

Greatest of All Time: 4. The Great “I AM”

John 8:53-58

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The Greatest of All Time is a title that has been attributed to athletes and others who have excelled in their sport or their area of expertise. And even then, it is usually open to debate about how great that person’s achievements really are. Some of you may be old enough to remember Mohammed Ali. For much of the 1960s, he was boxing’s heavyweight champion of the world, but he kept saying he was more than that. [video] But it would not be long until someone else took his place. He may have had the greatest ego of all time, even the greatest people have not been so quick to call themselves the greatest of all time.

Not even Jesus. His greatness was found and still is – not in what he said about himself, but how his life would change the world. That’s what his disciple John wants us to know in writing this Gospel. This is the fourth week in our study of the Gospel of John. From the beginning of the gospel, John wants us to know that God came to walk among us. John was an eyewitness to Jesus. He was one of the disciples who walked with Jesus for three years, listening to what Jesus said, watching what Jesus did and he thought, “maybe in Jesus, God became one of us.” But at the end of those three years, Jesus was crucified – so maybe that’s not who Jesus was after all. But on the third day, John would tell others **The Word became flesh and made his home among us... full of grace and truth.** God became one of us! The Roman Empire would try to squash this movement of people who heard who Jesus was and believed. Every time the Roman Emperor Domitian had a follower of Jesus put to death, more Christians stood up and said, I believe. And by the end of the first century, all of the other disciples were dead. Only John remained. According to Church tradition, the emperor Domitian put John into exile on the island of Patmos. Years ago, some of us were on a trip where we walked into the cave where it is said that John was kept. Today, the cave is this tiny chapel. From everything John had witnessed, he summarized who Jesus was and what the life of Jesus meant. God showed up in the flesh. **In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.**

What if John was right? Why would God want to live among us? Just look around this world. Some of us question whether we even want to live among us! John tells us as dark as the darkness gets, it cannot overcome the light found in that life. Why did God come to live among us? John says, so that we might have life, fullness of life right now, a kind of life that darkness cannot overcome, a life that never ends. **I came so that they could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.** That’s why God showed up in the flesh. This morning, we heard seven “I am” statements which John uses to tell us what Jesus’ life means for us and why we can call him the Greatest of All Time. Here’s the seven sayings: **I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate for the sheep. 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.**

John wrote these words in Greek. The words I AM in Greek are **Ego Eimi** – I am. But in Hebrew, these two words have a special significance which is what John wants us to hear. He wants us to remember a story from the Hebrew scripture about Moses who was tending his father-in-law’s sheep when he came across a bush that was burning but not being consumed by the flames. When Moses approached the bush, he heard a voice from the bush that said, “Take off your shoes. You are standing on holy ground. I have heard the suffering of my people Israel, and I will set them free. I want you, Moses, to go to Pharaoh and demand the people be released.” For hundreds of years, they had been slaves. Moses listed all of the reasons he could not do this, until he realized that God was not asking. And Moses asked, who shall I say

sent me? **God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”** I AM? What kind of name is that? In Hebrew, the word is Yahweh. What does that mean - that God is I AM? It means existence itself. I am the One from which everything else comes. I am life. And because I am, you are.

So, in John 8, the Jews have been getting more upset and more agitated and are ready to take whatever Jesus says and use it as evidence against him. They've decided Jesus must be killed, because Jesus is saying crazy things and violating the laws intended to protect the Sabbath. Jesus has been saying that not only does he know God, but the God that the Jews claim to know and worship is the very same God that has become flesh. And they ask, **Who are you?** And Jesus says, remember Abraham and what God promised to Abraham? Well, I was there. Now they know he's crazy! **You aren't even 50 years old! How can you say that you have seen Abraham? I assure you, before Abraham was, I AM.** [camera] In other words, if you want to know what God is up to? Watch me! You want to know what God would do? Watch me! And the next thing the Jews do is pick up stones to kill him.

Seven times in John's Gospel, Jesus says, "I am." And what John wants us to hear is Yahweh. Who is Jesus? I AM. In chapter 14, Jesus has a conversation with his disciples where he elaborates on what this I AM means, It's the Last Supper, though the disciples don't know it's the Last Supper. Jesus has just told them that he's about to leave them. They've been together for three years, and now he's leaving. And Jesus says, **Do not let your hearts be troubled.** What? Jesus, you've just told us you are going to die. "Troubled" means "to be shaken up." Don't let your hearts be shaken up. When we get news about our family or ourselves – a health diagnosis or a child's in trouble. What's our natural response? We're shaken up. And Jesus says, "Don't let your hearts be troubled?" How is that even possible? **Trust in God. Trust also in me.** In other words, Jesus is saying, trust me like you trust God. That's how we access life. I've described before my image of trust. When our children were little, and I would come home. The moment they heard the back door open, they came running – Daddy's home – Daddy's home! And they would wrap their arms around my legs and want me to pick them up and hold them. And as long as they were within my arms there was absolutely nothing to fear. Today, they don't live with us. So it's a phone call or a text message, and sometimes I think the real reason for the call or the reason they stop by the house is to hear the words, "I love you." When I'm with people experiencing a crisis or uncertainty about tomorrow. I will say, "God will never let go of you." I don't just say that, I'm counting on it. We trust in a lot of things. Our own ability, our spouses, our money – but sometimes the mind and body fail us, and family is not present, and the money disappears or all the money in the world can't fix it. Remove all this and what do you trust in? Jesus says, "Trust in God, trust also in me."

My Father's house has room to spare. If that weren't the case, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you? When I go to prepare a place for you, I will return and take you to be with me so that where I am you will be too. You know the way to the place I'm going." Jesus. What are you talking about? You are leaving and will come back and take us where you were before you came to be with us. And Thomas says what they all were thinking – huh?! **Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we know the way?** Jesus says, **I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.** There it is. I AM the way. The Old Testament tells us there are two ways – one way leads to God and the other leads away from God. We are continually at this fork in the road. And a lot of things are telling us they are the way – stuff we accumulate, a certain person or a job. And somewhere you have to choose, and if it's not Jesus then what is it? All of us choose something. Recently, I was trying to find a house in the northwest corner of Plymouth or maybe it was Maple Grove or Corcoran. That area has changed so much, I don't know my way

around. So I asked Siri. I picked up my phone and asked Siri for directions and she took me to an empty field – so I had to call for help. I thought I could trust Siri. Be careful with this verse. Jesus isn't telling us what happens to us if we don't choose the way, but Jesus is saying I AM the way to the Father.

Philip says something a lot of people still say, **Lord, show us the Father; that will be enough for us.** Just show us God and that's enough. There may be some point in your life where if I just knew for certain. If I could know that God is here. God doesn't have to say anything or do anything. I just want to know and whatever happens that there is a God and that God knows me. That would be enough. But here's what Jesus says: **Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been with you all this time? If you have really known me, you will also know the Father.** Jesus is saying, I'm as close to God as it gets. You want to know what God would do? Watch me. You will never get a better clue to what God is like than me. Watch me. I AM! Why did Jesus come? To show what God is like. God wants you to know, and God didn't trust anyone else with the information. God showed up to live among us. And in him – when we trust in him – LIFE begins.

Have I told you about my grandson? Most Mondays we spend the day together. He will be three in July, and he is delightful in every way. Last Monday, I took him to the grocery store, and he was talking to everyone and when we left the store it was like he was saying goodbye to his best friends – blowing kisses to everyone. I took this selfie when it was time for his mother to pick him up. I think he's far more photogenic than I am. Later, when I looked at that photo, I wondered – what if God took a selfie. That is, if God took a picture of God, it would be Jesus. And if Jesus took a selfie? That is. If Jesus took a picture of Jesus, it would be you, right? Isn't that what Jesus wants?

One of our members told me about her friend. Her friend grew up going to church, but as an adult she had not prayed, not gone to church. By her 40s, she doubted the Christian faith and didn't really know what to believe. Like a lot of people, she was at the fork in the road and didn't know the way. Her marriage was at rock bottom, and she didn't know what to do. It looked like the marriage wasn't going to make it. She cried out to God to help her, to give her a sign that God exists. It had been a while since this member of Messiah had a conversation with her friend. But when they sat down together recently, it seemed that everything in her life had changed. Her life which had been a mess, now it seemed to be on track. The marriage was better. They had identified the problem, sought counselling, and renewed their marriage commitment. So, what was the turning point? Jesus Christ. She asked her friend, "How did that happen?" And her friend said, "It was you. You showed me Jesus Christ." And how did I do that? "It wasn't anything you said, it was just the way you live your life."

Jesus is the great "I AM." God wants us to know God so that through us others will know the way to LIFE.