I AM

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 6:27-35

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This week as I was thinking about Jesus and preparing for my sermon, I Googled “superheroes” and learned some common traits that they share. They typically have: extraordinary powers or abilities; a secret identity that protects them; a backstory that explains how they acquired their abilities or how they became superheroes; a strong motivation for why they are doing what they are doing; and a strong moral code, including a willingness to risk their own safety in the service of good without expectation of reward.

Do you remember what someone would always say at the end of an episode of The Lone Ranger? “Who was that masked man?” It’s a question of identity. As we have been journeying through the stories of Jesus during Lent, we have witnessed that Jesus possesses special powers that no ordinary man could have. And the crowds of people gather around him and ask in different ways, “Who is this Jesus?”

Of course, superheroes are fictional, but Jesus is real. And, unlike superheroes, Jesus does not want to mask his identity. He wants us to understand who he is, where he came from, why he came, and the lengths he will go to accomplish his mission. Today, we are going to explore how Jesus reveals his true identity as the Son of God through the seven “I Am” statements in the Gospel of John.

**I Am the Bread of Life:** So let’s look at the first “I Am” statement. Just before this passage, Jesus has once again demonstrated his extraordinary power and abilities by feeding 5,000 people, so crowds seek to find the man who can supply “wonder bread.” Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’

“Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’

“Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’
“So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’” (John 6:26-31).

In this passage, Jesus acknowledges three reasons people follow him: for what they can get, what they can do, and what they can see. Materialists come for what they can get—in this case, food for their bodies. Jesus tells them, you have to think beyond this material world and think about eternity.

Legalists believe in eternal life, but they also believe there is something they can do to gain God’s approval and earn their own way. But Jesus makes it clear: there is nothing we can do. “The work of God is to believe in him whom God has sent.” Jesus is the one God has sent, the one who does for you what you cannot do for yourself.

Finally, there are those who are looking for a sign because seeing is believing. How many times have you said or heard others say, “I just wish God would give me a sign to show me the way”? Someone in the crowd says, “Moses gave our ancestors bread from heaven.” Can you do something like that? Really? I guess feeding 5,000 people with two fish and a few loaves wasn’t enough.

But this is a great setup for Jesus to explain his backstory. This crowd knows of the Israelites wandering in the desert for forty years—in a dry and barren land where there was no food or water. They know the people of God could not have survived in that wilderness on their own without the miracle food of manna raining down from heaven. But they think Moses gave their ancestors this “bread from heaven.” But Jesus says, “No, let’s get the backstory straight.”

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’” Notice he doesn’t just say he gives bread to the Israelites in the wilderness but he gives life to the whole world. Of course, they want some of that action:
“They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty’” (John 6:32-35).

This is the backstory for Jesus. When God calls Moses to lead the people out of Israel, Moses asks, “Who I shall tell them sent me?” God says, “I AM WHO I AM….Tell them I AM has sent me to you….The L ORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you” (Exodus 3:14-15).

Unlike a superhero, Jesus doesn’t want his identity to be a secret. He is no ordinary man—he is the Son of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, the God of their ancestors, the one who led his people out of Egypt, provided for them in the wilderness. Jesus is the great “I AM”—the one who is sent by God.

When he says, “I am the bread of life,” he is taking hold of this deeply understood religious experience of manna in the wilderness and the very ordinary, everyday reality of human experience—the need for food. He is making clear that he is the source of life. The implication is that we are faced with two choices. In our physical bodies, we either eat and drink or we die. For eternal life, we must believe in Jesus as the one sent down by God. There is no life apart from Jesus. But the promise is that those who believe in him will never hunger or thirst.

The second “I Am” statement further clarifies Jesus’ identity and his backstory: “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life’” (John 8:12).

Jesus again uses a common Old Testament image of light to connect his listeners to God’s story. Light was God’s first creation. In the exodus, God went before Israel in the wilderness as a pillar of fire at night “to give
them light” (Exodus 13:21). Light is a symbol for the law or the Word of God.

**I Am the Light of the World:** In this context, Jesus is in the midst of the celebration of the Feast of the Tabernacle, in which light was an important element. On the first day of the feast, four enormous lampstands were lit, reminding the people of God’s Shekinah glory—his very presence filling the temple. So much light was produced that every courtyard in Jerusalem was filled with light.

Jesus is not just the light of Jerusalem or the Jewish people; he is the Light of the World. Again, we as humans are confronted with two choices: To live apart from Christ is to live in spiritual darkness, but to follow Christ is to have the light of life.

The first two “I Am” statements help us understand Jesus’ identity and backstory connecting with God’s cosmic story in the creation and God’s redemption story through the nation of Israel. It all comes together in Jesus—the one who is from God and sent by God. As we read in John’s prologue, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4).

The next two “I Am” statements help us understand the relational nature of God through one of the most beloved images of Jesus as a shepherd: “So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’” (John 10:7-10).

**I Am the Gate:** Sheep are not very smart, prone to wander, and somewhat directionally-challenged. They are vulnerable creatures who need to be watched over, protected, provided for, and guided. Sheep were often gathered into pens at night to protect them from weather, wild animals, and even thieves. In Jesus’ day, these pens were caves or open areas surrounded by walls made of stones or branches, but they had no gate. The shepherd would position himself at the opening and serve as the gate, letting the sheep in and keeping out anything that would harm them.

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I suspect that many of us look at the picture of sheep in a pen and resist being thought of as a sheep. We prefer to think of ourselves as powerful as a lion or fast as a cheetah. We don’t like the idea of being hemmed in. Songs like “Free to Be Me” and “I Did It My Way” come to mind. And we certainly do not want to be that close to other sheep. After all, we are Americans who need to have a certain amount of personal space.

But Jesus uses the imagery of sheep because whether we want to believe it or not, we are broken, sinful, weak, and vulnerable people who are easily distracted and prone to wonder in many and varied ways.

And the reality of our world is that there are many voices—inner voices and outer voices in our culture and in the world—bombarding us daily with false ideas of who we are, what we need to do, what we need to possess to be somebody.

But here’s the truth: The good life isn’t out there somewhere fulfilling the expectations of others or doing what we want. Jesus is the gate to the good life, the abundant life we were created for. The only question is whether we will trust Jesus, listen to his voice alone, and walk through the gate.

Jesus goes on to say, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15).

**I Am the Good Shepherd:**

Here we see Jesus’ motivation for why he is doing what he is doing. Unlike a superhero, it’s not about being spectacular or powerful. Jesus’ motive is love. He alone loves, protects, provides and cares for his flock. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus knows each of us by name. His love for us reflects the love of the Father for him. He is the one sent to draw us into this intimate, interactive relationship with the Triune God. We are to find our home in Jesus and in being a part of his flock.

And Jesus isn’t like a hired hand who is paid to take care of sheep but will flee when the going gets tough. He’s not even like a superhero who is willing to risk his own safety in the service of good. As the Good
Shepherd, Jesus loves us so much that he willingly lays his life down for us.

We are invited to trust and follow this true, gentle Good Shepherd. So do you believe “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want”? “The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need” (Psalm 23:1)? I have everything I need—right here, right now, in this relationship with Jesus. Whatever comes my way, the shepherd is with me and for me and always loving, caring, protecting, providing for me—always working for my good. Do you believe that?

The next “I Am” statement comes when Jesus is greeted by his friend Martha after her brother Lazarus has been dead for four days. Essentially, Martha says, “I know who you are, I know what you can do, and I believe if you had been here, things would have been different.” In response to her grief, Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-26).

I Am the Resurrection and the Life: Later in the passage, Jesus raises Lazarus from death to life, demonstrating his utter power to overcome our greatest of human problems—death itself.

This great story connects with our human experience. As Mark Twain said, “The only two certainties in life are death and taxes.” This is one of my favorite passages to share at a funeral because it gives such comfort and hope in assuring us that death is not the end. Those who believe never die—we simply experience a transition from life in the body to life in the presence of the Lord. That is a true message of comfort to those grieving the death of a loved one.

But we mustn’t miss the thrust of what Jesus is saying here. We all have to face the truth that this fleshly body is wasting away, and we will all one day die physically. That terrifies many people. I sometime wonder if the frenetic, compulsive nature of life in the world today is the desire to push against the natural boundary of death. We think we have to do more, have more, accomplish more before the end of life. I wonder if people really believe that he who dies with the most toys wins. But as this church sign
reflects, that is not a good philosophy because “He who dies with the most toys…is still dead.”

Jesus reveals another way. Jesus has conquered sin and death and opened the door to eternal life. We can live a resurrection life right here right now and forever. We don’t need to fear. Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves, and we can live in trust, joy, peace, and love right here, right now.

The next “I Am” statement was said to Jesus’ disciples on the night before his death. Jesus’ followers are feeling anxious, confused, and disoriented because Jesus is talking about his departure. Jesus wants to reassure them that he is preparing a place—a home for them. They are thinking in terms of a physical place, so Thomas says, “Show us the way.” Give us a map and directions. “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him’” (John 14:6-7).

I Am the Way, Truth, and Life: It is a popular idea—and many religions do subscribe to this—that many roads lead to God. If you study world religions, you will find that most have at least three things in common. They have 1) a charismatic leader, 2) holy writings, and 3) an explanation of what humans must do to reach God or heaven, or paradise, or nirvana.

But Jesus doesn’t point to the way as other great religious leaders do; he makes clear that he is “the way, the truth, and the life.” Jesus didn’t come to provide another religious path or road. He is the path. He’s not interested in religion at all. Religion reflects the common longing among humans to know what God is like and what we have to do to reach God; but Jesus is God’s effort to reach us. It’s not about religion; it’s about an interactive relationship with God. And Jesus is the road—the one who leads us into unconditional love found in the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is an uncomfortable, exclusive statement; but when he makes it, Jesus sets himself apart as the only begotten Son of God. Jesus leaves us with no misunderstandings; he is the road to our home in God.
The final “I Am” statement comes as Jesus wants his disciples and us to understand how we are to live this life in the kingdom: I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

**I Am the True Vine:** Here Jesus states an obvious truth: if branches want to live, they have to stay connected to the vine. When they stay connected, they produce much fruit. I want you to hear the really good news in this passage: “Apart from me you can do nothing.” Our life in God is entirely dependent on God’s grace to accomplish for us what we cannot accomplish on our own. We are free from trying to prove ourselves or earn our way. The key is abiding, staying connected to Jesus. From him we receive life, love, joy, and peace. These are undeserved gifts of grace that naturally come to us as we abide in Christ.

This is not only for the glory of God and the abundance of our own lives—this is for the sake of others. We are meant to bear fruit in the world. We are to love others as he has loved us—not because we are gutting it out and trying harder. But rather because as we stay intimately connected in this interactive relationship, Jesus’ life and love naturally flow through us, bearing fruit in the world.

The “I Am” statements are meant to help us understand Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. The question is this: Do you believe—really believe Jesus is the one sent from God to do for us what we could not do for ourselves? Does the way you live your life reflect that you believe in Jesus?

I recently watched the movie *Les Miserables* again—a powerful redemption story of unconditional love and grace. The movie opens with broken, beaten-down Jean Valjean who is released from prison and cannot find work, food, or a place to stay. But then the Bishop—the Christ figure—welcomes him into his home. And then you see every symbol of the “I Am” statements represented visually in the story as a depiction of the presence of Christ in this moment of transformation.
The bishop opens the door (or the gate) and gives what Jean Valjean needs—food, and drink, and shelter. He is like a good shepherd who sees a lost sheep and is willing to do what he can to provide and protect. When Valjean steals the silver, the bishop could have given one word that would send him back to prison, but instead he becomes the way and the truth to a life in God. In addition, the bishop even gives him more valuable candlesticks—which Valjean keeps throughout his journey as symbols of God’s light, grace, truth, and love.

Jean Valjean is confronted with the choice to believe or not believe. He leaves his past life, believes in Jesus, and becomes a new man. And the recurring theme throughout the film is “Who Am I?” In relationship with Jesus, he becomes the kind of man who was able to do for others what God had done for him.

To believe in Jesus takes us in a new direction. And we, too, need to answer the question “Who am I?” Jesus gives us the answer. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples, breathes on them the Holy Spirit, and says, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20: 21).

Who am I? Who are we? As followers of Jesus, we are his body. Together, we are the sent ones. We are meant to live our lives as Jesus would live them if he were us—opening doors, welcoming home prodigal sons, feeding the poor, tending his lambs, shining his light. As those who believe in Jesus as the Great I AM, we are to live our true identities in Christ as those who have been sent by God to bless the world. May it be so! Amen.