

## John: The “I Am” Sayings of Jesus- Part 1 Sunday, 3/27/22

Last week we looked at John’s exposition of the contrast between living in the dark and choosing the light of Christ, as illustrated by the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. We were reminded that Jesus didn’t come into the world to condemn it, but to save it. Today, we’ll begin a two-part overview of the “I am” sayings of John.

When you meet someone new, what’s the first thing you learn about that person after their name and where they live? Usually what they do, right? People have always associated who they are with what they do, so much so that our names used to identify our jobs (think Miller or Barber, for example). With so many more people in this world, and so many more jobs, we’ve gotten away from that kind of naming convention, but we still find a great deal of our identities in the roles we play in life.

If you were to introduce yourself with a simple statement, “I am a \_\_\_\_\_,” what would you say? “I am a mother?” “I am a retiree?” “I am a farmer?” “I am a student?” How many “I am” statements would it take before the person meeting you might begin to get a sense of who you are?

For any one person worshipping with us today, we could easily come up with 50 to 100 or more descriptions of who you are, and still we’d be falling short of a perfect description, because listing “I am” statements is no substitute for being in a relationship over time, and people in healthy relationships are always growing in knowledge and love of one another.

The same thing can be said of Jesus, and then some. John gives us an intriguing series of “I am” statements regarding Jesus. Reading these names isn’t sufficient for us to completely know Jesus, but each of these names is an invitation for us to grow more in love with the one we call our Lord.

In our first reading, Jesus was nearly stoned for saying, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”<sup>1</sup> While that sounds confusing to us today, it would have been unmistakably clear to the Jewish crowd. Jesus was claiming to be God by implying a reference to the encounter Moses had with God in the burning bush. Do you remember what

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:58 (NRSV)

God said to Moses back in Exodus 3:14? “ I AM WHO I AM...Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”<sup>2</sup> Whenever we call Jesus by name, we remember that Jesus is first, simply “I am.” Each name beyond that is just a facet of human understanding applied to an infinite and awesome God. Like any love relationship, the journey of joy is found in discovering more and more of Jesus as we walk with him each day.

In our next passage from John 10, Jesus calls himself both the Gate and the Good Shepherd. I’m starting with verse 7 in the New Revised Standard Version.

{Read John 10:7-15 NRSV}

Before today, did you even know that Jesus said, “I am the gate”? I Googled “Jesus I am the gate t shirt.” Guess how many results were returned? Zero! “I am the light?” No problem. “I am the Good Shepherd?” Plenty of people selling those. “I am the gate?” Nada.

What could Jesus possibly have been thinking by calling himself the gate? Plenty, and quite possibly more than you think. But let’s start with the most plain meaning of his metaphor by remembering that sheep are prey animal, not predators. That means that other animals eat sheep, and not the other way around. And even though God blessed sheep with a really wide visual field of view to detect predators, they’re not very smart animals and they simply can’t defend themselves.

Shepherds in the time of Jesus relied on a couple of different strategies to keep sheep safe while the shepherds slept. One thing they could do if they were near a town was to share a large communal sheep pen with a paid gate guard. Sheep learned the voice of their shepherds, so when morning came, each shepherd could simply call out to their sheep and the flocks would sort themselves out, each flock following the voice of the shepherd they knew.

If they were out in their fields, they used simple rock rings to coral the sheep together, with the shepherd sleeping in the gap between the rocks, the shepherd in effect becoming the living gate. So when Jesus said, “I am the gate,” he meant at least two things: Going “in” through the gate of Jesus is the way to be in a place of safety, both eternally and in the here and now- a place of a “rich and satisfying life”; and only Jesus determines who can come in.

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 3:14 (NRSV)

What's really interesting about all this is that Jesus was apparently giving this teaching while standing amongst the crowds at the Temple in Jerusalem, a place where sheep routinely came in but never came out. Why? Because they were slaughtered there before the altar of God, sacrificed to atone for sins committed by God's people.

Jesus, on the other hand, turns this reality on its head by calling us his sheep and then describing a sheepfold where we can not only come in but, unlike the sheep sacrificed at the Temple, also come out again. It was the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, that atoned for our sins, once for all, allowing us to come into God's presence and not die, but live.

Jesus also calls himself the Good Shepherd. We know from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm some of the essential benefits that a good shepherd brings to a flock of sheep. Food and water, green pastures and still waters are things that sheep, unlike goats, can't manage to find on their own. Just like sheep, we depend on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to provide us with our daily bread, all the things we need to thrive in the course of our day. Have you ever wondered why the waters of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm are *still*? Sheep don't like moving water. Their wool gets waterlogged and they're not great swimmers.

What is the daily bread that you depend on from God? Is it a job, a place to live, a loving relationship, clean water, three square meals? It's easy to chew and swallow our way through each day without ever taking the time to recall with thanksgiving the loving hand of the Good Shepherd who provides you with the basic stuff of life that sustains you.

And why is it that Jesus makes us to *lie down* in green pastures? Sheep can't digest grass completely until they lie down, and sometimes they don't have the sense to do so on their own.<sup>3</sup> Can you see how this image might be a parable for us? Even in the course of 24 hours, there is such a thing as too much of something, even good things: too much food, too much work, too much sun, too much talking, too much sitting around, even too much Netflix. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he knows what we need in good measure, and he teaches us healthy rhythms of life.

And of course, we need the Good Shepherd because without him, we're prone to become so focused on eating grass that we become oblivious to the sheep around us and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/96303-the-problem-with-sheep>

wander off, far from the flock. Sheep really do this, which is why in the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells the parable about the lost sheep.<sup>4</sup> If you've got a smart phone in your pocket, it's much harder to get lost than it used to be. But Jesus wasn't talking about that kind of lostness. The Good Shepherd seeks out those who are spiritually lost, those who are looking for their daily bread from something or someone other than Jesus. God has every right to sit on the divine throne and insist we come to God, but that's not what the Good Shepherd does. Jesus would leave the ninety-nine and go after us if we became lost.

I wonder if there are ways in which you're lost today. It's possible to be lost without even knowing it! What are some signs that you might be lost, that you might have strayed too far from the Good Shepherd and the Gate? A feeling of emptiness inside that you can't seem to fill or satisfy is one sign. An abundant harvest of what I'd call the "anti-fruit of the Spirit" is another, like a lack of peace, violence of words, feelings, or actions, or a loss of desire to serve others in love. Sometimes when you're lost, you can find your way by setting out in one direction and hoping you come to a landmark like a road or a lake. But when we're spiritually lost, we don't need to find a landmark so much as a person. Jesus is both the Gate and the Good Shepherd. We need to return to him, the one who sends us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and bear good fruit.

Jesus alone offers his life completely for the sake of the sheep. Jesus alone is uniquely qualified to make peace for us with God. Jesus alone is capable of being both the Good Shepherd of his flock and the sacrificial lamb without blemish, offered that we might find our way back to God's sheepfold. How close are you today to the Good Shepherd? What's one thing you might do to move closer?

Please take some time now to reflect on one thing you can do today to move closer to Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 15:4-7



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