

Sermon by Vicar Pierce Chadburn
“Before Abraham was, I AM”: What does this mean?

Trinity Sunday
2016-05-22
Series-C

Text: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Acts 2:14a, 22-36
John 8:48-59 (NA27, ESV)

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN+

Introduction: “You judge according to the flesh...” “You will die in your sin...”

“You are from below...You are of this world...” “...everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him.” “Whoever is of God hears the words of God....you are not of God.” Ouch! These are some of the things Jesus just said to the Jewish temple leaders in the passages before our reading. [It’s] No wonder they would have been angry with Him. Yet, they restrained themselves. Consider then what it is—after all this—that actually makes them try to *stone* Jesus. They ask, “**Who do you make yourself out to be?**” Jesus answers, “**Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.**” What does this mean? [“I AM” MEANS ONE GOD, IN THREE PERSONS, IN JESUS CHRIST.]

- I. I AM means One [indivisible] God.
- II. I AM means Three [self-subsisting] Persons.
- III. I AM means Jesus the [fully God and fully man] Christ.

I.

Exodus 3 says, “**Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”**” Deuteronomy 6 also says, “**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.**” Or, “**I AM our God, I AM is One.**” “I AM” means the one and only LORD—YHWH.

Jesus just used the sacred name of God to describe Himself.

The name YHWH (“I AM”) calls special attention to God’s essence—which is another word for His existence—His *being*. [(“Essence” is the word we hear in the creeds.)] God is the One who apart from all time, space, matter, spirit, and creation *IS*. His being does not come

from something else, require something else, or exist in something else. The universe itself and all things (by which we measure and comprehend what exists) were created out of nothing—*nothing* nothing. So God's essence is not our essence, but is *incomprehensible*.

This also means (as the scriptures tell us) that God is perfect and without limitation [(infinite)]. So [according to His essence,] God is *one* in *number* because He cannot be divided. (There is no God other than God.) God is *simple*, which means there are no parts or pieces in God. God is *immutable*, which means He cannot change, suffer, die, or decay. God is *everywhere* (unlimited by space). God has all life, knowledge, and wisdom (unlimited by death, ignorance, and foolishness). God is *eternal*—without beginning and without end (unlimited by time).

So when Jesus says, “**Before Abraham was, I AM,**” it's a big deal. The temple leaders balk, “**You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?**” Jesus doesn't say, “*God* existed before Abraham,” or, “Yes, I'm a really old spirit from the spirit world before Abraham. Therefore I saw Abraham.” Jesus doesn't use God's name to describe Himself as one who was merely *honored* with, or *given*, or *adopted* into the privilege of God's name. Jesus claims God's essence as His own essence. Jesus says that He saw Abraham because He is *YHWH*.

Why then do the Jewish temple leaders try to stone Jesus? Because Jesus is not the God they know. God is One and His essence is not our essence. But Jesus talks about His Father (whom the Jews call “our God”), and is a man born of Mary. Jesus calls them sons of the devil. But they're God's priests who uphold the temple laws. No, Jesus didn't qualify to them and He just called Himself God. [Stone Him!]

Because God's essence is incomprehensibly perfect we can only try to understand Him with our own human ideas of perfection. But our ideas are not His ideas. They miss the mark. They *sin*. If we love thinking about God according to His essence, it's because [deep down] we love thinking about ourselves in God's place. We love seeing our “perfection” as God's perfection.

Consider for a moment then what you know about God, other than that He exists. Where did you get those ideas? What do they depend upon? Who do you make God out to be? Who do you make yourself out to be?

We no longer know who God is of ourselves because Adam in the beginning gave up God and His Word for the devil. God the Holy Spirit dwelt in Adam from Adam's creation, but was driven away by Adam's own free will. Adam therefore became a slave to sin and death. We are the children of Adam's human essence, and have inherited His enslavement.

II.

The temple leaders should have known that what Jesus tells them is true because God made it known in the Old Testament scriptures. He gave them His *own* ideas about Himself. He *appeared* to them [with signs and wonders]. "I AM" (YHWH) means *three Persons*.

For example, this is shown in passages where God speaks of Himself in the plural, like Genesis 1[:26], **"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'"**

This is shown in passages where God is worshiped in threefold petitions or praises, like Numbers 6[:24-26], **"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."** Isaiah 6[:3]: **"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!"**

This is shown in passages where the Angel of YHWH and YHWH Himself are two different persons who share one and the same divine essence, like Genesis 31[:11-13], **"Then the Angel of God said to me in the dream, 'Jacob,' And He said, '...I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me.'" Genesis 48[:15-16], **"And he [Jacob] blessed Joseph and said, 'The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys...."** Exodus 3[:2, 4], **"And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. ... ⁴ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'"****

There are passages that show the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit, like Genesis 1[:2], **"...the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."** 2 Samuel 23[:2], **"The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; His word is on my tongue."**

There are passages that show the three Persons of the Trinity side by side as three separate Persons, like Isaiah 63[:8-10]: **"For he [YHWH] said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely.' And he became their Savior. In all their affliction he**

was afflicted, and *the Angel of his presence* saved them.... But they rebelled and grieved his *Holy Spirit*....”

Furthermore, there are passages that show the divinity and personality of the Christ, like Psalm 45[:6-7], **“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever....Therefore *God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.*”** Psalm 110[:1]: **“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”**

There are too many other examples for me to list here.

[But] One last example from Malachi 3[:1, 3] ties in well with our Gospel reading: **“Behold, I send my Angel, and He will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple; and the Angel of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, He is coming, says the LORD of hosts....He will purify the sons of Levi [the priests of the temple] and refine them like gold and silver....”**

III.

Dear fellow Christians, the Angel of YHWH—the Second Person of the Trinity—is Jesus the Christ. “I AM” (YHWH) means Christ Jesus.

[So then,] we see in our Gospel reading that Jesus the LORD has visited His temple to rebuke and refine the sons of Levi (and all people). The priests, the temple leaders, **“judge according to the flesh,”** as Jesus says. *We* judge according to the flesh. We are not God and our ideas about God are wrong. The temple leaders are sinful, and **“will die”** in their sin. *We* are sinful, and will die in our sin. That is, unless we repent and keep Jesus’ word. God has worked so that we who are sinful may not die in our sin, but in Jesus Christ.

In His incarnation, Jesus took into His divine personhood our human essence from His virgin mother, but without our sin. Incomprehensibly but truly, God’s essence and our human essence are now inseparably joined in the one Christ. Therefore Jesus’ human essence shares in the attributes of His divine essence. [(Here we normally use the word “nature” in place of “essence.”)] His divinity and humanity likewise cannot be mixed, therefore He remains fully God and fully man.

Jesus is also His own, distinct person. He is complete, and subsists in Himself. Therefore all that God is, Jesus is. But He is not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit. Therefore according to His human essence, He serves God the Father on our behalf, by the indwelling

of the Holy Spirit, without serving Himself. [(His love is not selfish and self-reliant, but directed to His Father, and dependent on the Holy Spirit.)]

Because of the powerful, sinless union between His one, perfect, unlimited divine essence and our human essence...and because of His distinct personality from the Father and the Holy Spirit...Jesus was able to make our shared human essence in Himself one, perfect, limitless offering to God the Father, by the Holy Spirit, in His bloody crucifixion and death [active obedience]. Jesus was able to crucify in Himself not just the sins of one lifetime and one person, but the sins of all lifetimes and all persons, of all times and all places [passive obedience]. Your sin has been incomprehensibly but truly crucified in Jesus.

Because these things are so, God the Father raised Him from the dead on the third day after His crucifixion. Death could not contain Him. He has won the victory over the devil. His eternal life is now your eternal life for you who have been baptized into His death—into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: *Who then is God? What does “I AM” mean? “I AM” MEANS ONE GOD, IN THREE PERSONS, IN JESUS THE CHRIST. Trust in Jesus. “This is the catholic faith; whoever does not believe it faithfully and firmly cannot be saved.”*

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN+

[The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN.]