

A few weeks ago, around 40 Fellowship members stood in the ruins of an ancient city known as Caesarea Philippi. It's the site of an extremely important episode in the Gospels. There, in front of a hillside that contained a temple to the pagan god Pan, a cave that was thought to be the gateway to the underworld, and numerous idols that represented pagan religious beliefs of the day, Jesus posed to his disciples the most important question that has ever been asked. It was a question of identity and purpose. He began by asking, "Who do people say that I am?" His disciples told him "John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet." But then Jesus got to the question he really wanted to know the answer to. He asked, "But who do you say that I am?"

It was a question God would ultimately answer himself through the empty tomb and Resurrected King we celebrated last Sunday. But today, even though it was originally asked 2,000 years ago, it is a question that still demands an answer. It is still a question of identity and purpose, and it's one that you and I must answer. Who do you say that Jesus is?

This morning we begin a new series called "I AM". Statements that begin with "I am" typically express things like personality, motivation, values, emotion, and intent. They allow us to say who we are and what we are about. They give clarity regarding our identity and purpose.

Towards the end of his Gospel, the Apostle John tells us why he wrote what he wrote: **[JOHN 20:30-31] ³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

Of all the things that Jesus did and said during his time on earth, John recorded a specific selection to unequivocally show his readers that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah. And included in his Gospel are statements we call the "I Am's." These "I Am's" are a record of Jesus speaking about himself, giving us insight into his identity and who he rightfully saw himself to be.

They are not only statements that tell us who Jesus is, they are declarations of how a loving, gracious, and merciful Savior meets us in our deepest need, bringing life where there is death, giving identity where there is confusion, and assigning Kingdom purpose where only self-centered motives exist. They are Jesus' self-revealing truths that express his all-sufficiency, and our insufficiency. You see, **you will never know who you are until you know I AM.** Until we know the person and purpose of God, we won't know who we are or how we are to live our lives for him. Spiritual growth occurs when we become clearer and clearer about who Jesus is, and who Jesus is not, and when we become clearer and clearer about who we are, and who we are not. This series aims to provide that clarity.

So we begin it by looking in John 8. In this chapter, Jesus is in the middle of his public ministry, and people have taken notice, some eager to hear what he has to say, others not so much. John records a lengthy back-and-forth Jesus has with unbelieving, argumentative Jews. Jesus claims to have power over sin and death. They accuse him of having a demon. Jesus claims to have possession of the truth and offers the freedom that comes with it. They claim their heritage in Abraham makes them free. Jesus says he comes from his Father. They accuse him of being born of sexual immorality. Jesus says he is glorified only by the Father. They seek their own glory. This exchange exposes their ignorance; not only of who Jesus is, but also of who they are. They

don't believe they are in bondage to sin. They believe they are justified by their relation to Abraham. And they are blind to the Messiah standing right in front of them. It is a case of mistaken identity, but one with eternal consequences.

I always have my boys call their grandmother on Easter. My middle son, Luke, started it off this past Sunday. And from everything I could perceive, they were having a wonderful, and lengthy, conversation. But then, about fifteen minutes in, I heard Luke say, "Grandma, what are you talking about? This *is* Luke." My mom thought she was talking to one of my other boys. You can't have a relationship if you don't know who you are talking to.

These Jews don't know who they are talking to, making it impossible to have a relationship with Jesus, and making it impossible for them to accept his teachings. So Jesus decides to make it abundantly clear who he is.

[John 8:56-59] ⁵⁶“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” ⁵⁷So the Jews said to him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” ⁵⁸Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” ⁵⁹So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.

Wait. They picked up stones to throw at him? Why? Was it because they were really passionate about proper grammar? No. It's because they knew exactly what Jesus was saying. In a matter of just two words, Jesus declares his identity. Jesus references a story they would be very familiar with. It's a story in the book of Exodus where the God of Israel identifies himself to Moses with the personal name of "I AM". It's a name the Jews considered so holy that they wouldn't even speak it. And here, Jesus is not just speaking it, he's naming himself with it. The message is clear. He is claiming to be God. They reject him, see him as a blasphemer, and pick up stones to kill him.

It might be easy for us to dismiss these argumentative Jews as foolish and wicked. That, if we stood before Jesus, we would respond in the appropriate way. But I want to challenge you to be honest with yourself about your view of Jesus. If we are, I'm confident all of us will recognize we have some work to do. Maybe we wouldn't accuse him of having a demon, or try to insult his mother, but how often do we fall into the illusion or temptation that Jesus should conform to my idea of him, or that he should champion my agenda, or provide me with comfort and success?

Any god I use to support my latest cause, or who fits comfortably within my understanding or experience, will be a god no larger than I and thus not able to save me from my sin or inspire my worship or empower my service. Any god who fits the contours of *me* will never really transcend me, never really be God. Any god who doesn't kick the bars out of the prison of my perceptions will be nothing but a trivial god. -Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God*

Jesus' calling himself "I AM" is his attempt to kick the bars out of the prison of our perception of him. It is Jesus defining himself as he truly is, because he's the only one who can. And while it is absolutely a claim to deity, I also believe it is an invitation. The God who met Moses in the

wilderness is the same God standing before them now. It's an invitation to know him as Moses knew him, to know ourselves as Moses knew himself, and to respond to God as Moses responded to God. And so I want to turn to Exodus 3 because there are a few things we can learn from God's initial introduction to, and interaction with, Moses.

When I know I AM, he reveals who I am not.

When Moses first encountered God, he was in a place of brokenness. For the first 40 years of his life in Egypt, Moses was a member of Pharaoh's family. He lived a life of position, power, abundance, and royalty. But he struggled with his identity. He knew he was a Hebrew. He recognized how his people were being mistreated. And one day he snapped, killing an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave. Knowing that word had gotten out, he fled for his life. And in a moment, he went from prince to pauper, from directing the affairs of the most powerful nation on earth to shuffling sheep in the barren wilderness. And while it appears that all is lost, Moses is exactly where God wants him.

Brokenness is a gift of mercy because at the bottom of the pit is found the God of redemption. I know this not just as a theological truth, but through my own experience. While the failures in my life have been times of great pain and difficulty, they were also times of incredible growth, where God revealed himself to me in ways I never knew, where he humbled me and ripped idols out of my hands that were barriers to my relationship with him, and turned my heart to him in ways it never has been.

God uses brokenness to strip away from us any false sense of self. Our pride, our self-sufficiency, our own agendas all stand in the way of knowing the one true God and being used by him. Brokenness prepares us to come face-to-face with the Almighty so that we might recognize his glory and respond in the only appropriate way possible. And that brings us to Exodus 3, where a broken Moses is about to meet the God of Israel.

[EXODUS 3:1-6] 3 Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned." ⁴ When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ And he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

This is a fascinating picture of how God sees us, coupled with an explanation of how to approach him. God twice calls out Moses' name. This is an expression of a Semitic custom called "repetition of endearment" where the speaker uses someone's name consecutively to communicate affection and friendship. Moses would have understood immediately that he was being addressed by someone who loved him and was concerned about him.

But the intimacy of feeling didn't eliminate the need for Moses to proceed with care. God tells Moses to keep his distance and take off his sandals. This was an act of worship. You only worship what is greater than you. Moses recognized he was in the presence of God and his only proper response was total submission. God also tells Moses he is standing on holy ground. Holy means to be set apart. It wasn't holy because of its location. What made it holy was God's presence and the fact that he set it apart as the place where he would reveal himself to Moses.

A neighbor of mine has a prize antique car. I don't know much about cars, but I do know it's very old, and it's very sweet. And he doesn't drive it very often. No, this thing has been set apart for special occasions. He takes the cover off of it, pulls it out of the driveway, and tops out at maybe 11-12 mph. And you can see on his face the pleasure he gets from driving it. Yes, it's just a car. But it's a holy car, made holy by my neighbor's love for it and value he places in it.

God's presence on that ground made it holy. But you know what else is now holy? Moses. Whatever a holy God touches becomes holy. In this exchange, God is going to commission Moses, to set him apart, to fulfill God's purposes. And that purpose is seen in v12, where he is to bring out a people who will be holy to God, set apart for his purposes, and to worship him.

For those who know I AM, we too are called by God with affection and friendship, we too have been chosen and set apart, and we have been made holy both by the presence of God's Spirit living in us, and his calling in our lives to live for him. And our only response can be one of worship and submission.

When I know I AM, he provides for what I am not.

Immediately after God introduces himself to Moses and Moses responds appropriately, because he knows who God is and knows who he is before God, God commissions him in his purpose. He tells Moses that he has heard the cry of his people and is sending Moses to Pharaoh to bring his people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land.

The magnitude of this mission likely floors Moses. He answers God with two questions; one about himself, and one about God. The first question is in v.11 where he asks, **"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"** Moses is now an 80-year-old man who has spent the last 40 years as a shepherd, 40 years in exile, 40 years removed from the cradle of power, and now he's being asked to confront Pharaoh. "Who am I?"

And God says, "No, Moses, you're awesome. You got this!" God doesn't say that. In fact, he doesn't argue at all. You get the sense Moses is looking for a little encouragement about himself. It would be like me seeing you on the concourse and saying, "Man, that sermon wasn't very good", then looking expectantly for you to assuage my insecurities. But God's answer is infinitely better than any pep talk he might have given to boost Moses's self-esteem.

In v. 12, God gives Moses the answer. It is the Great I AM's refrain of presence and power for anyone he sets apart for his purpose. Five simple words: **"I will be with you."** These five words God says to Moses are the same five words God says to Joshua, the same five words Jesus says to his disciples at the Great Commission, and the same five words he says to you and to me. "I will be with you."

If we take this God Given Purpose stuff seriously, Moses asks a question we all should be asking. Who are we to be given a holy assignment from God? God's response to Moses is the same to us. By ourselves, we can accomplish nothing. We are utterly dependent on God to accomplish his calling on our lives. But we are not alone. God promises to be with us, working in us and through us to bring about what he asking of us.

The second question Moses asks is about God. If God will be with him, who is he?

[EXODUS 3:13-15] ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: '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, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

Moses knew the Hebrew slaves might be hard to convince. They had not heard from the "God of their fathers" for over 400 years. Sure, they knew the stories of the patriarchs, and they knew God was given descriptive names like El Elyon, El Shaddai, El Roi every time he did something on their behalf. But where has he been? Not only that, Moses lived in a time of abundant polytheism and paganism, where all of nature represented some kind of divine force. Egypt alone had over 2,000 gods. From all appearances, it looked like the gods of Egypt were winning. So, if Moses shows up and says, "God sent me to you," they are going to ask his name.

God reveals his name in v.14, calling himself Yahweh. Yahweh is a form of the verb "to be." It gets translated as "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." By it, God is saying "I am the eternal, self-existent, self-sufficient, unchanging God." And then in v.15 he continues by saying, "the God who was at work at the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is at work now." That's what Moses is to go and tell them, because that is the God who is going to bring them out of Egypt. And look how God finishes v.15. He says that this is more than his name for the moment. It is, in fact, his name forever, to be remembered throughout all generations.

Nearly 1500 years after this episode in Exodus, generation after generation later, Israel is once again in bondage to another nation, this time Rome. Additionally, the Jews have not heard from their God for another 400 years. And then one day a rabbi by the name of Jesus shows up, begins to teach some powerful things and, when challenged, proclaims that I Am, the eternal, self-existent, self-sufficient, unchanging God, has appeared. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who brought the people out of Egypt, is now standing before them in the flesh. Jesus' revelation of himself as God forces them to determine who they are in light of that, and how they will respond. Would they reject him and stone him as a blasphemer, or believe in him and worship him as the one true God, acknowledging their need for a Savior, and submitting their lives to him forever?

What about us? Well, we have a choice to make too. We have to go back to the question Jesus posed to his followers at Caesarea Philippi. Who do you say that I am? It's a question all of us must answer. And that's why I'm so excited to invite you into this series. The seven I am's are

an expansion of when he calls himself “I am.” They are Jesus’ own words, telling us not only who he is, but what he does for us, and who we are in light of that.

And so I want to invite you to dive into this series, to spend the next seven weeks digging into what Jesus has to say about himself. If it’s true that you will never know who you are until you know I AM, it stands to reason that **when I know I AM, I know who I am.**