

## I Am - You Are / Lent 2011

John's Gospel gives us the WHY and HOW of our relationship to God so it is an excellent resource for reevaluation in the season of Lent. Lent, a period of 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday, is traditionally a special season of retrospect and thoughtful meditation on the life and meaning of God in our lives, especially as we follow the life and teachings of Jesus. As we study and observe his life from beginning to end we expect to gain insight and patterns for our own lives as we mature with age. Because the perspective of the content of the Gospel of John is more theological, like a sermon ("a moralistic address") with stories, it may be very suitable for a Lenten scripture reading. Since the stories are primarily about Jesus and his work among the people it can provide a framework of life study for us during our Lenten experience to progress in our life and ministry.

The Gospel of John is unique when compared with the Synoptic Gospels - Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Words are key to human conversation and in understanding the symbolic use of words in John's Gospel is important when noting the differences of this last Gospel and the Synoptics. Many of the stories in John are unique in that they are not told nor mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels. The theological perspective, the arrangement of its content, and its distinctive use of imagery and symbols are a part of that difference. The introduction to this Gospel in several study editions is referred to as "the spiritual Gospel" because of its attention to the spiritual import of the incidents it reports. Many times various examples are visioned with the introduction of "I Am" in the presentation by Jesus with the expectation that his followers would follow suit by their actions or practice.

Words are basically symbols that need to be used in a sentence or context to clarify our intension when conversing and may be especially true when reading older manuscripts from earlier centuries. *"If I had to give my readers one clue and one clue only that would unlock the Fourth Gospel and allow its honesty and wonder to flow forth, it would be that in reading John one must always keep in mind that the author is not writing history or biography. Indeed, this author is constantly poking fun at anyone who would take his message literally, misunderstand his use of symbols or attempt to literalize the words he has attributed to Jesus. ... "I AM" is a key concept in the Fourth Gospel repeated over and over again. John alone has Jesus say such things as: "I am the bread of life; I am the door; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the vine; I am the good shepherd, and I am the resurrection." Jesus even asserts through that "I AM" claim that he is the exclusive pathway to God, a statement that has been used throughout Christian history to justify the basest forms of religious imperialism and to fuel the most insensitive kind of missionary evangelism. ... John's gospel must not be literalized if it is to be understood. It is a profound, even mystical, interpretation of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, written by a person deeply rooted in Palestinian Judaism and its words are designed to lead John's readers beyond literal words into a life-giving relationship with God. ....I once was repelled by the Fourth Gospel because I related to it as if it were a literal document. When I broke the bondage of that mindset, I found in this gospel a real understanding not just of God and of Jesus, but of life itself.* (from: The Origins of The New Testament, Part XXXIII - The Gospel of John by Bishop John S. Spong)

It is the whole concept of using "I am" that I also believe makes the Gospel of John a wonderful backdrop for our 21st century experience of God in our own maturity as Christians today with the life of Jesus as he is pictured in this unique Gospel. Some of the "I am" settings force us to see that we cannot take the words used as literal or historical. The use of the "I am" is a literary tool to make a point and to encourage us to establish a personal relationship to God. To share this view and begin to demonstrate this practical opportunity I will take the more obvious ones first.

"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) Light is amazing and essential to our universe as well as our individual life requirements. When you go to a comprehensive dictionary you will find forty-five delineations for light. (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/light>) While Jesus has been an amazing force in my life I did not feel he was boasting but inviting me to share in this light of life. His ministry was to serve and enlighten us about the Realm of God, demonstrating this light of illumination that enables everyone to live in the way, the truth, and the life of God's righteousness. The brightness of this gift of light is also our privilege and duty to share with others as followers of Jesus as noted in Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to God". In the Theory of Relativity -  $E = mc^2$  - (where  $E$  is energy,  $m$  is, depending on the context, the rest mass or the relativistic mass, and  $c$  is the speed of light in a vacuum) - it is light that energizes or enables this equality to exist. This "light of life" of which Jesus speaks and shares with the world is also our gift, so as not to walk in darkness, and bring this same light to others. Jesus makes this point clearly - because I AM – YOU ARE.

Next, we hear Jesus saying, "I am the door" - *"a swinging or sliding barrier that will close the entrance to a room or building or vehicle"* - (in other translations the word gate is used). It should be clear to everyone that Jesus, having said this, was not suggesting that he was a literal door. The scriptures themselves make this point clear, *"This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep..... I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."* (John 10:6,7,9) This was a positive implication and invitation to enter into a relationship with God through Jesus with all the freedom to experience the fullness of the "ins and outs" of God's realm. Jesus says I am the door or the gateway in bringing you the fullness of God's love for all people, in all times, and in all places and I bid you to share this by inviting and teaching others this good news as well. In bidding us to share this same invitation we might also consider that we are (I AM – YOU ARE) doors or gateways to invite everyone into a living relationship with God.

Jesus used another figure of speech when he said, *"I am the good shepherd..."* (John 10:11,14) We know that Jesus' father was Joseph who was a carpenter or stone mason so Jesus was never technically a shepherd. His image of a good shepherd was to emphasize his caring concern for humanity. The theme of shepherd, an important and prominent occupation in those days, was the focus of one of the most memorable, Psalm 23, *"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want."* This theme reminds us of God's loving and consistent care for all people and is a model of how we should act toward one another. In one of the earliest stories in Genesis 4, Cain asks, *"Am I my brother's keeper?"* with an affirmative implication to Able, his brother, demonstrating such care. Our care for the earth is made clear from Genesis as well along with our responsibility and care for the poor. The scriptures instruct us to care for ourselves, even the importance of maintaining a good name by what we say and do. Jesus made it clear that we are to welcome strangers and care for orphans and widows, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and those in prison. He made it clear that this responsibility is expected for our brother and sisters, any who were disenfranchised, if we considered ourselves servants of God. So again the implication is clear, as "I AM – YOU ARE".

We now come to several chapters wherein Jesus talks about himself using the I Am in ways that we may not easily see this expression as a literary tool. He begins with this question, *"Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, "I AM God's Son?"* (John 10:36) Perhaps I can break the ice by asking you a similar question; how clearly are you convinced that YOU ARE a child of God? Are we not also, through the words and actions of Jesus, able to claim that we are sons and daughters of God as well? Should we also be accused of blasphemy? When Jesus made this claim they were so offended and

confused that they picked up stones to kill him. When they heard the term I AM they were reminded of the words Moses was told what to say to pharaoh's inquiry; *tell him I AM who I AM sent you*. We will discuss this further later because these literary implications still bother many even today. Like I suggested earlier, how clearly are you convinced that YOU ARE a son or daughter of God? Jesus responds again by reminding them of his works, which he clearly credited to be the work of God in him and says, *"that the Father is in me and I AM in the Father"*. After this I Am we are told that they tried to have him arrested again but he was able to escape across the Jordan where John first baptized him.

After this Jesus learns about the illness and the death of his friend Lazarus who lived with his sisters, Mary and Martha, in Bethany. Jesus hesitated a few days and then asked the disciples to return with him to the region of Judea even though they warned him about people wanting to stone him there. Jesus however believed this would bring glory to God and that Lazarus would be made whole and needed to go. When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Bethany, only about two miles from Jerusalem, Lazarus was already in the tomb for about four days. Hearing that Jesus was arriving, Martha went out to meet him and expressed her distress that Jesus was not there sooner to prevent his death. When Jesus told her that Lazarus would rise again, Martha, a believer in Jesus and his teachings, agreed that Lazarus would certainly rise again at the last day. This is when Jesus replied, "I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever has faith in me shall live, even though he dies; and no one who lives and has faith in me shall ever die, Do you believe this?" Martha affirms her belief that he is the Son of God and Messiah. Then Jesus goes with everyone to the tomb and, after Jesus prays to his Father, called to his friend Lazarus to come forth and he did. We then, hearing this story and affirmation of Martha, believe in resurrection because we have been raised many times in our present lives and believe in eternal life. Again we note with assurance - I AM - YOU ARE.

By now we might realize that everyone of the "I Am" scenarios were positive teachings about the Realm of God of which Jesus spoke and was supporting with his actions to make them absolutely clear, true, and affirmed. It is also important to see that, without the resultant You Are, they would be only about himself with no affect on the people to whom he was sent. But the I Am claims do not end here, in fact, they become even more amazing in their implications, not only about Jesus but also about the salvation we receive by God's love and grace.

The Gospel continues as Jesus begins to talk about the heart and soul of our connections to himself and God, to God's plan, purpose, and our partnership with Christ in the realm of God. In chapter 14 we hear Jesus say, *"I AM the way, and the truth, and the life."* Jesus explains that if you know him then you also know God. He tells Philip, who seems confused about knowing God, *after all this time that I have been with you and you still do not understand?* Jesus declares, *"I AM in God and God is in me"*. The things I have said and done are all because of this relationship and authority from God so I have shown you. In fact if you or anyone has faith in me YOU ARE able to do what I have been doing and will do even greater things than these because I AM in God. *"On that day you will realize that I AM in my Father, and YOU ARE in me, and I AM in you."* (John 14:20)

This concept of the Vine and Branches gives us another non-literal and symbolic way of suggesting our need for such a consistent interpersonal relationship with God in Christ. Clearly our purpose for living is to be productive in word and deed in order to bear fruit. *"Dwell in me, as I in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine; no more can you bear fruit, unless you remain united with me."* (John 15:4) This living relationship is not only to bring glory to God but also to enable and continue the Realm of God among us. The love of God is present and proficient when we are connected and continue with values and actions proclaimed by God in Christ. *"As God loves me, so I love you. Dwell in my love."* Our challenge is to love one another as Christ loves us even if it means death. In doing so we are called friends and are no longer servants. We then, like Jesus, have come, not

to be served, but to be in loving service to others as modeled by Jesus. Here again we note the theme, as I AM - YOU ARE.

In the next chapters (17-19) there are scenes that describe the total commitment of Jesus to fulfill his commission to be among us. These scenes help us understand the passion Jesus had to remain faithful to his anointing until it was completed by death. We see the chaos of this time in Jesus' life with all of the variety of many hardships and struggles in body, mind, and spirit. We can relate to the fears and frustrations that we have already experienced in life and envision what may still happen before we come to our death. We can begin to appreciate the scenarios of the I AM concepts that teach us and prepare us for honest realities in life. It is also important, in these various key concepts, that we sense the loving promise of God in our lives knowing that WE ARE in God like Jesus. We have the light, we are fed, we have the good shepherd to lead us in and out of every situation in life. We have the living Christ who is the Son of God with the assurance that WE ARE also sons and daughters of the most high. WE ARE familiar with the way, the truth, and the life because we have the gift of Jesus, the I AM, to lead us faithfully in those paths. We have the promise that we are uniquely one with God in an eternal relationship as established in Jesus the Christ. It is also reassuring to know that we have this nourishing connection, as pictured in the concept of the Vine, to have the continuity to be faithful and fruitful as the people of God's Realm.

Yet we still have more to consider as we move into chapter 20 where the reality of "I AM the resurrection and the life" is dramatically revealed. Even death cannot separate us from the love of God that is vividly demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Keep in mind, this is not resuscitation! This is not putting new wine into old wineskins. This is being raised in spirit and in truth, now and forevermore, amen! Eternal life - believe it or not!

**Is the author of the Gospel of John really suggesting that it is possible to become this interpersonally related to God in our daily living?**

Before we close perhaps we should consider the opening and closing remarks of this Gospel to finalize that the answer to this question is YES.

John begins with this theme about the Word becoming flesh, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* (John 1:1) [When it is not capitalized, the dictionary defines it as, *"word - a unit of language that native speakers can identify"*. When it is capitalized it is defined as, *"Word - the sacred writings of the Christian religions" or "the divine word of God"*.]

As in the opening of the book of Genesis, *"In the beginning...."*, so it is in John's Gospel, *"In the beginning..."*. Few people are familiar with the Spanish translation of these verses in "La Sagrada Biblia" with the Imprimatur: ANGEL, Obispo Aux. y Vic. Gen. Madrid, 4 de Julio de 1968. In this translation we have *"En el principio era y el Verbo"*, while in our more familiar translations we see these words, *"In the beginning was the Word"*. Here are the English translations of each version for comparison:

English:	Spanish:	Spanish translation:
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.	En el principio era ya el Verbo, y el Verbo estaba con Dios, y el Verbo era Dios. El estaba en el principio con Dios.	In the principle it was already the Verb, and the Verb was with God. It was in the principle with God. <i>(Translation)</i>

When I first read the Spanish version of the opening of John's Gospel I was struck by an interesting correlation to another biblical passage when Moses spoke with God in the burning bush. When Moses asked God whom he should say sent him, God said to Moses, *"I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'* It is simple and yet so profound that the "principle" of this Universe is I AM! The Creator is the VERB that brought it all about.

We are blessed today because we have so many versions along with a variety of translations of scriptures. Words change their meaning over time and they need to be interpreted within the context of the circumstances of the past when they were first used along with how they may be interpreted in our present understanding and usage. I really appreciate that we have both a Noun and a Verb (the Word and the I Am – the verb "to be") as reference to our beginnings and our being.

Indeed Lent is a good season for us to think more deeply about our faith and how we are to take action to be followers of Jesus today. We need to face the hardships in our lives and take up our crosses with the same dignity and courage. We will need to be the doors and gateways for people today. It will be our responsibility to shepherd those who are wandering and unable to find their way bringing them into the pastures of God for their well being. We dare not hide our light but learn to help enlighten others to know and reflect the essential light of God in their lives. We need to remember that we are the sons and daughters of God to invite others to join us as branches of the Vine of life to share our unique gifts and talents to fill the world with the abundance of God's creativity and grace. This is what it means to be a follower of Jesus to advance the Realm of God in our world today.

By now I hope you are realizing why I suggested that John's Gospel gives us the WHY and HOW of our relationship with God is an excellent resource for a holy Lent. We are encouraged and challenged in this Gospel to discover life and live it to the full – *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (John 10:10) Faith is a noun and believe is a verb and we are capable of adding all the other grammatical amenities to make innumerable sentences to express volumes of that love and grace in our lives from God in Jesus Christ. God tells us that I AM your Creator; Jesus says I AM your Liberator, and the Life-giving Spirit enables it all to become a reality. When we focus on I AM – YOU ARE as exemplified by Jesus the Christ we are continually RAISED to living a life of victory, now and forever more!

May the caring peace of God that goes beyond human comprehension, declare God's love for you in your heart and mind as we see it in Jesus Christ; and may the blessing of God, loving Creator, gracious Liberator, and life giving Spirit keep you steadfast now and always. Amen.