

It's true, according to the Gospels,

Jesus didn't go around telling people, "I am God."

He had various reasons for that reticence--

For one, his audience simply wouldn't know what to make of such a statement.

No, he was more subtle than that—

he did things that only God could do—

his miracles where signs, pointers, to his true identity.

And Jesus said things that only God could say—

words we've been looking at these last few weeks—

things like, I am the light of the world,

I am the Good Shepherd,

I am the Bread of Life,

I am the True Vine.

But there were a few instances in which his words were so audacious, so god-like,

that they elicited an immediate reaction of outrage and reproach,

for they had the sound of blasphemy in the ears of their hearers.

There are a few times when Jesus clearly identifies himself with God.

One of those is in our passage this morning.

As we consider the "I am" statements of Jesus in John's Gospel

during this Advent season,

on this Sunday before Christmas I thought it appropriate

to expound the one statement in which Jesus simply says, "I am"—

as in Jn. 8:58-- **"Before Abraham was born, I am."**

First, let's look at the **context** of this unusual statement.

We read this passage a few weeks ago,

for this statement concludes a contentious dispute with the Pharisees

which began when Jesus declared that he was the light of the world.

John 8:12—"Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness,

but will have the light of life," he said.

"How can you say such things," they asked.

"My Father testifies on my behalf," Jesus replies,

and so begins a heated discussion about fatherhood.

"Abraham is our father," they claim in v. 39.

"If you were Abraham's children," Jesus said, "then you would do what Abraham did.

As it is, you are looking for a way to kill me,

a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God.

Abraham did not do such things.

You are doing the works of your own father."

"We are not illegitimate children," they protested.

"The only Father we have is God himself."

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me,

for I have come here from God.

I have not come on my own; God sent me. . . .

You belong to your father, the devil,

and you want to carry out your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning,"

v. 48 The Jews answered him,

"Aren't we right in saying that you are a [half-breed] Samaritan

and demon-possessed?"

"I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus,

"but I honor my Father and you dishonor me.

Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day;

he saw it and was glad."

"You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him,

"and you have seen Abraham!"

"Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!"

"Before Abraham was born, I am"—

If Jesus had simply intended to declare that he had existed prior to Abraham—

as astounding as that would have been--

he would have said, "Before Abraham was, I was."

But he doesn't say that—

he affirms more than mere chronological priority—

No, he affirms eternal existence—

"I existed not only before Abraham,

but I have always existed"—

"Before Abraham was born, I am."

The biblical resonance of these words was unmistakable.

The first passage that comes to mind is the one we read earlier from Exodus 3—
when God reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush.

God commissions Moses to go back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh
and to lead the Israelites out of slavery,
and Moses is terrified by that prospect.

God then promises his powerful presence,
but Moses raises a question—

In an Egyptian culture, full of gods of all sorts,
they will ask me what is the name of this god who sent you to us—
and what should I say?

Ex. 3:14 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.' "

God also said to Moses,

"Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Yahweh], 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 you shall call me
from generation to generation."

This name of God—Yahweh—is mysterious,
but it seems to be related to the Hebrew verb "to be."

Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the God who is.
He is who he is.

Tell them, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "

Another biblical connection is found in the prophet Isaiah—

in passages that have the same Greek expression for "I am" (**e'gw̄ ei'mi**)
found on the lips of Jesus in John's Gospel"

Is. 43:10--"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,

"and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am.

Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me."

Is. 45:18—"For this is what the LORD says—

he who created the heavens,
he is God;
he who fashioned and made the earth,
he founded it;
he did not create it to be empty,
but formed it to be inhabited—
he says:
"I am,
and there is no other."

"Before Abraham was born, I am"—it can only mean one thing—

Jesus was putting himself on par with God himself.

And that's exactly how Jesus' hearers understood him—

John 8:59—when they heard this, "**they picked up stones to stone him,**"

Jesus was claiming divinity.

This was not the first time Jesus aroused such a reaction, nor would it be the last.

In John 5, after justifying his healing on the Sabbath,

Jesus claimed he was only doing what his Father did.

5:18—"For this reason they tried all the more to kill him;

not only was he breaking the Sabbath,

but he was even calling God his own Father,

making himself equal with God."

And then in chap. 10—Jesus says, "I and the Father are one,"

and again, his Jewish opponents picked up stones to kill him—

for blasphemy, for he, a mere man, was claiming to be God. (10:30,33).

And there's one more incident—where instead of anger, Jesus elicits worship—

This time from Thomas, when Jesus appears to him after his resurrection

and shows him his pierced hands and side.

Thomas declares, "My Lord and my God!" (20:28).

Notice, Jesus accepts Thomas's worship,

and he never seeks to correct his opponents' charge of blasphemy either.

Which is why John begins his Gospel as he does—

'In the beginning was the Word,

and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

He was with God in the beginning. . . .

And **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**

We have seen his glory,

the glory of the one and only Son,

who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

"Before Abraham was born, I am."

Here is the grand miracle—

the miracle before all other miracles in the birth and life of Jesus—

it is the miracle of the incarnation—

Immanuel—God with us.

But still we have to ask the question--

Why does it matter if Jesus is truly divine or not?

What difference does it make?

Isn't it enough to speak of Jesus simply as a divinely inspired man,

a prophetic figure, almost God-like in his character and teaching?

I. The church said, No.

You see, only if Jesus is divine, can he be a full and complete revelation of God.

I like the story of the little four-year-old Johnny was working furiously one day

with his crayons on a sheet of paper.

"What are you drawing?" asked his mother.

"I'm drawing a picture of God," he replied.

"But Johnny, no one knows what God looks like," she said.

"Well, they will when I'm finished."

What *does* God look like?

What do we know about his nature, about his character, about his will?

How can we know what God is like?

John writes this:

" the law was given through Moses;

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only

[or, that could be translated, "the Unique One, who is himself God"),

who is at the Father's side, [he] has made him known."

Jesus Christ, as God incarnate, has made God the Father known

in a way no mere prophet ever could.

God has revealed himself through creation,

through his mighty acts,

and also through his words--

but the Bible tells us of a revelation of God that surpasses them all.

John speaks of God revealing himself in person in Jesus Christ.

Jn 14:9—Jesus says, "**Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.**"

If you want to know what God looks like, he tells us,

then look at Jesus.

When you look at that baby in the manger,

you can see the humility of God.

When you look at that man eating with tax gatherers and prostitutes

you can see the mercy and compassion of God.

And supremely, when you see that man hanging on a cross,
you can see the love of God.

That's just what the Bible declares--

Rm 5:8--"God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners
Christ died for us."

Jn 3:16—"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son
that whoever believes in him should not perish
but have eternal life."

Jesus bring us the very love of God.

If Jesus is not God you can't say that.

Only if he is fully divine is he a full and complete revelation of God.

II. Second, if Jesus is not divine,
he cannot achieve our full and complete redemption.

If Jesus is not God himself come to us,
the redemption he brings
is powerless to forgive and to save.

It is God we have offended—
only he can forgive and redeem.

If Jesus is not God,
he is quite simply not a party to our relationship with God--
his death and atonement are irrelevant to our moral status before God.

We are left to ourselves, to justify ourselves.

If Jesus is not God, then he is not our Savior--

for what does the Lord says?

"I, even I, am the Lord,

and apart from me there is no savior" (Isa 43:11).

If Jesus is not fully God

he cannot bring us to God—

he cannot be Immanuel, "God with us."

Only as God did Christ have the power to bear our sins and not be overcome by them;

Only as one of us—as fully human—could he represent us;

and only as fully God could he redeem us.

The Christian message is that not about us human beings

trying to reach up to God;

it's about God, in his grace, reaching down to us.

He came down to us,

so that he might raise us up to him.

Our salvation is God's work, not ours.

In Jesus God became one with us,

so that we might become one with him.

This is the wonder of the incarnation—

As the creed affirms,

God sent his Son into the world "for us men and for our salvation."³

It was as the incarnate Son of God

that Jesus lived a perfect life of love and faith before his Father in heaven.

It was as the incarnate Son of God

that he died on the cross for our sins,

and it was as the incarnate Son of God that he rose from the dead on the third day

and ascended in glory to the right hand of the throne of God.

And when Jesus was exalted to that place of honor,

he raised our humanity with him,

and now through faith,

by the work of the Holy Spirit,

we can join our humanity with his,

and through his divine Person we can share in the very triune life and love of God.

Or, to put it another way, because the Son in his divinity is one with the Father,

our being joined to the Son in his humanity means we are joined to the Father.

And because the Spirit exists as the bond of communion between the Father and Son,

he brings us into that communion by uniting us to Christ.

Think of it like this:

Our youngest son Cason went out from our family to a faraway land—

he went to live in Texas.

But in going out he remained one with us—he is still a Kynes.

But there in Texas he wooed a lovely young lady named Alexis.

³ Chalcedonian Creed.

(Cason's brothers affectionately call her "Alexis from Texas"

or simply "TexLex.")

And through her union in marriage with our son,

Alexis has become united to our family,

She became a Kynes also—

a Kynes, not by birth but by marriage—

a daughter, in law, yes,

but still enjoying the love of a daughter in fact.

Jonathan Edwards makes just this analogy:

"There was, [as] it were, an eternal society of family in the Godhead,

in the Trinity of persons.

It seems to be [the Father's] design to admit the church into the divine family

as his Son's wife."⁴

Through our faith in Jesus, who is the Son of God by nature,

we become sons of God—not in law, but in grace.

In our union with Christ in his humanity

we can come into communion with the triune God.

Our life is lifted up into the very life of God,

so that we come to share

in that eternal triune love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You could say that our Christian faith can be summed up in a series of unions⁵—

"There is the union of the three persons in the Trinity,

⁴ See Johnson, *One with Christ*, p. 42.

⁵ See Johnson, *One with Christ*, p. 37.

then there is the union of the Son of God with our human nature,
and then there is the union of Christ with his church
the union established by the Holy Spirit with us as he indwells us."

In each of these, we find a union with a distinction—

The members are united without being lost or absorbed in the others.

Personal union in relationships of love—

that's a notion central to the gospel message.

That's why marriage is such a wonderful picture of the gospel

because that's what marriage is supposed to point us to—

our union with Christ,

which is a union with God in his triune love.

When you think of Jesus Christ,

don't think of him as some Santa Claus who hands out gifts

from his bag of goodies.

No, he is a bridegroom who gives us himself--

which is the greatest of all gifts.

And when we are joined to him by faith

through the work of the Holy Spirit

the great covenant promise of God finds its fulfillment—

"I will be their God and they will be my people.

And I will dwell with them forever." (cf. Rev. 21:3)

Full and complete Revelation;

Full and complete Redemption

Jesus is not just like God;

he is God,

and that makes a critical difference.

If that is true, then Jesus deserves our absolute devotion.

He deserves our worship.

But if he is not fully God,

then worshipping Jesus is nothing less than blasphemy.

So who is this man Jesus?

That's the question Christmas poses, doesn't it.

He is God's Son—fully divine, fully human,

He is what God's gospel is all about—

for Jesus Christ, God incarnate, is our only Savior.

What are you to make of Jesus Christ?

Who do you say that he is?

When you think of it

there is something almost comic about such a question.

As one writer has suggested, it's a little like a fly
trying to decide what to make of an elephant!

What are you to make of Jesus Christ?

The real question is-- What is he to make of you?

Prayer—

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,

Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.

O Come, All Ye Faithful—

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,
born this happy morning,
Jesus, to Thee be all glory giv'n;
word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!

O come, let us adore Him,

O come, let us adore Him

O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!

Closing Song: #143 *Infant Holy, Infant Lowly*

Benediction:

2Pet. 3:18 "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever! Amen."

The "I Am" Statements of Jesus

Dec. 20, 2020

"Before Abraham was born, I am"

John 8:58

The miracles of the Christmas story point to even more miracles to come in the life of Jesus. All of them, however, are grounded in the greatest miracle of all—the Word had become flesh and has dwelt among us. This morning we consider Jesus astounding claim to divinity and the difference that makes for us.

The Grand Miracle:

The Christian claim of the Incarnation.

I. The Declaration of the Incarnation:

"Before Abraham was born, I am" –John 8:59

Ex. 3:14 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.' "

Is. 45:18—"For this is what the LORD says—

he who created the heavens,

he is God;

he who fashioned and made the earth,

he founded it;

he did not create it to be empty,

but formed it to be inhabited—

he says:

"I am,

and there is no other."

II. The Significance of the Incarnation—

- 1) Only if Jesus is divine,
can he be a full and complete revelation of God

- 2) Only if Jesus is divine,
can he achieve our full and complete redemption.

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail the incarnate Deity,*

Sermon Response:

"Before Abraham was born, I am"

John 8:58

•Take time in your group to reflect on the miracle of the incarnation—God become flesh, bringing humanity into his divine Person as the Son of God. Appreciate the mystery, for through that mystery we are drawn into a life-giving relationship with God ourselves.