

#1 Sermon title
slide

Come and See: Asking Jesus in John, Part 3

The Costly Truth

John 8: 12, 46-59

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**March 12, AD 2023
Colton Underwood**

The text we have before us today, with the exception of verse 12, comes at the very end of a back-and-forth between Jesus and a group of Jews in Jerusalem that actually begins in the first verses of chapter 7. It's roughly six months before Jesus' betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection at the Feast of Booths, a festival for the people of Israel wherein they spent days in tents (booths) to commemorate God's faithfulness during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. Jesus has already used one of the ceremonies attached to the festivities to point to himself in chapter 7 and, in doing so, he caused quite a stir. The crowds around him seem to be mixed in their opinion of him. Some seem to be cautiously interested in what he has to say, some are furious at his audacity and want him dead, and still others are confused by his cryptic language and hesitant to side either way. It's into that tense atmosphere that Jesus continues speaking in our passage. We'll begin by reading verse 12 of chapter 8 because of its relevance to the following response, and then we'll read the final verses of the account beginning in verse 46. However, before we do so, let's seek that Lord's help in prayer.

Our Father in Heaven, your words are the very words of life, yet so often we are slow to hear. Therefore, as we hear from you, unstop deaf ears, give sight to blind eyes, give new birth to dead hearts to beat for you. By your Spirit, cause us to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these costly truths that we might rightly respond in faith and love. For it is in your Son's name that we pray, Amen.

#2 Both
Images
On one
slide



I must admit, I'm not the biggest fan of all the changes Peter Jackson made to the Lord of the Rings in his film adaptations in the early part of this millennium, but the change he made to Boromir's character arc in the Fellowship of the Ring is possibly the best of them. In the films, Boromir's headstrong and youthful personality leads him to a point of crisis when, beginning at the Council of Elrond in Rivendell, he comes face to face with Aragorn, the rightful heir to the Gondorian throne.

If you've not seen the films or read the books, the kingdom of Gondor—the most noble of the realms of men—has long left its throne in Minas Tirith empty and the White Tree of the King has sat barren. In the place of the kings, then, a line of noble stewards arose to care for Gondor in the absence of its true ruler and Boromir is the son of the current steward. His eldest son, in fact, and therefore the one who will inherit the stewardship after him.

Meeting Aragorn, then, meant coming face-to-face with a costly truth: that there was one who could completely upset his applecart. Accepting Aragorn's claim to the throne of Gondor meant giving up a great deal. Boromir would need to give over authority, control, power, esteem, his youthful pride, influence, and security. He would need to accept a lesser role than the one he grew up believing he would fill. In response to that costly truth, Boromir's response at the Council was, "Gondor has no king; Gondor needs no king." In the face of a costly truth, Boromir initially chose to harden his heart in rejection.

In our text and in the verses between in chapter 8, Jesus presents the crowd of Israelites with a series of similarly costly truths, and their reactions are telling. They've come to the Feast believing that they walk in the light of God, but Jesus tells them by implication in verse 12 that they actually are walking in darkness. Rather than seeing, as they believe, they are truly blind. They've come to Jerusalem because they believe that they know God. Perhaps they would even say that they know him as a Father, as he called Israel his son. However, Jesus tells them plainly in verse 19 which is echoed again in our text in verse 55 that they do not know the Father at all. They've come thinking that their lineage and obedience to the laws they've heaped up around the Torah will win for them life. They're righteous, of course. Yet Jesus plainly tells them in verse 21 the costly truth that they—if they do not turn—will die in their sins. They've come to celebrate a festival that called to mind their freedom as a people having been set free from slavery in Egypt, yet Jesus boldly tells them the hard truth in verses 31 and 34 that they are slaves, slaves to sin. They've come identifying as the people of Abraham, his offspring, and that is a great source of pride for them. Yet, while Jesus will concede in verse 56 that they have *genetically* descended from Abraham, he will not shy away in verse 39 from the costly truth that they are not truly Abraham's children. They've come believing that they are "of God," yet Jesus will not allow them any delusions. In verses 44 and 47 he summarily tells them their true origin. They are sons of the devil; they are not "of God."

So much for our sweet, free-spirited, meek and mild Jesus. The milquetoast, white bread Jesus that so many in America have in their minds when they consider him—if ever they do—is far from this man. This is not to say that Jesus isn't compassionate. Rather, he shows incredible compassion and patience with those who are truly contrite, interested, and repentant, just consider the woman at the well. But as we've noticed in the preceding

passages of John's Gospel, particularly the cleansing of the Temple and Jesus' words all through the sixth chapter, Jesus doesn't pull his punches when the time is right. He has no issue with getting under his listeners' skin. In fact, when his hearers are even slightly insincere in their interest in his whole teaching and movement, he seems to intentionally poke them right in the eye, upsetting them even further to the point of anger and outrage. That's exactly what we have brewing in chapter 8. Jesus will by no means leave room for ambiguity about the state of his hearers as well as his own identity. He has hard, costly truth to tell, and the response of the Jews who were listening is telling.

They begin our passage by deflecting the issue at hand, trying to undercut Jesus by turning to low-level slander, calling him a Samaritan, a half-breed. Perhaps they were calling into question his mother, Mary, given his questionable birth story. Then they go one more and say he has a demon, which is blatantly false and the opposite of the truth. You'll notice that, when losing an argument, the losing party often degrades as the battle to be fought gets steeper. So, instead of logical arguments to combat Jesus, they now resort to emotional and personal insults. Below that, the level of physical violence, as we'll see is not all that far behind.

Jesus responds calmly to this, reminding them that their blasphemy will be held in account by the Father. And it's here, even here in his eye-poking that Jesus holds out again the hope of life to these people. He tells them, "if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."

To that, they respond once more in increasing disbelief. "Now we know you have a demon," they cry, "Abraham died, as did the prophets . . . are you greater than our father Abraham who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?" There's the question. Maybe we could restate their cynical inquiry as, "and just who do you think you are?!"

Like usual, Jesus doesn't respond directly to this right away. Rather, he pokes his finger back in their eye, reminding them of the hard truth: they're blind and don't understand what Jesus says because they do not know God the Father. Jesus isn't surprised by their unbelief. In fact, he talked about this very thing in chapter 6 at length. It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is no help at all. Jesus' response is a firm and resolute refusal to sink to their level, because he has come to do the will of his Father. Yet that doesn't lead him to dampening the truth of who he is, so he goes on to cryptically answer their query as to his identity as he says, "your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad." What could that mean? Abraham looked forward to you, Jesus? That would be like me saying that John Knox, a great father of Presbyterianism, looked forward to *me* . . . and was glad!

So, again, faced with a hard and costly truth and refusing to believe it, they respond in one last mocking question. “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” We might even imagine the sneers and stifled laughter under such a question. It’s in response to this that Jesus replies, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” This is the real answer to their question, “who do you make yourself out to be?” However, we may not understand the gravity of what he’s saying.

You may know that in John’s Gospel, there are 7 “I AM” statements that have a matching predicate. “I AM the bread of life.” In verse 12, the verse that kickstarted this passage, “I AM the light of the world” and on they go, totaling 7 to pair with the 7 Signs of the book. Paired with those and perhaps lesser known are also 7 “I AM” statements *without* a predicate, meaning that they stand alone, as it were. This, I would contend, is the most powerful of them if not for the fact that soldiers fall down when Jesus says those two words at the time of his arrest in 18:5. In all of these statements, this one included, his “I AM” is almost redundant. He uses two words where he only needed one in the Greek and it’s obvious to someone who’s even moderately familiar with the Bible that Jesus is doing so intentionally. Why? Because in Exodus 3:14, when Moses asks God what name he gives to Moses to tell Israel the identity of the God who sends him to lead the exodus, God responds, “I AM that I AM.” Time would escape us if we tried to exhaustively see what this means, but suffice it for our purposes to know that God claiming to be the great I AM is a claim for absolute deity, there is no one else. Not only that, he needs nothing for his existence. He is existence in and of himself; he depends on no one and nothing for who he is and that he is!

So, when Jesus takes these words on his lips, he is claiming more than just the idea that he might *have been* or *have existed* before Abraham over 2000 years prior. No, he claims the seemingly impossible. That he, a man before their eyes, was God himself, the very God who spoke in the burning bush to Moses, the very God that Abraham believed in who would send a redeemer, one of his offspring, to bless the world. The very God who promised to Adam and Eve that one would arrive from the godly line who would be the great serpent-crusher, the sin-destroyer, the death-defying Savior. Adam, Abraham, Moses, indeed, all the Old Testament saints looked forward to this day and they were glad to see it.

The problem is, the Jews listening know *exactly* what Jesus was saying. There’s no question of his claim, and no matter how some might try to paint a Jesus who died because he was nice to sinners, or because he welcomed the outcast, or because he was a misunderstood teacher of timeless wisdom, none of those things provoked this reaction. No, make no mistake, the Jews knew that Jesus claimed deity for himself and that was the most heinous crime of all.

Now here they are, faced by the hardest, costliest truth of all, that this Jesus whom they have blasphemed and hated, is God in the flesh. Acknowledging that truth would cost them more than they can bear, so they do what we mentioned earlier. They try to stone him, only to be somehow hindered whether by Jesus hiding himself physically, Jesus being hidden supernaturally, or some other combination thereof. Regardless, it wasn't Jesus' designated "hour" that we've heard so much about, so he escapes their clutches for now.

Just as Jesus came before the Jews at this Feast and would not let them turn away from hard, costly truths, so too does he place them before our very eyes today. How will you respond? As it was for them, the costliest truth for us is what we ended on, that Jesus is exactly who he says he is. Maybe you've checked that box. "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, eternally begotten of the Father." Check. But do you actually understand what that means? Again, Jesus isn't interested in us just hanging out with his crowd because we have a passing interest in what he can do for us. He isn't interested in letting us coast on being "good enough" because we checked off that box and look the part. If you believe that Jesus is no more than the one who helps you get out of hell, you've missed the point. Jesus cannot be your Savior without also being your Sovereign, your King, your Lord and God.

If he is who he says he is and he is your Lord and God — and he is whether you'll have him or not — that means coming to grips with a truth which will cost your pride, your desire for control, your belief that you are the master of your destiny, your selfish ambitions, your ability to make up the rules for your own life. In short, it will cost you no less than yourself, even your very life. "If anyone would follow me," he says, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Following Jesus as both Savior and Lord means giving up your own personal lordship and allowing him to get right up in your business, under your skin, and letting his word hit you where it hurts. Following Jesus as God means knowing that the Creator has right over the creature and what he says is best for us *is* best, even when that doesn't seem right to our sensibilities.

You and I are conditioned practically from birth to value the self-made man, the independent person, the one who breaks the mold and lives out their inner longings and desires to be truly him or herself. But Jesus won't allow us to go there. We naturally yearn to do what we want to do and make our own rules, often justifying the things our conscience and those around us might criticize. But Jesus won't allow us to go there. The world is full of people who are full of themselves, confident that they've done enough good to make it to some sort of reward after life, or perhaps because they've been attached to Jesus for many years that he'll look favorably on their pet sins simply because they paid him lip service. But Jesus won't allow us to go there.

Have you come to grips with this costly truth? If not, I would plead with you, the Lord Jesus Christ is your King. He reigns over heaven and earth and one day he will come again to judge the living and the dead. Your life, if you abandon and deny this truth, will amount to nothing but dust in the end. So yes, coming to grips with who Jesus is will cost you much, but don't you see? It may cost you everything from one angle, but in truth, it will cost you nothing.

It will cost you nothing more than the weight of responsibility you willingly carry, trying to make a meaning for yourself that lasts in a transient world. It will cost you nothing more than your bitterness at the vanity of life and the hard world around you. It will cost you nothing more than the lesser joys you have willingly accepted in exchange for the greater, lasting joy. It will cost you nothing more than your own death in exchange for life. It will cost you nothing more than your old slave master, sin and self. It will cost you nothing more than your chains.

#3



At the end of the Fellowship of the Ring, Boromir finally came to realize the truth of Aragorn. Aragorn was Isildur's heir, the rightful king of Gondor. Only as he laid dying, having sacrificed himself for two hobbits, did he come to grips with it as he spoke his last words to Aragorn: "I would have followed you, my

brother. My captain. My King." His heart, though hardened by pride and selfishness at the start, came finally to soften. He recognized that he *did*, in fact, need a king. So do you. You need him more than you know. The costly truth is before you. Will you abandon your pride and selfishness? Will you abandon your death and chains? Christ is Lord. Will you bow before him and find life?