

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Fifth Sunday in Lent [Judica] (2022)

The Timeless Christ

Rev. Toby Byrd

“Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”” (John 8:58, ESV)

Lent is rapidly drawing to a close. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, that day on which Christ's makes His triumphal entry into the Holy City to begin the last week of His earthly life. Within the Lutheran Church, Palm Sunday is most often associated with Confirmation Sunday and next Sunday will be no different here at Grace, for two of our young men will be confirmed before this assembly. Not only here at Grace, but throughout the Evangelical Lutheran Church, after months and years of catechesis, of instruction in the faith, hundreds of adults and thousands of children will be received into the church as communicant members through the rite of confirmation. What a glorious day that will be. But sadly, many gain the false understanding that confirmation is some sort of graduation, a time which releases them from further study of God's Word; but nothing could be further from the truth. No one can ever say they have learned all there is to know about God's Word. For those who have completed their catechetical studies and are confirmed, the instruction they received should be a catalyst that increases their appetite and desire to learn the Bible that they may see *the Timeless Christ* of Holy Scripture. That they may see His holy work of saving people from their sin and thus become true disciples of His.

Who is a true disciple of Christ? This question is one that actually begins the discourse for our Gospel Reading today. Earlier in this chapter of John, Jesus said, ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31–32, ESV)***

Jesus is having a conversation with Pharisees, and there were others present, including many of His disciples. So when He says to the Pharisees, ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,”*** He is not speaking so much to the Pharisee's as He is speaking to His disciples and to those who were beginning to believe in Him. He knows the day is drawing near when all the apostles, save one, will say they would gladly risk life and limb to follow Him. But will they? Not all who hear the Gospel come to faith, and not all who hear the Gospel become true disciples of Christ, rather they affix themselves to the assembly of the Word for self-serving reasons, money, material goods, fame, undeserved honor, and so forth. Therefore, Jesus says if you desire to be a true disciple of Mine, you must abide in My word and My doctrine, not your own. You cannot, as the Scriptures say, add to or subtract from the Word of God (Rev. 22:18-19; Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6). To do so is to risk the wrath of God who, ***“will take away [your] share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.” (Revelation 22:19, ESV)***

True disciples hear the Word and receive it as Truth, believing what the Word says, giving praise and thanks to God the Father and God the Son for the blessed and merciful forgiveness granted to repentant sinners who believe and trust in the Word of the Gospel. However, there are others who hear the Word and battle with it, declaring I can pick and choose that which I prefer to believe. While for others their faith collapses in the face of persecution and trial. The burden of the cross is too hard to bear. So, there are two types of disciples; those who are true and those

who are not. But, if you continue in the Word of Christ, forsaking the world while cleaving to the forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life, promised therein, you will truly be a disciple of Christ.

This truth is vital for the confirmand to understand. Their life in the church is just beginning. They have been taught the six chief parts of the Christian faith, but there is yet more to learn and that additional instruction, is found only in God's Holy Word of Scripture. Jesus says, ***"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples."*** Concern yourself therefore with the doctrine of Holy Scripture as articulated by the church. Preserve in that doctrine through cross and suffering. Remain steadfast, persevere, endure. Say to yourself, "No matter what the world, my flesh, or Satan throws at me, I shall be content to live and die with the *Timeless Christ*. He who is ***"the same yesterday and today and forever."*** (*Hebrews 13:8, ESV*)

Having heard that Jesus said if you abide in His word you would set them free, the Pharisee's misunderstanding, claim they have never been slaves because their heritage has made them free. They say, ***"We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"*** (*John 8:33, ESV*) Thus begins a discourse where Jesus tells them their father was not Abraham, but the devil. (*John 8:44*)

Our text finds Jesus responding to the challenge of the Pharisees, those religious zealots who are proud of their ancestral heritage, proud that Abraham is their father. Look they say, we can trace our heritage to the one God declared righteous, Abraham. Jesus, to whom can you trace your heritage? In fact, they assert, ***"Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"*** (*John 8:48, ESV*) Yes, we consider you nothing more than a Samaritan, and a demon possessed Samaritan at that! Your heritage is to people who have disgraced themselves with their worship of false gods, people who cannot trace their heritage to Abraham. Even as they said the words, they knew they were lying, they knew the heritage of Jesus could be traced through His earthly father Joseph and His mother, Mary. Their lying accusations merely verifies what our Lord Jesus had said of them earlier, ***"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."*** (*John 8:44, ESV*) Like their father, these Pharisees lie. But to their specific accusations, Jesus says to them, ***"I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death."*** (*John 8:49–51, ESV*)

Wow! This really set the Pharisees into a tizzy. So they respond, ***"Now we know that you have a demon! Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? And the prophets died! Who do you make yourself out to be?"*** (*John 8:52–53, ESV*) Come on Jesus, certainly You're not greater than our father Abraham! Jesus responds, ***"Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad."*** This response infuriates the Pharisees, so they say, ***"You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?"*** Certainly they are saying, Jesus, You're not only a Samaritan with a demon, but You're a liar or someone who is operating with less than their full mental capacity. Abraham lived and died 2000 years before You, yet You say he saw Your day? ***"Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.'"*** (*John 8:56–58, ESV*)

What a statement by Jesus! He who was born of Mary just a little more than thirty years before this conversation with the Pharisees, yet He says He was in the world before Abraham. Wow! This was too much for the Pharisees to grasp. How could this be? For them it couldn't.

Therefore, angered by our Lord's words, ***“they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.” (John 8:59, ESV)***

Without the aid of the Holy Spirit, one simply cannot hear or read these words of Jesus and understand them. Without the Spirit, the hearer will come to the same conclusion as did the Pharisee's, Jesus must be mad or possessed by a demon. No one lives two-thousand years! He's a liar, let's stone Him.

Yet, we read in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” (John 1:1–2, ESV)***

Without question, Jesus, who was born of Mary, says He was with God before Abraham. Like the Pharisee's, this Bible verse has confused many, especially those who insist that Jesus cannot be God, thereby denying the Trinity. Rather than believing Jesus and the history of the Creation given in Genesis One, where God clearly says, ***“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26, ESV)*** Here, God uses the first person, plural ***“let us”*** clearly stating there was more than one divine person involved in the Creation. The Pharisee's insist our understanding does not come from Genesis, but from Deuteronomy and the Shema; ***“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4, ESV)*** If there is only One God, and it certainly it can't be Jesus, for He is one of us, He must be lying. Furthermore, to worship Jesus as God is a violation of the First Commandment; ***“You shall have no other gods before me.” (Deuteronomy 5:7, ESV)*** We could never violate the first commandment.

Now the Pharisee's didn't have the Gospel of John at their disposal, but they had the prophets and the signs of Jesus to verify our Lord's statement. But for you and I, it is in St. John's gospel that the Holy Spirit speaks of the eternal divinity of Christ as the Second Person of the Godhead, the Triune God, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. So, when Jesus says, ***“before Abraham was, I am,”*** this must be received from a Christological perspective. A perspective the Pharisee's lacked.

Of the three persons of the Trinity, only Jesus assumed human flesh. The Son of God is the seed of the woman promised in the Garden of Eden who would crush Satan's head. This Word that was with God at the beginning became ***“flesh”*** (John 1:14) and dwelt among us. St. Paul reminds us, when the time had fully come, ***“God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law,” (Galatians 4:4, ESV)*** The Incarnate Son of God, the Word, took on our flesh to become one of us while also retaining His divine essence and nature. This Jesus whom the Pharisee's are attacking is both God and Man, the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is standing so close to them they can literally reach out and touch Him. But they do not understand who He is. They do not see Him as the Passover Lamb of God, the promised Messiah who came to earth to save mankind from the wrath of God, the wages of sin. All this is too much to believe for men who have come to believe in themselves.

The ministry and mission of Jesus was filled with healing the sick, the oppressed, the lame, the blind, the demon possessed, and most of all forgiving sinners. Most important, the one who forgave sinners, never sinned. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us, ***“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15, ESV)*** But this high priest also became the sacrifice, the propitiation for our sin. Free of sin, He became sin for us. St. Paul tells us, ***“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)*** The sinless dies for the sinful. Rejecting temptation to sin, He eradicated the curse of sin, eternal death. He won the victory over sin,

death, and the devil by His death upon the Altar of the Cross. There on that cursed tree, He gave His life for ours. His death brought us life and salvation. What a great reversal, one that the Pharisee's could not understand, one that much of the world refuses to understand today, rejecting it out of hand.

As I said earlier, Lent is drawing to a close and within a week we'll enter Holy Week where we shall commemorate the Last Passover meal of our Lord Jesus Christ, that meal in which He instituted the Lord's Supper, giving it to the Church that He may come to us through the ordinary elements of bread and wine, and thereby give to us His true body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. The Pharisee's had the opportunity to touch Him and did not. But in the Holy Eucharist, our Lord invites us not only to touch Him, but to consume His body and blood whereby He cleanses us from our sin. Look at the blessing the Pharisee's missed.

In that week, we'll also commemorate the last agonizing day of our Lord's life as He was brutally beaten, scourged, and crucified, not because He was a criminal deserving of death, but because He fulfilled the will of His heavenly Father taking our punishment upon Himself. The sinless received the condemnation that we who are guilty of sin richly deserved. In our stead He tasted death so we could taste eternal life. He took our place on the Altar of the Cross to receive the punishment we so richly deserve. What a marvelous reversal!

“Before Abraham was, I am.” Indeed, our Lord Jesus is timeless. There has never been a time when He was not. Abraham rejoiced to see His day, and we, too, rejoice because the Holy Spirit has given us the precious gift of faith to see *the Timeless Christ*, to worship *the Timeless Christ*, and to receive the very body and blood of *the Timeless Christ*, the Passover Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in, under, and with the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Our Lord Jesus is ***“the same yesterday and today and forever.”*** (*Hebrews 13:8, ESV*). He is indeed *the Timeless Christ*. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.