

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Not Just a Teacher or Prophet”

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“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death” (John 8:51).

Jesus is all but brawling with His audience. He’s not giving His disciples a private lesson. He’s not spelling out a dogmatic treatise on the doctrine of God. He has locked horns with a crowd. Verse 31 tells us the crowd is made up of “Jews who *had* believed in him.” Past tense. At one time they had faith in Jesus. Now they don’t. They’ve lost it, or buried it, or renounced it, or just drifted away, as so often happens today.

Earlier, when they first started following Jesus, they would have faced persecution. We can imagine how disappointed and angry their families and friends were. We can imagine the fierce resistance and constant quarrels. Maybe they were shunned by people they loved and respected. Maybe they weren’t being hired any more, their goods weren’t selling anymore. Whatever the reason once they believed in Jesus. Now they don’t.

Jesus has not given up on them. “If you abide in my word you truly are my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” That is, only in Him will anyone be free from sin, death, and Satan’s rule.

They don’t like that. “Who are you to say your truth will set us free?” “Abraham is our father” they say (v. 39). Jesus says if that were the case, they would be doing the works of Abraham, and not seeking to kill Him.

They say, “We have one Father: God” (v. 41). Jesus says, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God.”

Two thousand years later we can still feel how sharp and painful this conversation was. It goes back and forth, and ultimately 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. He is claiming to be God.

“I am”, the name God gave Moses at Mt. Sinai, 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. But Jesus doesn’t just utter the name; he’s claiming *to be* the name. He’s claiming to be one with Yahweh. There is no greater claim a person can make. In John 14 Jesus says, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9). The Jews heard Him loud and clear. John 5 says, “the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because . . . he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (v. 18). And, of course, before Pilate they said, “We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because He has made Himself the Son of God” (Jn. 19:7).

When Jesus made such claims you can imagine their outrage. You can imagine the outrage of his Jewish listeners when He made such claims, and He made them a lot. “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the Light of the World.” “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” “Before Abraham was, I am.” Remarkable claims!

So, if Jesus was there at the burning bush, does that mean He was also there at creation? Sure enough, in our Old Testament lesson, we hear the voice of the pre-incarnate Christ saying: “When 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 also there “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. In fact, that’s good, because there is mystery here, and it is far better to preserve that mystery than to impose some kind of man-made 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. When Jesus said, “Before Abraham was, I am”, He’s introducing the concept of one God, multiple persons to His Jewish listeners. They understand the claim perfectly well. That’s why they start picking up stones, intending to kill Him for what sounds to them like idolatry.

But it is not yet His time. Jesus hid himself from them. I doubt He could have just blended into the crowd. I think this was a case of divine concealment. Later, He would not hide, and would all but walk into the arms of His executioners. But here, it is not yet His time.

In any event, on this Trinity Sunday, let’s look again at verse 53 where the Jews ask, “Who do you make yourself out to be?” In other words, “Just who do you think you are?”

Many correct answers are given in Scripture: Peter gave a good one, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16). So did John, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29). Thomas eventually got

it right, “My Lord and my God” (Jn. 20:28). The centurion at the cross also got it right, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Mt. 7:54). Even a demon-possessed man in Capernaum got it right: “I know who you are – the Holy One of God!” (Mk. 1:24).

But what about today? How do people answer the question today: “Who is Jesus?” First, many don’t want to answer that question. They prefer to be vague and ambiguous. They don’t want to be pinned down. So, almost like an NFL running back they dance and dodge and weave. Yet it’s an important question, one we all must answer. Who is Jesus?

Some in America don’t even believe He was a real person, only mythical, like Zeus or Poseidon. For others, depending on who you ask, Jesus might be a flag-waving patriot, an environmental crusader, a militant feminist, a proponent of conceal/carry laws, or an advocate for gay marriage. The survey results are . . . mixed.

In a recent poll, 52% of Americans now believe He was a man, but **only** a man, meaning He’s dead and gone. So, about the same percentage, that is a majority of Americans, would say He was a prophet of sorts, or a great teacher of moral ethics, but not anything more. C.S. Lewis wrote, “A man who was merely a man and 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” (Mere Christianity, HarperOne, 2000, 52). In other words, the claims Jesus made about Himself won’t allow us to patronize him as a great teacher of morals. For example, in our text, Jesus promises, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” That’s not something any teacher would say. That’s something a Savior would say.

It’s a big claim and a powerful promise. If you think you’ll somehow avoid dying, this claim doesn’t mean anything to you. But if you have watched a loved one die or have watched the casket close for the last time, this promise means the world. Or maybe it’s your body. It used to be so reliable, and recovered so quickly, but now there’s mutiny afoot. Or maybe it’s your brain: it just doesn’t process as quickly anymore; you struggle finding words and names and irrelevant details insist on barging into your stories. If you can relate, then this promise is for you: “If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” We keep His Word by reading the Scriptures. We keep it by joining our brothers and sisters in worship, study, and conversation. We keep His Word through the daily habits of devotion and prayer. Most of all, we keep His Word by *believing* His Word, clinging to His promises.

This isn’t the first or only time Jesus promises eternal life. It’s a consistent claim he makes. In John 10, Jesus promised, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (v. 28). That’s quite a claim, right? I give them eternal life. None of my teachers, even the ones with big egos, ever said anything like that.

In John 3, Jesus promised, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them” (v. 36).

Look at the claims Jesus makes about Himself. He’s not just a teacher. He’s your Savior. In John 4, Jesus promised, “Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (v. 14).

In John 3, Jesus promised “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (v. 16).

Consider the claims! Remember the promises! In John 6, Jesus said “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you” (v. 27). And again from John 6, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (v. 51). And again, from John 6, “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (v. 54).

Look at the claims Jesus makes about Himself, and the promises He has made to you. Don’t let anyone tell you He was just a teacher or prophet or man. Their unbelief has rejected Him; He can only be for them what they allow Him to be . . . a good but dead teacher. But because you believe who He says He is and trust His promises, you have eternal life.

In Luke 10, Jesus told His disciples, “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (v. 20).

One more from John 11, “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” There’s the great I Am again. And here comes the promise: “Whoever, believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (v. 25).

It is the consistent promise of Jesus throughout the Gospels. It is the consistent claim that the rest of Scriptures make about Jesus: Romans 6 for instance, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 23). 1 John 5, “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (v. 11).

We could go on and on. The point is, don’t let anyone try to tell you Jesus is anything less than Lord and Savior. Challenge them to consider again the claims He made about Himself, and the promises He made to them too. And give thanks to God that through Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit has opened your hearts to keep His Word and trust His promises. That God-given faith allows Him to be for you who He says He is, your Lord and Savior.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” Amen.