

Tracy Daub
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Exodus 3:1-15

THE 'I AM' STATEMENTS: I AM WHO I AM

"I am." Any time we start a sentence with those two words we are preparing to tell something about ourselves. Sometimes it may be just our name: I am Tracy. I am Bill. Or maybe it will include some piece of information about ourselves: I am a mother. I am white. I am black. I am a teacher. We might use "I am" to convey our feelings: I am sorry. I am afraid. I am hungry. I am glad to see you. We use those words, "I am" to tell others about ourselves.

Jesus uses those two words, "I Am," with great frequency in the Gospel of John. There are seven instances in the Gospel of John where Jesus begins a sentence by stating "I am." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." And then later he says, "I am the light of the world." In one lesson he first states, "I am the good shepherd," and then adds, "I am the gate for the sheep." Later on in John's gospel Jesus states, "I am the true vine." He also states, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." And then Jesus states, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Jesus seems to be all over the place, and we might think, "whoa, Jesus! Pick one metaphor and stick with it!" But Jesus uses each of these metaphors, often pulled from ordinary items in life, to convey something important about himself to his followers.

Over the course of this summer, I will explore each of these I Am statements to see what these statements might teach us about Jesus and maybe also about ourselves. When those early followers of Jesus first heard those I Am statements, they would have immediately thought of another famous I Am statement. They would have remembered the famous I Am statement God made long ago when speaking with Moses. And that was Jesus' intention. When Jesus stated, "I Am," he wanted to remind his followers of God's words to Moses. He wanted them to think

about the entire Moses story. When making the I Am statements, Jesus wants to identify himself with the God of Moses. So that is where we need to begin our exploration--with the Moses story and God's famous I Am declaration.

God makes this self-revelation in the famous story of the burning bush. At the time of the burning bush event, the Hebrew people were slaves in Egypt. God appears to Moses in a dramatic way--through a bush that was on fire but was not being burned up. And God speaks to Moses from the bush and summons him to go to the Egyptian king and demand the people's freedom. Well, this was just a bit intimidating for Moses. First of all, he was a fugitive from the law, having killed an Egyptian man who was beating up a Hebrew slave. In addition, Moses felt inadequate for the job. And so he and God have this back and forth conversation. And Moses wonders, what if the Hebrew people demand to know who has sent him to free them. What will he say? What name will he give? And that is when God offers up a bit of information about Godself. God says, "I Am Who I Am. Tell them I Am has sent you."

What an odd name: I Am. Maybe one of the best ways of understanding this odd name is by turning to grammar. Those of us of a certain age may remember having to diagram the parts of a sentence in our early years of education. How many of you remember diagramming sentences? I don't think they teach that anymore, but once upon a time elementary students had to dissect sentences and identify such things as the predicate, the direct object, the indirect object, the modifiers, the transitive verbs, and so on. It became very complicated. Luckily for us, the sentence we are examining today is a simple one. Two words: I Am. We have a noun--the subject. And we have a verb, the action.

Right up front God identifies Godself as the subject of this holy encounter. God says to Moses, "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of

Jacob.” God effectively says: let’s start off this sacred moment by identifying our subject, our noun. I am the God who was there, who was faithful to, who stood by and cared for your ancestors. I’m that noun. I’m the subject of today. That is the "I" in the name "I Am."

When Jesus makes his own "I Am" statements, he is identifying himself with that same "I." The holy God of Moses, the holy God of all their cherished ancestors, he Jesus is part of that same God.

After identifying the subject to Moses, God then moves on to the next crucial part of speech: the verb. The noun is essential for this conversation. But the noun alone is not complete. The story of God’s involvement with us does not stop with the noun. God follows the noun with a verb—actually, with many verbs. God says to Moses, “I have *observed* the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have *heard* their cry . . . I *know* their sufferings.” And then, a most crucial verb comes along telling us that God is not content just to be aware of our sufferings. God says, “I have come down to *deliver* them from the Egyptians, and to *bring* them up out of that land to a good and broad land.”

You see, this story refutes the belief some people have of God as a noun alone. You know how some people claim to believe in God but don’t believe that God is actually involved in our lives in any real way. This story tells us that God is both noun and verb. And that is extremely good news for us. It tells us that God will not forsake or abandon us to our pain, our misery, our sufferings. God sees and hears and knows and *acts* to deliver us.

And this is good news to every one of us who has ever cried out for deliverance: deliverance from our pain, deliverance from our grief, deliverance from an illness, deliverance from our own destructive behaviors, deliverance from fear and worry, deliverance from anger, deliverance from guilt. Have you ever needed deliverance? Today’s grammar lesson offered by

God tells us that God knows and acts to deliver us, not just *from* something but also *to* something—to a place filled with blessings. When Jesus says, "I Am," he is telling us he's that verb. Jesus is the one to deliver us from all those conditions of bondage that enslave our hearts, souls, and lives.

God offers yet another verb to Moses, one that doesn't thrill Moses. God says, "So come, I will *send you* to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." God, the verb, hears, sees, knows, acts to deliver and then also *sends* us to be part of God's plan. God uses us to complete the action. The God who knows all about human suffering and who plans to liberate us, turns around and uses us to complete that action—to complete the sentence. And we are woven into the very structure of the sentence God is creating. We are called to become partners with God in liberating others from oppressive situations, partners in extending compassion, partners in creating places filled with blessings. Wherever there are people waiting in their own "Egypt," wherever there are people suffering, struggling, grieving, dying, waiting for deliverance, God sends us to be part of that holy verb.

We see some of those action verbs in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul was trying to teach those Christians that if they were to carry the noun of "Christian," then they must merge it with holy verbs: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor . . . Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer . . . extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony . . . feed your enemy."

What we learn about God in the name "I Am" is that God is not only a subject but also a verb of holy action. God says to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh for I Am will be with you." God does not promise to make Moses eloquent. God does not promise to make Moses brave. God

promises to be with him as the Great I Am, the verb "to be." Think about that. Nothing exists without the verb "to be." This great verb causes things to exist, makes things happen. God is that holy verb of existence. And that holy verb, that holy presence was with Moses, helping him face his challenges, bringing into existence all that was needed in him, creating and re-creating him every single day.

This same Great I Am is found in Jesus, helping us with the challenges we face, bringing us into new existence every single day. And the Great I Am sends us, as with Moses, to be part of God's holy action in the world so that we may be part of bringing into existence the holy actions of love, compassion, justice, and hope. We might not feel brave enough, smart enough, wise enough, adequate enough to carry out such awesome responsibilities. But none of that matters. For the Great I Am goes with us, bringing us into existence.