

I AM

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 24, 2023

John 1:19–28

Some of the most well-known and well-loved statements of Jesus are the I am statements. Some of them come readily to mind: I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection and the life, I am the way, the truth, and the life. These are powerful, beloved statements of our Lord which express who He is and what He does and how He loves us and provides for us and saves us.

But before the great I am statements of Jesus there were some emphatic I am not statements. We heard them this morning in the Gospel reading of the Fourth Sunday in Advent. John the Baptist is the one who speaks them. Jesus knows who He is and that He is the great I AM. John also knows who he is—and part of that is knowing who he is not. John is out in the desert proclaiming and baptizing and the religious leaders from Jerusalem come out to question him. What authority does he have to do these things?

They question him. Are you the Messiah? I am not. Are you the Elijah who was promised to come? No. Then are you the great Prophet who was promised to come? This is the prophecy we heard in today's Old Testament reading. No, not that one either.

Well then, who are you? We need to report back to those who sent us. What authority do you have to be preaching and teaching? After making clear to them who he is not John tells them who he is. "I am a voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord—just as Isaiah the prophet said." This is the prophecy found in Isaiah 40, the Old Testament reading we heard last week.

It's interesting because John actually was the second one they asked him about, the Elijah who was to come. This was the prophecy from the prophet Malachi which we heard in the Old Testament reading on the Second Sunday in Advent. The voice of one crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40 and the Elijah who would come are the same. This one would be the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who would prepare the way of the Lord. John understood himself as that promised forerunner of Isaiah 40. Though he was in fact also the Elijah who was to come, as we heard from Jesus in last week's Gospel reading, John did not make that claim of himself.

John answers the religious leaders' interrogation with three I am not statements. Okay, then if you are not the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet, why are you baptizing? "I baptize with water," John answered them. "There is one who stands among you, but you don't know Him. He is the one coming after me, whose sandal strap I'm not worthy to untie." The apostle John, the one who wrote this fourth Gospel account, begins this account of John out in the wilderness by saying that this is the testimony of John, that is, John the Baptist. And what is his testimony? I am not. I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the Prophet.

But yes, I am baptizing. I am preaching. I am pointing you to the one who is the great I AM. He is the one coming after me, the one whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He is coming after me, but in fact He was before me because He is the great I AM. He is the one who was, who is, and who will be forever. And now remarkably He is in the flesh. The great I AM is a human being, but very God of very God. Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

Jesus was the one coming after John, but only in the sense that before the Messiah would come a forerunner would come to prepare the way for Him. And what is that way? It is the way of repentance. Throughout Advent, which is now coming to a close, we have been emphasizing the need for repentance. Well, we should always be emphasizing it. Each day. Throughout our entire lives. We should be people who are constantly repenting. Because the voice of one crying in the wilderness still cries out through the written and proclaimed Word of God.

Make straight paths. That is, repent. Stop your sinning. Put away your excuses. Follow the path of the Lord, the Messiah who has come. The Savior who has taken away your sins. His was the path of humility. His way was that of selflessness, of serving and loving. He is the great I AM, which means that His way is the eternal way. He is the door and the way. You cannot enter eternal salvation by your own power. He is the truth against all your lies and ways you rationalize away your sins. He is the Good Shepherd who guides you and seeks you when you stray. He is the resurrection and the life as He brings you up from the death of your sins. He is the Bread of Life, feeding you with Himself.

He is the great I AM and so brings you into His eternity so that you will never die eternally. When you are called to your eternal home you will never again experience sorrow or suffering. He is the great I AM, even as He is the God who is in the flesh. John knew he was not any of these things. He knew he was not the one. There was only one who could suffer in the flesh for the sin of the world. He is the one John points us to. Jesus is the I AM and yet He died on the cross. We might think we are self-sufficient. But we have no life apart from the God who has given us life. And we have no eternal life apart from the God who has brought us into His eternal life in the waters of Baptism.

John knew who he was not. He also knew who Jesus was and so he pointed people to Him. He is the Messiah, the great Prophet, the very Savior we so desperately need. He is the I AM and that means we are forgiven and forever alive. Amen.

SDG

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