

March 6, 2019  
Ash Wednesday

I Am  
*I Am*  
Exodus 3:1-14

**Opening words:** The Gospel of John is preoccupied with the deity of Jesus. Chapter one sets the tone for the rest of the book. In that chapter, John declares Jesus, the Word, to be God, and goes on to say, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” He announces that in Jesus, the glory of God has been seen, and he further speaks of Jesus as the One who has made the invisible God known. And then, we have the multiple “I Am” sayings scattered throughout John’s gospel. The title “I Am” is the divine name revealed to Moses by the Lord in Exodus 3:14 from the burning bush. By taking on this name, Jesus claimed to be the Lord! The “I Am” sayings not only speak of Jesus’ identity, but each of the seven “I Am” sayings reveal an aspect of Jesus’ mission.

We begin our Lenten sermon series in the Old Testament book of Exodus. The Hebrew word for exodus can be translated “exit” or “departure.” Tradition tells us, the book of Exodus was written by Moses, which dates the book between 1440 and 1406 BC. Exodus is foundational in our understanding of God. It gives us God’s attributes, God’s redemption, his law, and how he is to be worshipped. In our scripture lesson for this evening, we learn God’s name. May God give you an ear to hear this sacred reading, Exodus 3:1-14. Let me call this message *I Am*.

**Exodus 3:1-14** Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. <sup>3</sup> So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.” <sup>4</sup> When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” And Moses said, “Here I am.” <sup>5</sup> “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” <sup>6</sup> Then he said, “I am the God of your father,<sup>[a]</sup> the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. <sup>7</sup> The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. <sup>8</sup> So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. <sup>9</sup> And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way

the Egyptians are oppressing them. <sup>10</sup> So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

<sup>11</sup> But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

<sup>12</sup> And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

<sup>13</sup> Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

<sup>14</sup> 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.’”

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This evening, we find ourselves in the third chapter of Exodus. It is only the third chapter, but much has already happened to Moses. He was born a slave, raised in the palace, and is now a fugitive of the law. For this reason, Moses never intended to return to Egypt, but God had a different plan for his life. You remember the story, because you have seen the movie. God’s Chosen People were enslaved in Egypt and cried out to God for help. God heard their prayers and decided to send Moses back to Egypt to liberate them. That brings us to our scripture reading. The scene begins innocently.

Moses is tending his flock in the wilderness. The tranquility of that scene is broken when Moses notices something unusual. There is a bush burning that is not being consumed by the flames. Moses draws nearer to the bush. When Moses is close enough to hear the crackling of the fire, God, Himself, speaks to him. If you distill the scene down to its basic elements, it is a conversation between God and Moses. God makes the first move. First, God tells Moses not to get any closer. Second, God tells Moses to take his sandals off, because that was holy ground. Third, God identifies himself. He is the God of Moses’ ancestors. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses does not question God. He accepts God at his word, and that insight fills Moses with fear. The scripture says it clearly, Moses was afraid. Moses hid his face, but God continued to speak. At first, Moses must have liked what he heard. God had heard the prayers of his people. Their lives were hard, and God intended to help them. Their miserable existence will be replaced by a bright future. God will give them a new home, a promised land, which is close to perfection. Moses liked those words, but he hated the words that followed. God was sending *him* to liberate his people from Egyptian rule. Those were hard words for him to accept. His past came back to haunt him. After all, he was a fugitive and he had decided long ago not to return. He had built a good life away from the Egyptian authorities. His divine task seemed overwhelming. Who was he; what resources did he possess to liberate his people? Why would the Pharaoh, the master of the Egyptian Empire, listen to him, a shepherd? It is a good question, but God’s answer is not reassuring. God simply says, he will be with him. Then, Moses tries to escape his divine calling. He says, what if the people themselves don’t listen to me? Then Moses asked God a question that showed the people were being assimilated into

Egyptian culture. The Egyptians believed that if you knew someone's name, you had a certain amount of control over them. Moses said, the people will want to know your name. So, Moses asked God what his name was. And God responded, "I AM WHO I AM." Do you know of anyone named I AM WHO I AM? Let me state the obvious.

Names are important! Names are not just a way to identify us. If that were the case, we would be given numbers, not names. If you were the oldest of three children, then you would be number one. If you were the youngest of three children, then you would be number three. If you were the middle child, then you would be number two. If you were the youngest child in the Duggar family, then you would be number nineteen. Names are not just about identification, names are about identity. Our names are influenced by our culture. The most popular baby names in America today are Olivia and Noah, followed by Emma and Liam. The most popular baby names today in South Korea are Hayun and Doyun. Sometimes our name represents something about our family core values. My middle name is Quentin. My father's middle name was Quentin. Why Quentin? The reason is quite simple. During the World War I, Theodore Roosevelt's son, Quentin, was killed. My grandparents admired Theodore Roosevelt. In memory of his son, the family middle name went from Eli to Quentin. Don't tell me names are not important. If you agree names are important, say, "**Amen!**" (Can someone explain to me why Michael Jackson named his son Blanket?)

Rob Fuquay is the Senior Pastor of the St. Luke's United Methodist Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. He has written a variety of things that have been published. One of the books he has had published is called *The God You Can Know: The I Am Sayings of Jesus*. I would encourage you to read that book over the next few weeks. It is the primary source for this sermon series, *I Am*. He says that those two little words, I Am, can have a profound influence on our spiritual development. He may have a point. Just think about it for a moment. Let me ask you this question first:

**What does God's name, I Am, tell us about him?** It is in the present tense. His name is not "I Was" or "I Will Be." When God called himself, I AM WHAT I AM, he was saying he is present. God does not hide; God is always with us. God is dependable and faithful, so God can be trusted. God likes to be recognized. He walked with Adam and Eve in the garden and he had a special relationship with Abraham. Think about it for a moment. God is with us this evening! God is present. He is the great I AM! If you are thankful God is present, say, "**Amen!**" That leads me to another question.

**What do the I Am sayings of Jesus tell us about him?** When Jesus used the seven "I Am" phrases, he aligned himself with the God of Moses. In other words, he was saying he was God. Each one of the "I Am" phrases discloses something about his early ministry. When Jesus said...

- *I am the bread of life*, he was speaking of knowing God's satisfaction.
- *I am the light of the world*, he was speaking of God's guidance.

- *I am the good shepherd*, he was speaking of God's care.
- *I am the true vine*, he was speaking of God's power.
- *I am the way, the truth and the life*, he was speaking of God's way.
- *I am the resurrection and the life*, he was speaking of God's possibilities.

Jesus is saying people's spiritual needs and human longings can be met by him. If you will admit you need Jesus, say, "**Amen!**"

When God gave Moses his name, I AM WHO I AM, he was telling him he was an ever-present, dependable God. When Jesus made the "I Am" statements, he was saying he was God, and he was telling the world about the vastness of his ministry. Those things are theological in nature and can't be questioned. However, there is a practical side to I AM. This evening, I do not want to end this meditation with a story or a quote. I want to end this meditation with a quiz. There are only two questions to this quiz. It is a quiz about yourself. This is question number one:

### **How do you complete the phrase, I Am....?**

Don't answer too quickly. Don't get hung up on your physical appearance. Things like, I am fat, or I am short. Don't get hung up on the role you play in this world. Things like, I am a teacher, nurse or an engineer. Don't get hung up on your relationships. Things like, I am a wife or a grandfather. Don't get hung up on your imperfections. Things like, I am stubborn, a bigot, a gossip, or homophobic. Don't get hung up on your core values. Things like, I am patriotic or responsible. This is Ash Wednesday. Go all the way down to your heart of hearts and ask yourself the question. There is only one correct answer. You must say, "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ". That insight should shake you at your very core. That leads us to the second question in this short quiz:

### **What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus?**

The journey begins this evening and it will be completed on Easter morning. Never forget it: As a disciple of Jesus Christ you are supposed to be a little more like Jesus every day. What is holding you back from a closer walk with Jesus? Answering that question correctly will change everything. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"