

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Before Abraham Was, I Am”

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Ash Wednesday, 2012

“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:58-59).

Everything you are looking at in here has a beginning and an ending, a time when it was put together and a time when it will be taken apart, disposed of, recycled, burned or buried. Some things are short-lived; others last a little longer. This candle (eternal light) must be replaced every 14 days so it never goes out and these candles [altar] about every six weeks. That candle (Paschal Candle) is usually switched out once a year at the Easter Vigil, but we’re going to use this one another year because they’re expensive and because this one still has a lot of life in it and because it’s just now getting down to within the reach of our acolytes. Your bulletin was printed and folded yesterday and most of them will be in the recycling bin tomorrow. The chairs you’re sitting on are sturdy, but their days are numbered. They won’t last forever, nor will this sanctuary. One day it will come down, intentionally or unintentionally. Barring any catastrophic event, that organ might well be the one thing that outlives everything else. If it’s taken care of, it will last for centuries. But it will not last forever. In this world, nothing does.

Look at the back of the head of the person in front of you. With just that limited information, you can probably make a pretty accurate guess as to his or her age. Our mortality is so evident that one glance is all you need. Plastic surgeons can shave a few years off our estimates, but not much more than that. Time has such an indisputable impact on us that one miserable glance is all you and I need to know the age of the other. We even begin planning around our mortality. My father-in-law just bought a new car, a purchase that stirred both excitement and sadness. In his own words, “it should last for the duration.” That’s how we start thinking because that’s the world we live in. And if we start forgetting about our mortality, or try to forget it, then along comes a pastor with oily ashes on his finger and the reminder of the harshest truth, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.”

Ultimately because of sin . . . and its wages, everything on this planet, including the planet itself, has a beginning and an ending, a DOB and a DOD. Everything that is, except for our Savior Jesus. He had no beginning. And he has no ending. That’s the claim he’s making in our text.

He’s having a rather heated discussion with his Jewish listeners. It begins calm enough but soon becomes argumentative, and finally explosive.

“Abide in my word” he tells them, “and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

“We are children of Abraham” they say “and have never been enslaved to anyone.”

“Anyone who sins is a slave to sin” Jesus replies, “. . . but if the Son sets you free you

will be free indeed.” The crowd is beginning to think out loud that Jesus might have a demon. Still, he does not back down. “Truly, truly I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”

“Now we know you have a demon,” they answer. “Abraham died, as did the prophets. Are you greater than they?”

To which Jesus replies, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I Am.”

When the Jews heard this, they could hardly believe their ears, and started picking up stones.

This Lenten season, we will be examining the “I am” statements of Jesus. They are so familiar to us they might have lost their edge. With them, however, Jesus was revealing more about himself, but he was declaring his divinity. For example, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” Whoever says something like that is not claiming to be just a good man, a good teacher and role model. He’s claiming to be God. So also with the “I am” statement for today.

Remember when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush? He was sending Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. He had heard their cries and was responding with compassion. Of course, Moses doesn’t think he’s up to the challenge. Who would? And once God deals with those reservations, Moses asks one more question. “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘God. . . has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What then shall I tell them?” “I Am Who I Am” God answers. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I Am” has sent me to you.” “I am” in Hebrew sounds something like “Yahweh.”

Thousands of years later, here comes Jesus things like, “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Light of the World.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life”. “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” He’s triggering their memories of the burning bush in Exodus 3 and saying, I was there. That voice from the burning bush was, in part, his voice, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The claim is: he is Yahweh. He is the source of life, the source of being, the source of everything. He is the God of the covenant, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God who is remembered from generation to generation. He is the great “I am.” Therefore, he is timeless, the only one, without beginning and without end.

There are some who still like to say, “You know, Jesus never claimed to be God.” They smile as if they know a dirty little secret that would blow the lid off everything if it ever came out. They think themselves so wise and bask in the sunshine of their own approval but they don’t know a thing about biblical theology. Two thousand years ago already the Jews understood perfectly well the claims Jesus was making. Jesus could not have made a greater claim. And that’s why his listeners started picking up rocks. It wasn’t to build an altar by which they could remember these words. It was to kill him so they might never have to hear those blasphemous words again.

“Before Abraham was, I am.” To the Jews it was the greatest blasphemy. To us it is (or should be) of great comfort. The life in Jesus is the life of the great “I am.” The truth he speaks is the Truth of Yahweh. The word he speaks is the Word of God. And just as he had compassion on his people Israel, freeing them from their slave masters in Egypt, so he has had compassion on us, freeing us from our slave masters: sin, death and the devil. In our text he promised, “If

the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” That is what he set out to do on the cross and that is what he accomplished.

No one else could die for us. No other death would suffice. Not the death of Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, nor of any the prophets. None of those fellow slaves to sin could set us free from sin. No, we needed salvation from the outside. We needed someone who knew no sin. We needed the “Holy One of God” on the cross. No one else was blameless enough. No one else can suffer enough and die enough. No one else can rise again on the third day. It would have to be him or no one. And it was him. When the last bit of life trickled out of Jesus on the cross, somehow, in a way we will never fully understand, the great “I Am” died for us. And it *is* him who gives himself to us today, right here. He masks his glory, today not under a burning bush, but under bread and wine so we can approach and eat and drink for forgiveness.

“Before Abraham was, I Am.” We are a people with ashes on our foreheads and the words still ringing in our ears, “Dust you are and to dust you shall return.” It’s the truth. But Jesus also has the truth for us today, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.”

We are a people whose age can be determined with just a glance. It’s the truth. But Jesus also has the truth for us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”

We are a people who purchase things and cannot help but think to ourselves, “It should last for the duration.” It’s the truth. But the promise of Jesus is also true, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

“Before Abraham was, I Am.” It’s the truth. Thanks be to God. Amen.