



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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THE HOLY TRINITY

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“Before Abraham Was, I am”

(John 8:58-59)

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“Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:58-59).

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, You have given us grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of a true faith and to worship the Unity in the power of the Divine Majesty. Keep us steadfast in this faith and defend us from all adversities; for You, O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, live and reign, one God, now and forever.
Amen

It's an extraordinary conversation between Jesus and his Jewish listeners. Verse 31 of this chapter tells us they are "Jews who *had* believed in him." Past tense. At one time they had faith in Jesus, but have since lost it, renounced it. They've had a change of heart. We aren't told why, but can imagine how disappointed and angry their families, friends and neighbors were when they started following Jesus. We can imagine the fierce resistance they faced. Maybe they were thrown out of the synagogue, shunned even by people they've known all their lives, people they loved and respected. Maybe their livelihoods suffered; the little bell on the front door of the shop didn't ring much anymore. Whatever the reason, once this group of Jewish listeners had believed in Jesus. Now they don't.

Thankfully, we've never known that kind of persecution, but we should not underestimate the pressure it can put on a person to renounce the Christian faith.

Jesus hasn't given up on them. "If you abide in my word" he says to them, "you truly are my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." His listeners don't like these words at all. Maybe they feel Jesus is patronizing them. "Who is he to say his truth will set us free?" And from there, the conversation just plunges into the abyss.

They claim Abraham is their father. Jesus says if that were the case, they would be doing the works of Abraham, and not seeking to kill him, Jesus.

They say, "We have one Father: God." Jesus says, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God."

When Jesus sees they've made up their minds about him, have rejected him and have hardened their hearts, Jesus

says the most scathing words that ever came out of his mouth, “You are of your father the devil.” That is, maybe they can trace their physical ancestry to Abraham, but with their unbelief, their spiritual ancestry is of the devil, as it is for anyone who rejects Jesus. He’s not saying this to be mean. He’s laying out the consequences of unbelief. As the baptismal liturgy states, “We are under the power of the devil until Christ claims us as His own” (LSB 268). Jesus had a claim on them, but rejecting him, they have fallen back under the devil’s claim.

Two thousand years later we can still feel how sharp and painful this conversation was. It goes back and forth, back and forth, and it culminates with Jesus saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” Now he’s done it. They can hardly believe their ears.

Remember when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush? He was sending Moses to bring the Israelites up and out of Egypt. Of course, Pharaoh might object to losing his slave labor, so Moses has some reservations. Once God deals with those, Moses asks one more question. “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘God. . . has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I tell them?” “Tell them, ‘I Am Who I Am’. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I Am” has sent me to you.” In Hebrew, “I am” sounds something like, “Yahweh.” “Tell them Yahweh has sent me to you.”

It was the most frequent name for God in the Old Testament, used over 5,000 times. It was a name so sacred to the Jews, they didn’t dare utter it. Still today: When I was learning Hebrew at the University of Wisconsin, one of the students, a Jewish friend named Samuel was reading out loud as he had been asked, and when he came across the name Yahweh, he said “Adoni.” I knew just enough Hebrew to think, “That’s not how you pronounce that!” But the professor immediately explained that in inserting “Adoni” (which means Lord), Samuel was showing devotion and reverence for the name Yahweh. So in your Bibles when you see the name LORD all in cap letters, the Hebrew behind that word is “I am” or “Yahweh.”

“Before Abraham was, I am.” Jesus doesn’t just utter the name; he’s claiming to be the name. He’s claiming to be one with Yahweh. Not just a good teacher or prophet, not just a mentor or role model . . . he’s claiming to be one with the Father. There is no greater claim a person can make. When you come to know Jesus, you come to know Yahweh. In John 14 Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9).

You can imagine the outrage of his Jewish listeners when he says things like that, and he says them a lot. “I am [there’s the name again] the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Light of the World.” “I am the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies.” “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.”

If he was there at the burning bush, he was also there at creation. Sure enough, in our Old Testament lesson, we hear the voice of the pre-incarnate Christ saying: “When he [Yahweh] established the heavens, I was there . . . when he marked out the foundations of the earth, I was beside him, like a master workman” (Prov. 8). Clearly, he was not created but was participating in creation alongside Yahweh. And we know the Holy Spirit was there too at creation for “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1:2).

With all this, we’re bumping up against the Holy Trinity. If the nature of the Holy Trinity is confusing to you, that’s ok. It’s far better to preserve the mystery here than to impose clarity where there is none. We can no more capture the Holy Trinity in our minds than we can hold the ocean in a bucket. But we can imagine the outrage of his Jewish listeners. Immediately they started picking up stones, and it wasn’t to build a shrine with which to remember these words. They intended to kill him, but John says Jesus hid himself from them. We could also say “Jesus was hidden from them.”

It’s Trinity Sunday and I think that’s a really good place to start our discussion of the Trinity, and of the cross. In Jesus, God has hidden himself. Only by faith do we see

Jesus as the Son of God, one with the Father. What his unbelieving audience saw that day was a man, and only a man. His divine nature was hidden behind flesh and bones. Particularly when Jesus gets tired, or thirsty, or hungry, his divine nature is hidden even more so. Most of all, when Jesus is on the cross, with his breathing growing shallow, gurgled, the bleeding and the dying, God is hidden behind all that. He's there, but only to be seen with the eyes of faith.

"Before Abraham was, I am." To his listeners that day it was the greatest blasphemy. To us, it's a great comfort. It means the one who died on a cross wasn't just some unfortunate fellow who got himself crucified by the Romans 2000 years ago. No, this is the Messiah, the Christ, the One sent by the Father to save us. It means Jesus has all the power and love and compassion of Yahweh in him. In Jesus are all of Yahweh's historic promises to save his people and bring them into the Promised Land. So the death Jesus died on the cross wasn't just one death of a man; it was the death of the God-man, which sounds strange to our ears but that's how some in the Early Church described Jesus: the God-man. So his death on the cross was for you. The wages of sin is death. He had no sin. He's dying for your sin. Only God can do that.

"Before Abraham was, I am." This means the cup we drink and the bread we break isn't just wine and bread. It has the power and presence and forgiveness of God in it. Again, only God can do that, but his divine nature is hidden beneath the bread and wine. Jesus is hiding himself here . . . for us.

"Before Abraham was, I am." This means the word Jesus speaks is the Word of the Lord. We can trust it. It is true. He's hidden there, underneath the words for us, but through the Holy Spirit those words also reveal him to us and his will and his promise. So when he says, as in our text, "If anyone keeps my word, he will never taste death", we can trust that. It's the truth. Even though our eyes will close in the sleep of death, we will be awakened by his voice. Maybe a thousand years will have gone by before he calls us up out

of the grave, but to us it will have felt like a delicious ten minute nap.

“Before Abraham was, I Am.” This points to the Holy Trinity, and a lot of people have a lot of trouble with the Triune nature of God. Don’t think too hard about it; just accept the mystery of it, and the goodness of it. God blesses us and gives himself to us through his triune nature. Luther wrote, “These are the three persons and one God, who has given Himself to us all wholly and completely, with all that He is and has. The Father gives Himself to us, with Heaven and earth and all creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam’s fall. Therefore, the Son Himself has subsequently given Himself and bestowed all His works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and His gifts. But because this grace would benefit no one and could not come to us, the Holy Spirit comes and gives Himself to us wholly and completely” (AE 37:366).

For Luther, the Holy Trinity is not something we should tee up for endless speculation, banging our heads against the wall trying to understand that which is incomprehensible to us. Instead, we just accept the comfort of it, and give thanks that the Father has created and sustains us, the Son has redeemed us with his blood, and the Holy Spirit has given us faith through Word and Sacrament to receive these gifts. . .

“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself.” Jesus remains hidden . . . not from us but for us, in, with and under the bread and wine, in the waters of Holy Baptism, in the Word. Thanks be to God that Jesus remains hidden, not from us, but for us, so that one day we can stand before the risen Lord in his glory and see his face. Amen.

