

The I Ams of Jesus: The Alpha and Omega

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

March 3, 2019 – AM Sermon

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Revelation 1:1-8

I want to draw this series to a close by focusing on both the meaning of this I am as we find it here in Revelation, AND on the meaning of the I ams as a whole. What I think I would like to say to you and what I would like to say to myself, is that I hope we aren't content with simply knowing the meaning of the I ams; I hope we can be people of the I ams. I want to be a person of the I ams.

What do I mean by that? Well, to get into that, let me try to evoke what everyday life can feel like for us. I know this example will take the perspective of a middle-aged working male, but I think that all of us will recognize how some version of this applies to all of us.

You go to bed at 10:30 and, as you drift off to sleep, you think through your plans for the following day. On your desk at work you've already written your to-do list and you think through some of the tasks on the list. You fall asleep. You wake up the next morning ready to take on your day, but after you get ready you open your phone and there are already some new crises in your inbox. A letter of complaint from a customer unhappy with the product you delivered. An email from a colleague; he's sick and can't get in today and would you mind sitting in on that meeting for him. You horse down some breakfast. You look out the window. More snow. Ugggh! It's March! How can this be! Got to shovel the driveway before heading out! Twenty minutes later you leave for work, much later than you wanted. Of course the roads are terrible. By the time you sit down at your desk you are already a full hour behind.

About ten o'clock you get a text from your high school daughter. Her car won't start and she's stranded. You knew you should have replaced that battery. Fortunately she's not far away and you have jumper cables. You get back to work, you go to that meeting for your colleague, you call that client, and now it's lunchtime and you haven't made a dent in your to do list. You work through lunch and get a couple of things done. But about one o'clock a junior colleague comes into the office. He's dealing with a tough client and can he pick your brain on possible approaches. Yeah, sure. 45 minutes later you get back to work. Now there's an email from your Mom. Her wifi isn't working and she gets a funny message on her computer, and she's pretty sure she's having her identity stolen, they did a show about it on 20/20! You talk her down. At the end of the day you take stock of your progress. You crossed four things off of your to do list; you added six at the bottom.

You go home that night and turn on the news. Another mass shooting. Another political firestorm. You turn off the news and browse on Facebook on your phone. There's an outraged post from your friend on one end of the political spectrum, followed by another outraged post from your friend on the other end of the political spectrum. You shut off your phone, and close your eyes. It's almost time for bed, and that's a good thing, because you are exhausted.

No matter who you are, no matter your age, no matter your gender, I think you can all relate to this imagined account. So many of our days feel something like that. Which is to say, so many of our days feel chaotic, jumbled, random. Life is a river in flood and you are just trying to stay afloat. Life is a dodgeball game and you're just trying to get hit. In the middle of all this you don't feel strong, you don't feel effective, you don't feel significant, you just feel tired. And notice the example I used was a person whose life was relatively uncomplicated! If you add family conflict to this story, if you have depression or anxiety added to the mix, if there is serious sickness to deal with in the family system, now things aren't just busy, they're overwhelming.

Human life has always felt something like this. I am completely sure that the people in John's time, the people who got the book of Revelation, would have faced the same sort of daily frustrations. And on top of that they would have been dealing with persecution. By the time Revelation was written, Christians were facing growing discrimination, they were getting shut out of the business community, some of them were getting thrown in prison. Not only would their life feel random, it would feel like things were coming apart.

The I ams of Jesus are specially aimed at people who feel this way. Jesus spoke them to overwhelmed people like us so that we could be people of faith, hope and love in the middle of our days.

How so? Bible quiz: Whenever Jesus stands up and says I am, he is deliberately echoing an important Old Testament passage. Do you know which Old Testament passage that is? Does the phrase *I am* remind you of anything from the Old Testament? It should remind you of holy name of God revealed to Moses. In Exodus 3 God meets Moses at the burning bush and he reveals his name. He tells Moses that his name is Yahweh. Yahweh means "I am who I am and I will be who I will be." Almost like "the one who is and who was and who is to come," right? In every sermon in this series I talked about what each individual I am statement meant. But there is also something common to all the *I am* statements.

Every time Jesus says "I am," he is saying, "I am the living God! The God who appeared in the burning bush has come among you!" "When you eat my bread, when you are grafted into my vine, when you follow this shepherd, then the power and the hope of the living God is in you!" Every I am statement is Jesus standing up and saying to us, "I know your days feel random, but do not be afraid. I am has come to you! I am the living God and I am here for you."

Most of you know that the 4 gospels are all different. One of the analogies I use to explain those differences is that the four gospels are like four different portraits of Jesus. They are all true and inspired, but they all emphasize different aspects of the Lord. **Mark's** portrait is simple and direct, like a piece of folk art. **Matthew's** portrait emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus. **Luke's** Jesus has one arm on the gentiles and another on the poor. **John's** portrait of Jesus shows him standing tall, full of strength. You look at John's Jesus and you can see right away that he is the living God come to earth.

The *I am* sayings are some of most important brushstrokes that John uses to make his portrait come alive for us. Each I am saying emphasizes Jesus divine strength.

If you want further proof of this, look at John 18:4-6. John 18:4-6 has a little known I am saying. We are in the garden of Gethsemane and the soldiers come to arrest Jesus. Here's what happens. Listen to how strong and in control Jesus is, and listen to the words he says: Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him (see how control he is), went out and asked [the soldiers] "Who is it that you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he!" Jesus said. ... When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground." Have you ever noticed that detail before? Jesus says "I am!" "I am he!" And the soldiers fall down. Jesus announces his divinity and the power of Rome and the power of Jerusalem fall to the ground.

This is John's portrait of Jesus! This is the side of Jesus that John paints for us!! Strong against the chaos! Strong to help us! Strong to save!

I think you can see how this sense of strength and power is also in today's I am. I am the Alpha and the Omega. I am the beginning and I am the end. I am behind and before! My power and my grace surround your whole life. Read carefully and you see that in Revelation 1, when Jesus is called alpha and omega, the Holy Spirit wants us to see that Jesus encompasses all dimensions of life. He is the one who is, who was and who is to come. He is the alpha and omega of time. He surrounds our days. He is the faithful witness. People lie and spin in this world, but He is the alpha and omega of truth. He is the first born from the dead. He is the alpha and omega of life. Not even death can separate you. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth. He is the alpha and omega of the political realm with all its fearful noise and struggle. That's the picture of Jesus that the Holy Spirit is showing in the writings of John. Boy do we need this picture.

I realized that at our staff retreat this weekend. We had our annual staff retreat over at the Vault this Monday and Tuesday and, as usual, our retreat agenda was full of issues and problems. LaGrave is a strong, healthy church, but there are many places where we could be stronger and healthier. At the retreat our agenda sent us down into all those problem places. How can we better connect people? How can we better reach our young people? What will we do with the SDA church? How can we better reach our neighbors? We spent two straight days wrestling and it was draining. At the very end of two tiring days we prayed together as a staff and I realized how much I needed that. I was worn out from the discussions and the list of things I felt like I needed to do going forward.

But then we prayed and for a moment we weren't looking at the problems, we were looking at Jesus. We looked away from our to-do lists and we all looked at the great I am. It was so good, so healing, to remember how strong he is, how faithful he's been, and how much he loves us. The alpha and the omega was standing in our midst and his arms were way wider than our worries.

We all need to see the great I am standing over our days. My old colleague, John Timmer, told the story of Sir Francis Chichester. Chichester was one of the great early pilots of the 20th century – right up there with Charles Lindbergh. In fact, he wanted to be the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic, but Lindbergh beat him to it, so he decided to try a different aviation feat. He would be the first to fly from Australia to New Zealand. In 1931 he made his attempt. In order to be successful, he would have to stop for refueling at tiny Norfolk Island which was way in the middle of the South Pacific. To find Norfolk he had only primitive tools. A compass and

some simple instruments that could determine his latitude and longitude based on the position of the sun. Unfortunately, soon after he took off from Australia, clouds rolled in and his instruments were useless in the clouds. What would he do? In the clouds he couldn't find Norfolk Island and if he didn't find Norfolk Island he would die. Here was his solution: He would head in the general direction of the Island until he saw a break in the clouds. As soon as he saw a patch of brightness where the sun shone through he would fly to that spot. He would turn his face to the sun, he would get his bearings, then he would set off into the clouds again toward his destination. By flying from one break in the clouds to the next, he was able to make it through the confusion and darkness to Norfolk Island. By going from bright spot to bright spot he was able to complete his journey.

In the clouds and confusion of a regular day, we head towards the bright places. In worship, in prayer, in Spiritual conversation with one another, the clouds break, the light shines through. In those bright places, we see the great I am, with his arms stretched over our whole life, and he says, "I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first, the last and the living one. Do not be afraid."

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