Teaching: “I am” sayings of Jesus

_I am the vine, you are the branches._ (John 15:6)

Our study Jesus’ teachings continues, and tonight we turn to the Gospel of John, where the ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus are recorded. There are seven of these sayings/teachings by Jesus, each an ‘object’ lesson that was meaningful to Jews, but also made sense to Gentiles. The theme of our New Testament study this year is “Who Do You Say I Am,” so it seems especially fitting to study these self-descriptions of Jesus. We begin with a little history – do you remember Moses and that burning bush?

**Exodus 3:14-15** - “ehyeh asher ehye” (I am who I am); “ehyeh” (I am); “YHWH” 
Jesus echoes these words showing a oneness with God.

_I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty._ (John 6:35)

- Context: After the feeding of the 5000, crowds (looking for food and miracles) are following Jesus everywhere.
- Common experience: Bread is a staple in most diets. Everyone needs bread.
- Jesus teaches that there is more to life than food.
- Those who believe will never be hungry (spiritually) and will have eternal life.
- “. . . the bread I give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51ff). In the other Gospels this teaching comes at the Last Supper.
- This is a difficult teaching. Some take it literally and change their mind about Jesus.

_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)

- Context: Jesus makes this declaration at Feast of Tabernacles during the celebration of light (four great golden lamps were lit in the outer court of the Temple).
- Common experience: Light shows us where we are, where we going.
- For Israelites, light is a symbol of God’s glory.
- Pillar of light that guided Israelites (Exodus 13:21).
- God’s word is light. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105).
- Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus statement.
- Blind man (John 9:1-41): Jesus’ mission that the blind may receive sight. Some have physical sight and spiritual blindness.

_I am the gate for the sheep._ (John 10:7, 9)

_I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep._ (John 10:11)

- Context: Jesus was concerned about religious leaders that abused their position and were not caring for the people.
- Common experience: We don’t have a lot of experience with shepherds, but people in Jesus’ time would have known a lot about shepherds, and that it was a shepherd’s job to lead sheep, and provide them with food, water, and protection.
• Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 23:1, Psalm 80:1, Isaiah 40:10-11).
• Corrupt shepherds (Ezekiel 34:1-16).
• Shepherds knew their sheep and could easily spot a sheep from another flock. At night they would check each sheep with their staff and once they were safely in, they would sit across the door of the sheepfold to protect the flock from wild animals and thieves.
• Jesus is teaching about the joy and safety of God’s kingdom. Once you have entered, enemies will not be able to take you away.
• The Good Shepherd tends and protects, knows all his people by name, and will lay down his life for them.
• “I have other sheep . . .” (John 10:16): Jesus comes for all people.

_I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live._ (John 11:25)

• Context: Jesus has been called to the home of his friends in Bethany (Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha) because Lazarus is very ill. When Jesus arrives, Lazarus is dead.
• Common experience: Dying, questions about eternal life, life beyond death.
• Eternal life: Those who believe will continue to be alive, even though they pass through the experience of death.
• Martha’s response, “I believe you are the Christ.”

_I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me._ (John 14:6)

• Context: This is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse or talk. Thomas (the Twin) is trying to understand. Jesus is going away, but they don’t know where. How will they follow? Jesus gives a very simple answer.
• Common experience: Needing a map or a set of directions to reach a destination.
• Knowing Jesus means knowing God.
• God’s truth is a path which can be found and followed. Truth is a person and a relationship – Jesus is the road and guide.

_I am the true vine._ (John 15:1) _I am the vine, you are the branches._ (John 15:5)

• Context: This is also part of Jesus’ farewell talk.
• Common experience: The purpose of the vine is to bear fruit. Fruitfulness of branches is dependent on being connected to the vine.
• Vine frequently used as a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament (Psalm 80, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, and Hosea). They were chosen by God and ‘planted’ – but instead of producing sweet grapes . . .
• Jesus as vine – Israel in “person.” A vine that will produce the fruits of goodness and love.
• Vines become dried up, withered, by giving all their strength to the fruits. Jesus pours out his life for us.
1. How many “I am” sayings are there? What Gospel do you find them in?

2. What do you think the crowds that followed Jesus after the feeding of 5000 were looking for? Did they find it?

3. What is the “true bread from heaven?” How is this different from the miracle of manna that God gave the Israelites when they were in the desert?

4. Give an example of how one of the “I am” sayings would be meaningful to Jews, but would also make sense to Gentiles.

5. How do the Pharisees react to Jesus’ teachings?

6. Some people say truth is a statement or an idea. What does Jesus say truth is?

7. How does Martha respond to Jesus saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live."

8. Jesus describes himself as the true vine. What are the fruits he produces?

9. Who are the branches? Who is the gardener? What must the branches do to be fruitful?

10. What is the Good News?
Did you know? (Fun facts to know and tell!)

Feast of Tabernacles: This is one of the seven festivals established by Mosaic Law. It is a week-long fall festival commemorating the 40-year journey of the Israelites in the wilderness. The temporary shelters or booths (Sukkot) remind the people of their time in the desert and God’s protection, provision, and faithfulness. This is also a joyous harvest festival which celebrates the ingathering of grain and wine. This year the festival began at sundown on September 30. If you happened to go by Temple Israel last week, 1602 East Second Street, you would have seen a ceremonial sukkah erected in front of their building for this festival.

Another “I am”: John 8:58: During a debate with a group of Jews, Jesus claimed that he had seen Abraham. When this was challenged, Jesus replied, “before Abraham was, I am.” This is one of the most direct statements in the Gospels equating Jesus with God. The Jews considered it blasphemy and tried to stone Jesus to death.

And in John 18, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, when Jesus said “I AM”, the “soldiers stepped back and fell to the ground” (John 18:6). I AM in Greek is ego emi (present indicative active form of the verb ‘to be’). Many translations of the Bible, including NRSV, have translated this “I am he.”

Counting Sheep? In Hebrew there are twelve (12) different words for sheep including ram, lamb, ewe, flock. Sheep were very important to the Israelite life and economy. Common occupations during biblical times were ones that provided food and shelter and farmers and shepherds provided food. Sheep are portrayed in both the Old Testament and New Testament as innocent, helpless, and docile. Lambs in particular represented innocence and gentleness and were used for sacrifices. Jesus is called the Lamb of God, because of his sacrifice for the world’s sins.

Gospel of John: We don’t know for sure who wrote this book. Tradition holds that it was John the fisherman disciple, son of Zebedee, brother of James; but most scholars believe it was a disciple of John, who recorded John’s preaching and teaching. According to tradition John lived in Asia Minor and from Ephesus guided the churches of that province.

It is through John’s Gospel that we measure the length of Jesus’ public life. John mentions Jesus traveling to Jerusalem for three Passovers (all male Jews go to Jerusalem for this annual festival if they can).

The Way: “The Way” became another name for Christianity in the early Church.

Everybody needs friends!

Nicodemus: The Council member who intervened on Jesus’ behalf at some risk to his own reputation (John 7:50-52), was an important Pharisee leader that had gone to see Jesus at night (John 3:1-21) to ask about his teachings.

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus: Lived in Bethany and were dear friends that Jesus would stay with. Bethany is located approximately two miles from Jerusalem and is still inhabited today. See another great story about Mary and Martha in Luke (Luke 10:38-42).

Our Verse: I am the vine, you are the branches. (John 15:6)

What’s Next? We're off next week - Reformation (October 31). We’ll gather again on November 7 and discuss some of Jesus’ miracles. See you then!