

Who I Am
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John 6:15-35

At pivotal points throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the phrase, “I AM.” It is sometimes obscured when translated into English, but in Greek, the phrase would have been quite familiar to readers and hearers familiar with the scriptures. Jesus uses the same phrase that God used as a name in the Old Testament. To faithful Jews, use of that phrase would amount to blasphemy. But to followers of Jesus, it would amount to a stunning revelation of identity.

When the woman at the well asks Jesus about the Messiah, “I AM.” Later he says, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” “I AM the light of the world.” “I AM the gate for the sheep,” and “I AM the good Shepherd.” “I AM the resurrection and the life.” “I AM the way, the truth and the life.” “I AM the true vine.”

And in today’s reading, Jesus twice uses this phrase. When he walks across the storming sea towards his terrified disciples, he calls out, “Do not be afraid: I AM.” (This is one of those instances in which the drama of language is lost in translation. The NRSV reports this as “It is I.” How lame is *that?*) The second use is a very familiar one to us. Jesus says, “I AM the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Last week we heard the story immediately preceding this text: the feeding of the five thousand. This story is a continuation of that one — Jesus retreats from the throngs of well-fed people because they are enamored by the simple

physical fact of the miraculous appearance of food. He went to the mountain by himself to get away. Meanwhile, the disciples need an escape plan of their own.

Imagine being one of that small cohort, surrounded by thousands of people who are clamoring for a new King, with the object of their devotion now out of sight. Imagine that night falls. Imagine that you are fishermen and that there happen to be boats handy. I've wondered before why they left without Jesus, but perhaps it was simple desperation. The disciples would have been exhausted, both mentally and physically. And now, in the dark, they are rowing across the sea and a strong wind rises. I imagine that they were terrified even before they see the apparition walking across the waves towards them. And then the familiar voice: "Do not be afraid: I AM."

When Moses asks God's name in Exodus 3, God responds with a phrase that can mean, "I AM who I AM," or "I will be who I will be." And then God uses the name YHWH, which probably means "The one who causes to be." All of these meanings are wrapped up in Jesus' use of "I AM." And so when Jesus says "Do not be afraid: I AM," the disciples hear "Fear not because of who I AM." "I AM the reason you need not fear." "I AM, have been and will be your freedom from fear." That's a little more dramatic than just "It is I; do not be afraid."

And the next day, this crowd that apparently camped out for the night, perhaps snacking on the leftover miracle meal, finds that Jesus and the disciples have gone. They get into boats and set out across the sea for more miracles.

In Capernaum they find a very tired Jesus. I suspect it would be tiring walking across water. Add to that a little mountain climbing and crowd control

following an impromptu wilderness banquet, and the voice I hear Jesus speaking with has a decidedly weary edge to it. The crowd wants to know how he got across the sea. They had seen the disciples depart by boat the night before and knew that Jesus hadn't gone with them. Maybe some of them suspected another miracle. But Jesus won't take the bait. He recognizes in them the very human inclination to pursue miracles. In fact he makes an interesting distinction here. He says, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." I suspect that Jesus is drawing a distinction between a *sign* and a *miracle*. Many people had worked miracles before; in many cultures, miracle workers are a cottage industry. But Jesus was no Miracle Max. A sign, in contrast to a simple miracle, points to or indicates something greater than itself. It references a higher reality. The miracle was that bellies were filled — but the sign, which many witnesses missed, was that Jesus is the Christ, the one who fulfills a hunger beyond the physical.

Once they catch on to what Jesus means by "sign," they promptly want another one. If Jesus is claiming to be sent by God, they say, then he should prove it. They reference a collective cultural memory that yesterday's feast brought to mind — another instance in which bread was provided from heaven.

Jesus must have been quite exasperated. Talk about adventures in missing the point. But he goes on to explain the difference between the bread provided to the nation of Israel as it wandered in the desert and the "true bread of heaven" that he provided.

The two stories share much in common — the image of multitudes of people out in the wilderness eating a miraculous supply of bread is compelling. However, there is an important distinction that the narrator of the Gospel highlights for us — in Exodus, the people were commanded to dispose of any uneaten bread. They were to rely day-to-day on the new morning supply. In contrast, the John story emphasizes the abundance of the miracle — there was a bounty of food left over, and it would supply the people for days to come. The miracle: plenty of food; the sign: freedom from hunger.

And now we come to second “I AM” statement. Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Each of these I AM statements in John relate to a particular human need. Jesus relates his cosmic identity with the Creator of the universe to the finite reality of human existence. He ties the spiritual graces that he brings to the stuff of everyday life — the need for water and food, the desire for safety and guidance. And when he says, “I AM the Resurrection,” he addresses the ultimate human experience — death.

In looking at these passages it might be tempting to accuse the writer of over-spiritualizing Jesus. In this passage, it might look as though he disparages the need for literal food. But Jesus ties each of these spiritual signs to a concrete reality. He does not offer himself as the bread of life without first supplying real relief from hunger. He shares literal water with the woman at the well. And he says “I AM the resurrection and the life” outside the tomb of Lazarus as he

prepared to offer a real, physical resurrection — not simply a spiritual one. “I AM” is both a spiritual reality and a physical one.

Later in this Gospel, Jesus says “I AM the vine, and you are the branches.” If we are the branches of this vine, then we have much sweet wine to offer. We can serve as signs of the greater reality — the great “I AM” that encounters people in the midst of their need and supplies us with physical and spiritual relief. We have the bread of life and living water to offer, because we serve the one who is, has been, will be, and is the source of everything we need.