

A number of times over the last months, I have reminded you that none of the Gospels are histories. Their purpose is not to tell the narrative of Jesus' life or early ministry. Their purpose is theological reflection and education. The Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke accomplish that reflection through a similar narrative structure focusing on events particularly events in the final year of Jesus' earthly ministry very much focused on the coming of the Kingdom, the humanity of Jesus, and understanding his role in the coming of the Kingdom. They are heavy on the miracles and parables as illustration of what will become possible in the Kingdom. John's Gospel is very different. John is focused on the divinity of Jesus and his close relationship with the Father. When John records a miracle it is designed to highlight the divinity of Jesus rather than the nature of the miracle or of the kingdom. John has lengthy discourses, major dialogues, and has about 90% unique material that does not appear in the synoptic Gospels.

In addressing the comparatively minor differences among the synoptic Gospels and the very great differences between the synoptics and John, it is useful to remember that there were many written accounts circulating about Jesus, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. Most were eventually rejected when the councils of the church created the canonical books of the bible during the 4th century. That the material was rejected in the 4th century, doesn't mean it may not have influenced the Gospel writers in the 1st or 2nd century. Certainly the conditions of the times the particular Gospel was written may well have caused a different theological focus for each of the authors.

I think it important to remember John's Gospel was the last of the 4 to be written possibly as late as 120 to 125 CE. That is possibly as many as 90 years after the resurrection, 60 years after Mark's Gospel, and 30 years after Matthew and Luke's. What is the significance of the passage of time? The first generation or two of the followers of Jesus were convinced that the kingdom was imminent, that it would come soon. By the time John's Gospel was written, expectations of an early arrival were dashed. Rome remained ascendent, the Temple had been destroyed, and significant populations of Gentiles dispersed throughout the Mediterranean region made up the church. So the Gospel of John was a theological treatise designed to inspire the gentile church with joy and purpose. *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.* John 3:16 And of course the wonderful preface to John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.*

Our reading this evening begins with one of the key means John uses to illustrate who Jesus is and his inseparable relationship with God. As I said two weeks ago, John's Gospel is a real beginning to what became known as Trinitarian Theology: God described as one in essence (what God is) and three in person (who God is) – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Perhaps the most important way John develops the theology of who Jesus is his use of seven "I am"

statements. In this evening's reading, he says *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.* At other places in the gospel Jesus says: *I am the bread of life; I am the door of the sheep; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life; I am the true vine.* As I have already said, John is eager to continually emphasize the divine nature of Jesus and his shared essence with the Father and the Spirit. Repeating "I am" a number of times makes the connection with God's statement in Exodus 3: 14 - *God said to Moses, "I am who I am."* He said further, *"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'*" The metaphors John has Jesus couple with "I am" express the breadth of his role as Son of God. The bread of life – spiritual nourishment; the light of the world – illumination for those lost in spiritual darkness; the door of the sheep – the entry into salvation; the good shepherd – care and protection for his followers even at the cost of his life; the resurrection and the life – victory over death and eternal life; the way the truth and the life – the sole source of truth and the path; the true vine – the vine to which we all can become branches. All express Jesus as the link between God and humanity.

Jesus uses "I am" one additional time in an entirely unmetaphorical, literal way, later in the chapter from which our reading this evening is excerpted. In chapter 8 verse 58 Jesus says, *Very truly I tell you before Abraham was, I am.* echoing completely *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.* Note the mixture of tenses – Abraham was / I am. Jesus is one with the God as I quoted Paul Tillich two weeks ago, God was before existence, and God is timeless.

The point of the oneness between Jesus and God is further emphasized in our passage this evening when challenged by the Pharisees that his testimony is not valid Jesus says to them: *In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.*" Then they said to him, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." Oneness of God is yet again reinforced.

So I have spoken several times about the difference between believe and *pisteuō*, the Greek word that is translated into English as believe. You may recall that *pisteuō* demands an active response. It doesn't speak of passive assent. We are required to act. Every one of the I am statements is followed by an action required by the human to profit from God's grace. In addition to believe, we see come, follow, enter in, know, abide – as Jesus abides in God and God abides in Jesus, God will abide in us and we in God. The door is open; the invitation is there, is our response ready? That is what this passage in John requires of us, an active, all consuming response. Thinking back to last week you may recall from John 15 ...*abide in me as I abide you.* There is no question about the invitation are we ready to accept and accept and accept? Amen