

*Before Abraham was, I AM*

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During Lent and especially on this Passion Sunday, we are invited to consider how we define our identity. We are invited to move past the usual, past our namesakes, family pedigrees, our hometowns, our alma maters, and favorite sports teams. The Gospel challenges us, who are we when all these things have been taken away? Are we comfortable with an identity solely in Jesus Christ? If we begin to truly live Christian lives, to define ourselves totally in Jesus Christ, - which is the goal of the Church after all, do we fear what our families and friends will think? Are we willing to risk being labeled as “too religious” or “too Christian”? Or do we think we are not good enough, or saintly enough to say of ourselves, *our identity is totally and completely in Jesus Christ.*

The Pharisees that we hear about today in the Gospel, those who came close to stoning Jesus not just this once, but a couple of other times too, identified and defined themselves by their sect of Judaism, as Pharisees or Sadducees, but most importantly as biological descendants of Abraham. They could trace their family trees all the way back to Adam and Eve. They also prided themselves on how well they kept the ritual Law of Moses. They devoutly kept their rituals and said their prayers with precision. They were proud of God’s covenant with Abraham, that the nations would be blessed in them, his descendants. And not only did they continue in the faith of Abraham, but they counted themselves holy because Abraham was in their family tree. They were the sort of people who thought they could get into heaven on the coattails of their righteous ancestors and their good works. Then along comes Jesus, who calls all of this into question and tells them they have strayed from the truth and from God. The law could only take them so far, but He could bring them even further into relationship with God. Yet the Pharisees, unable to accept the teaching of Jesus, asks Him who He is. They want to know how He defines Himself. Is He a Pharisee or a Sadducee? He seemed to them to be a Rabbi, a Rabbi who works miracles, even miracles on the Sabbath. Is this Jesus a prophet? Is He John the Baptist raised from the dead? No, none of these things, and yet more. Jesus reveals to them, *before your father Abraham was, I AM.*

Jesus’ response may seem a little cryptic of our Lord to some. But of course, we remember the words from the Gospel, *In the beginning was the Word.* Jesus’ response, *before your father Abraham was, I AM,* makes perfect sense considering

St. John's Gospel. But this exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees happens before that Gospel was written. What is going on here, is Jesus is telling them that He has always existed. He implies that He existed also before Abraham's covenant and that Abraham rejoiced over Him, and then to top it all off, He uses the familiar and holy phrase, *I AM*. Make no mistake about it, Jesus is telling them He is God, and it incites the Pharisees to take up stones to throw at Jesus for what they perceive to be blasphemy. Now the Pharisees have all the proof they need to try and get Jesus sentenced to death. He has admitted to them that He defines Himself as God, and let no modern atheist try to tell you otherwise. They have heard this Name before, *I AM*, from the Book of Exodus when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, *you shall tell Pharaoh, I AM that I AM has sent you*.

Jesus has left them with no choice, it would be convenient to define Him as only a poor rabbi, but now they can define Him for themselves. They should either fall at His feet and worship Him or according to their law pick up stones and stone Him to death. C. S. Lewis writes that we have also been given a choice, but we cannot just accept Jesus as a great moral teacher or rabbi. He writes, *A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.*

A madman might very well let himself be stoned to death; a great moral teacher may very well allow himself to be crucified. But a madman or a great moral teacher would not have incited the type of cruel death that Jesus endured. At some point the madman and the great moral teacher may have given it up and tried to keep the peace with the Temple priests and Pharisees. But Jesus does not do this. Neither does He let them stone Him. He has already said, *no one takes my life from me, I lay it down freely, and I, if I be lifted up, I will draw all men unto me*. Jesus' death is more than just a cessation of life, but a life-giving sacrifice for us all. His life and death are foretold prophecies centuries before. His death was foretold even by the Law of Moses in the Old Testament. The very law that the Pharisees became so obsessed with, a system of ritual cleanliness and sacrifice was meant to prepare them to recognize the true Lamb of God when He stood among them. They did not recognize Jesus when He came because there was no life in the old Law, and

regardless of their ritual cleanness and perfect sacrifices their hearts were still covered over in sin. There was no life in the old Law, no freedom, and no identity to be found in it.

Let us remember this passion Sunday, that *the old things have passed away, behold the new has come* all because of Jesus Christ. Let us remember that the passion and crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the life-giving source that we can find our true identities in. This is only possible because He died freely for each one of us. We rejoice that we are given an identity in Christ through the waters of Baptism, and through the bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Holy Communion. We will never find ourselves completely in anyone or anything else, because in Jesus Christ is Life. His life saving Death and Passion is our source of true life and true freedom. There is no other way, no other source of life than through Jesus Christ, God made man, the *I AM* in the flesh, Who is made present to us this morning through bread and wine. Amen.