

When I AM Speaks, You'd Better Listen

John 6:24-35

It seems to me that somebody got into the front window of life and changed all the price tags. The things that used to be expensive now have cheap labels. And the cheap things have expensive labels. It seems to me that today we have a transvaluation of values. Everything is turned upside down. Important values have become unimportant for many people. Unimportant values have turned into seemingly valuable categories.

Just look at the ads on television, the movies, or the magazines being produced today. From the perspective of popular media you'd think that getting more and more "stuff" is the most important goal in life and that God and the Bible are somewhere on the sideline, if we are to consider God and the Bible at all. The values of years ago have been turned upside down, and it's happened so gradually that many of us have hardly noticed that it happened at all.

It's like the old story of the frog in the kettle. Put a frog in hot water and he'll jump right out. But put him in cool water and gradually turn up the heat and the frog will slowly die without noticing what is happening. Our cultural path to death is like that.

The biblical corrective for this transvaluation of values is found in the name of God -- the great I AM. This is the name that God gave to Moses when Moses agreed to go to Egypt and lead the people out of bondage. "Give me your name that I might tell the people who sent me," Moses requested.

"Tell them that I AM who I AM sent you," God replied (Exodus 3:13-15). God is the center of life. When we put something else in the center of our lives, we don't work right. God is the great I AM. We better pay attention to him -- how he reveals himself and what he says.

According to the gospel of John, Jesus used the name I AM for himself on numerous occasions. In the text before us, he says of himself, "I AM the bread of life". In John 8:12, Jesus says, "I AM the light of the world." In John 10:7 Jesus says of himself, "I AM the door of the sheep". In John 10:11 Jesus say, "I AM the good shepherd."

Other "I AM" sayings by Jesus in the gospel of John include: "I AM the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). "I AM the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). "I AM the real vine" (John 15:1). "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). Space doesn't allow us to examine each of these "I AM" sayings in depth, but it's obvious that in the gospel of John, Jesus identifies himself as the great I AM that Moses met in the wilderness.

Jesus was a great teacher, but those who claim that he was *just* a great teacher, and ignore the truth that he was also divine, have to eliminate the I AM sayings from consideration. I AM is God's name. Jesus claims that name for himself.

Exodus 3:13-15 puts these words into the mouth of God: "This (I AM) is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations." That is the high, holy, and exalted name God uses for himself. Jesus used that name for himself. Should he be locked up or held up high and worshiped?

In our gospel lesson for today, we hear the claim of divinity and the connection between the wilderness story of Moses and the preaching of Jesus on the theme of bread.

- Moses received the manna from heaven. Jesus claimed to be the manna from heaven.
- Moses told the people that they needed to eat the heavenly manna God sent to sustain them. Jesus said he is the heavenly manna that sustains us.
- Moses pointed away from himself. Jesus pointed to himself.

Jesus was either an egomaniac or what he claimed to be: God incarnate. You can't limit him to being *just* a great religious leader. He was that but so much more. He was, he is, the great I AM who is the bread of life.

Since Jesus is the great I AM, that means he is in control. "I" am not in control, but my sinful tendency is to try to be in control. We don't want anyone to rule over us, not even God who created us. That's the biggest conflict that characterizes our days.

The entire Bible can be outlined around this theme of God's rule over us. In Genesis 1, God creates us in his own image. He commands that the fruit of one tree is out of bounds. And yet in Genesis 2 we read that humankind rebels against God's authority and eats the forbidden fruit. And we see for the first time a game we all play, called "pass the buck".

Adam replies to God who asks him what happened and says, "It's her fault. She made me do it." Eve responds, "The snake is responsible." If the snake could speak, I suppose the snake would say, "Don't blame me. You made me that way." In other words, not only do we rebel against God's authority, but we make excuses to justify our rebellion instead of repenting for our wrong doing. Sound familiar?

All this rebellion and rationalization mean that we don't want God to rule over us. The rest of the Bible from Genesis 2 through the last verse in Revelation is about God working to restore us to God's reign over us. God works to restore us in His own way, not by forcing us under his control with power, but by inviting us back to his control for our own good.

That invitation comes to us because God gave us the option of saying "Yes" or "No" to him. We have the freedom to reject God's offer of accepting us in Christ, in spite of our rebellion, if we repent and come to him sincerely. Before we come to him, he has come to us by the power of the Holy Spirit to create the faith we need to be saved.

As Luther said, "I cannot of my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, but the Holy Spirit called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith...."¹

While we are fighting the rule of God over us for our own good, God is at work in us to bring us back into the fold. That's the classic battle in our souls between God and the devil.

God has accomplished our salvation by Jesus dying on the cross. Inspired and prodded by the Holy Spirit, we are called to appropriate what God in Christ has accomplished. From the cross Jesus said, "It is accomplished."

It's like a gift of a million dollar check being given to us by God's grace. Unless we turn it over and sign it, we don't receive the benefits of the gift. Some foolish and stubborn people refuse to sign the check. They refuse to listen to the great I AM. Instead, they put other things first in their lives, and thereby commit idolatry.

As mentioned earlier, many people have turned biblical values on their head. They value things that are cheap and devalue things like faith that are precious. That's happening in our culture, but it's also happening in many churches which emphasize the horizontal dimension of Christianity and neglect the vertical dimension.

The horizontal dimension is the human relationships we have, the need to respect one another, serve one another, love one another. All of which is good, and necessary, and mandated by Scripture. But it's only a portion of what Scripture mandates. It's not large enough to encompass all of Scripture.

The whole of Scripture is contained in the biblical admonition, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The whole truth, the big truth, is that **we are called to love the Lord our God above and beyond anything else.** That's the vertical dimension too often neglected today. Our text provides a corrective by reminding us that Jesus is the great I AM and the bread of life. That the great I AM is in charge. That we are called to love our neighbors, yes, but only after we love God first.

From the perspective of the gospel of John, there are two options in life: either "I" am in charge, or I AM is in charge. When "I" am is in charge, life doesn't work the way it was designed. When I AM is in charge, life works the way it's supposed to work - which is according to God's plans and God's purpose.

¹ *The Small Catechism, The Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 161.

When "I" am in charge, I consistently mess things up, make excuses for the mess I make, and refuse to take responsibility for what goes wrong. In other words, the biggest problem I have in life is that "I" am self-centered. The center of the word "sin" is I. That's the problem we all have. We can't get ourselves out of the center, even when we try.

No act of the self can lift the self out of the self because the self is the problem. Unless that which is above self rules that which is within us, that which is around us will. In other words, we get trapped in one idolatry after another when we don't submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the great I AM.

Harold was trapped in alcoholism. They called him "Hap," short for happy, because he was a happy drinker. As far as most people knew, "Hap" was a respected judge and a good family man. But "Hap" had a secret. He drank to solve his problems. When drinking became his chief problem, he drank to solve that problem too.

That's the cycle of alcoholism. "Hap" claimed that he wasn't an alcoholic, and he could stop drinking any time he chose. When his life began to cave in, he tried to stop drinking, but he failed time and time again.

One day, the bills from a recent trip arrived. The trouble was that "Hap" didn't remember making that trip. He had invited his drinking buddies to fly to Chicago with him, take in a Chicago Bears football game, and eat at expensive restaurants -- all on his dime.

He stared at the bills and said, "I don't remember inviting my friends to go with me. I don't remember the flight to Chicago or the football game. I don't remember any of the meals we ate. But these bills prove that I did all that. Since I don't remember any of it, I know I'm out of control in my life. I give up. I acknowledge that I can't handle my life. I can't control my drinking. I give up control to you, Lord."

From that point on, as "Hap" woke up each morning, he prayed, "Dear Lord, I can't handle my drinking. I commit my life and my problems to you. Without you being in control, I will only mess things up as I've done before. You are the only one who can keep me from drinking today. I turn my life over to you today, one day at a time. In Jesus' name. Amen."

From that point on, for the rest of his life, "Hap" never drank a drop of liquor. As he looked back on his former life, he said, "One drink was always too much and a thousand were not enough." If you complimented him about his decision to stop drinking, "Hap" would always say, "Not me, God."

In terms of our text, "Hap" made the transition from "'I' am" in charge of my life" to "I AM is in charge of my life." To put it another way, Jesus became the nourishment "Hap" needed for life, the food and drink that kept him alive. For the last years of his life, he listened to and depended on the great I AM. He also witnessed to the power of Jesus Christ to other people.

When the great I AM speaks, we'd better listen. And the great I AM has spoken. What he says is called the Word of God. That Word of God is primarily Jesus himself. That Word is the Bible and the preaching and the sharing of the gospel. Will we listen to the siren calls of the world or will we listen to the whisper of the Gospel of God and pass it on?

The answer to that question is given in a story about a bully and a wise man. The bully decided to challenge the wise man. "I have a little chick in my hands, behind my back. If you are so wise, tell me, is it alive or dead?"

Of course, the wise man knew that if he said, "Alive," the bully would kill the little chick. If he said "Dead," the bully would pull out the chicken from behind him and say, "Wrong." The wise man said, "That's up to you."

In like manner, the answer to whether you will follow the ways of the world or the ways of the great I AM is the answer given by the wise man. "That's up to you."