

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: October 4, 2015
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BEFORE ABRAHAM, I AM”

John 8:56-59

{Job 42:3, 5-6} When Job was granted a vision of the LORD, he confessed:

**“I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.
My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes.”**

{Is 6:1, 5, NCV; TNIV; CEV; NLT} When Isaiah was granted a vision of God **“seated on a throne”** he cried **“Oh, no! Woe to me! I’m doomed! My destruction is sealed, for I am a sinful man and a member of a sinful race, yet I have seen the King, the LORD Almighty!”**

{Ezek 1:28, NLT} When Ezekiel was granted a vision of **“the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD... [he] fell face down in the dust.”**

? What about us? Unlike those Old Testament saints we have access to the Father through the Son. The Savior invites us to **“approach God’s throne of grace with confidence”** on the basis of his merit and his ministry.

Nevertheless, we must not confuse confidence with a casual attitude. Assurance is not nonchalance.

? Do we realize who Jesus is? Do we perceive his greatness and glory? Do we seek his presence with reverence and wonder and joy?

▣ Please turn with me to John 8:58. Jesus declares, **“Very truly I tell you...before Abraham was born, I am!”**

Abraham died at least 1,900 years before Christ was born. The distance in time between them was nearly as far as the distance between Messiah and us.

{Wuest} And still Jesus announces, **“Before Abraham came into existence I AM”!** There are only three alternatives: he is either ancient beyond reckoning, severely deluded, or demonically deceitful.

■ As a group, the crowd does not believe him. And so, **verse 59, “they [pick] up stones to stone him.”** They are convinced of their obligation to kill Jesus. Leviticus 24:15-16: **“Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible; anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD is to be put to death. The entire assembly must stone them. Whether foreigner or native-born, when they blaspheme the Name they are to be put to death.”**

📖 Blasphemy is disrespect to God in unholy words and deeds, by which the blasphemer denies some good thing about the LORD or attributes evil to him. It consists of brazen offenses like using God’s Name as profanity or cursing him outright, and subtler ones like claiming God’s approval of our immorality, injustice, or idolatry. In addition, it is blasphemous to attribute uniquely divine qualities or identity to anything other than the Living God.

That last one is the issue here. When Jesus says **“Before Abraham was born, I AM!”** he is professing to be one with the Father.

“I Am” is the crucial phrase.

- It should sound familiar. In Exodus 3:14-15 Moses asks how he is to identify God to other people. God replies, **“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM’ has sent me to you.’ ...Say to the Israelites: ‘The LORD,”** YHWH, **“has sent me.”**

The Name is given in three related parts. I AM WHO I AM; the simplified version, I AM; and YHWH, which, like both of those, is derived from the Hebrew verb *hayah*.

📖 The basic definition of *HAYAH* is clear: *to be, to exist*. But the form spoken in this text is so obscure that a number of reputable commentators say it is fundamentally untranslatable. Is it I AM WHO I AM, or I WILL BE WHAT I AM, or I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE? Could it be I AM I AM?

{Halevi; Recanti; Sforno} Some Jewish scholars suggest that it might mean The One Who Exists, or Pure Existence, or He Whose Essence Is His Existence.

It would be asinine of us to presume that we comprehend this mystery! Still, there are a couple of things we can say with confidence.

☆ Observation 1: I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH are verb forms.

📖 {Ex 3:13} Moses expects to hear a proper noun. However, this is not a proper noun like *Ra* or *Osiris*; nor is it a common noun like *god*, with a lower case “g”.

I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH are verbs. To be more precise, they are different configurations of the same verb, *hayah*.

Why isn’t God’s Name a noun? We cannot be dogmatic, but consider this.

Nouns are used to categorize things. They help us to recognize, understand, and manage our existence. That is their purpose, and it is good one.

The flip side is that we often misuse nouns to pigeon-hole and mislabel others. This is harmful enough as an honest misunderstanding; but when we do it to diminish another or to control them, it is evil.

Has the LORD communicated a Name that is not a noun in order to undermine our attempts to objectify it, diminish it, or control it and, by extension, God himself?

Also, unlike nouns verbs are action-oriented. The verbal form of YHWH’s Name might imply that divine identity is revealed most directly in his deeds. Do you want to know who God really is? Learn what he does!

It is not that nouns are unimportant. We cannot even begin to think without them. It is that we perceive the LORD’s heart, mind, values, and purposes more precisely in concrete action words than in abstract idea words.

☆ Observation 2: I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH underscore certain divine attributes.

★ The Name accentuates that God is real. Not only does it assert the bare fact of YHWH’s existence (in opposition to atheism), it exposes other so-called “gods” as lifeless things dreamed up by their own worshipers.

★ The Name reveals that the Living God is autogenic. His life comes entirely from himself.

In contrast, we are *because*, or *as a consequence of*. If our parents had not become one flesh, we never would have been. If we lose access to oxygen, water, and food we will no longer be. When we suffer a lethal disease or fatal injury, our bodies will stop being.

Not so with God! He is not I AM *because*; the LORD is I AM without condition, limitation, or stipulation.

★ {Rev 5:8} The Name highlights that the Living God is eternal. It is derived from *hayah* (to be, to exist) but the tense is indefinite, and with excellent reason: YHWH is *still* present in the past, he is *always* present in the present, and he is *already* present in the future. Forever and ever he is the One **“who was, and is, and is to come.”**

★ {Mal 3:6; Lam 3:22-23} The Name accentuates that the Living God is steadfast. It is I AM, not ‘I AM, If You Happen to Catch Me on a Good Day.’ Who YHWH is does not change. **“His compassions never fail... great is [his] faithfulness.”** Every time he does a new work it is with the same goodness, same mercy, and same justice. We can count on I AM WHO I AM.

Scripture repeatedly emphasizes God’s steadfastness. Isaiah 43:10-13 is a classic example:

**....Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.
I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no savior.
I have revealed and saved and proclaimed –
I, and not some foreign god among you.**

**You are my witnesses,” declares [YHWH],
“that I am God.”**

Yes, and from the ancient of days I am he.”

There is so much more truth, beauty, power, and glory to behold! We have barely dipped our toes into the ocean that is the Name I AM WHO I AM, I AM, and YHWH.

▣ When Messiah declares, **“before Abraham was born, I am!”** he is saying he is in a unique, perfect union with the Deity who spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

Allow me to clarify: we are Trinitarian Christians. We confess that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three different titles for the same Entity; they are three distinct Persons who share the same Essence.

Jesus is not professing to be the Father; he is saying, **“I am God’s Son”** with a capital “S” (John 10:36). He is not claiming to be another member of the Trinity; he is saying, **“I and the Father are one”** (John 10:30).

{Jn 3:16; 5:19} As the **“one and only Son”** he is utterly united with the Father in being, character, purpose, word, and deed. Hence, **“The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.”**

The truth of the Holy Trinity is a great mystery! If you can figure it out, you are way ahead of me.

✈ {Jn 12:45} But there is one thing we can say with confidence, and its implications are profound and highly practical: When we look at Jesus we see the Father.

★ Regarding his teaching, he says: **“the Father ... has commanded me to say all that I have spoken.... Whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say”** (John 12:49-50).

★ Regarding his actions and relationships, he says: **“I do nothing on my own and speak just what the Father has taught me.... I always do what pleases” “the one who sent me”** (John 8:28-29).

★ Regarding his identity he says: **“Those who believe in me do not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When they look at me, they see the one who sent me”** (John 12:44-45).

{Jn 1:18} Inspired by the Spirit, John explains that **“No one has ever seen God, but the only and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”**

This demands a significant response.

When the crowd in John 8 was given a glimpse of God in Christ, they tried to stone him.

When the prophets were given a glimpse of God on his throne, they fell down.

What about us?

“Before Abraham was born, I am!”

John 8:56-59 is the Word of the LORD.