

Sermon: Who Does He Think He Is?
Text: John 10:1-10
Date: May 7, 2017
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

I am the gate . . .

John 10:9a

Of the Bible's four main stories about Jesus, the Gospel of John is arguably the most famous.

Among ordinary church going folks like us, it owes its fame in large part to the fact it's home to several of the most famous verses in the Bible: *In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (John 1:1, 14).

For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son . . . (John 3:16). *You must be born again . . .* (John 3:7). *Jesus wept* (John 11:35, which also happens to be the shortest verse in the Bible and, thus, a perennial favorite among teenagers facing off in youth group competitions centered on who can memorize the most Bible verses.)

On the scholarly level, the Gospel of John is also famous for being home to what are called the "I am" statements of Jesus, including the one in the passage I just read: "I am the gate."

There are a bunch of these statements in John -- a point we'll come back to in just a second -- and when you read them together, it sounds like Jesus is on some kind of ego trip. And I mean that in a very specific sense.

Greek is like Spanish in that in day-to-day speech, pronouns are typically not used because they are implied by the verb.

In Spanish, if you were going to make this same claim in ordinary speech -- "I am the gate" -- you would not say, *Yo soy* (I am) *la puerta* (gate or door). You would simply say, *Soy la puerta*, with the first person pronoun *yo* implied in the to be verb, *soy*.

It's the same in Greek, ordinarily. But if it's not an ordinary situation, if for whatever reason you specifically want to emphasize that you are the gate and nobody else is, you would add the pronoun, *ego*, the Greek word from which we get the first person pronoun "I" in English.

Which is exactly what Jesus does here. *Ego eimi* (I am) *he thyra* (the gate, or door).

But he doesn't just add this point of emphasis here. And he does not just claim to be the gate. Here's the full list of the "I am" statements in John.

I am the bread of life
I am the light of the world
Before Abraham was, I am
I am the gate
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

So, in total, Jesus makes nine different self-references here: bread, light, being (or divinity), door (or gate), shepherd, resurrection, way, truth, life, and vine.

What are we to make of these claims? What's going on here that Jesus would not only say these things of himself, but also make it clear that he's making these claims *uniquely* about himself? *Ego eimi he thyra*, I am the gate, and you're not.

In one sense, these claims maybe not as remarkable as they first sound. Each one of us can name our own set of unique identifiers.

I am husband to Robyn. (And you're not.)
I am second son of Helen and Clarence.
I am brother to Susan and Rusty.
I am uncle to Annalisa.
I am staff to Anne, the Wonder Poodle.
I am the pastor of Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church.

And so on. Again, we could all make our own list of unique ways to identify ourselves over against the person sitting next to us.

But it's also true that in Jesus' case, the claims he makes go well beyond mere biology, and beyond the ordinary human roles we all occupy of son or daughter, sister or brother, aunt or uncle.

His claims are of a different class altogether. *I am the resurrection and the life. Before Abraham was, ego eime, I am.* So what's going on? Who does Jesus think he is?

Is this just one big, giant ego trip, or is something else at work here? Is there some deeper motive driving his impulse to make these unique and seemingly grandiose claims about himself?

It's hard to know exactly what his motives or intentions were since we can't just come right out and ask him.

Obviously part of the answer has to do with his unique status as the second person of the Trinity, as God incarnate: *Before Abraham was, I am.* Incidentally that's the same phrase Yahweh used when he revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. *Tell Pharaoh "I am" sent you.*

But I think the answer also has to do not with his unique role and identity, that is, not just with who he is and with his status as God's only begotten son.

Rather I believe these claims may ultimately be rooted in what he's come to do. And even more specifically, what he's come to give.

And we do know the answer to that question because in this very same passage he comes right out and tells us: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

That's Jesus' mission statement, right there. In one sentence, he gives us his *modus operandi*, as defined not by the church, not by some weird TV preacher, not by a seminary professor or your Sunday school teacher, or by me for that matter, but by Jesus himself.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

At the end of the day, if you're ever asked what the whole Jesus thing was all about, it might really be that simple: He came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

And when you view these “I am” statements through that lens, they immediately start to come into clearer focus.

I am the bread of life. Of course he is because in peasant cultures all around the world, bread is the staple food, the very foundation of life.

But it’s not just bread that we’re hungry for. The love he teaches, the love he embodies, the love he demonstrates time and again -- unconditional love for the person God created each one of us to be, a love without judgement or limits -- this is the one thing everyone, everywhere is hungry for. So, take, eat, this bread is for you.

I am the light of the world. Of course he is because life only flourishes in the light. And if you’re living in darkness -- the darkness of fear, or hate, or anger, or guilt, or resentment, you will not flourish.

So come, be forgiven, expose your hate or your anger or your guilt to the light of love and mercy, grace and forgiveness, so that you might begin to live and grow and flourish.

I am the door. Of course he is because if you’re walled out of community by what the world says about you, judgments about your gender, or your sexuality, or your politics, or about your income (or lack of it), or your intelligence, or your race, or your nationality, then walk through that door, come out to be who you are, or come inside to this place, to gather here with God’s people, where you will be loved and accepted for who you are.

I am the good shepherd. Of course he is because if you’re exposed to the elements, if you have nothing to protect you from the storms of life and the lightning starts to strike all around you, or if wolves are circling you and threatening to take you down, then of course you need a shepherd to protect you and guide you to safety.

I am the resurrection and the life. Of course he is because if you’re feeling dead inside, or sealed in a tomb not of your own making, a tomb of judgment, a tomb of despair, a tomb of hopelessness or resignation, then he will issue the same call to you that he issued to Lazarus: come out from that tomb. Step into the light, breathe deeply the breath of new life and begin to live again, abundantly.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. Of course he is because if you're lost, or befuddled or confused about who you are, or what your life means, or about whether anything matters in life, about the difference between right and wrong, truth and lies, goodness and evil, then follow in his way and he will put you on a path that leads you home, that leads you to yourself, that leads you to peace and understanding.

I am the true vine. Of course he is because it's hard to be fruitful alone and if you're isolated and cut off from love you will not flourish. So come be grafted into a community that is rooted in God's own life and nourished by God's own love.

Who does Jesus think he is? Well, that's who. Is he on one giant ego trip? I think not. I think these statements are more like his job description.

So suppose your Aunt Alice calls you up some night, or your next door neighbor on campus comes knocking on your door.

It quickly becomes obvious that they're feeling a little desperate about their life, that however they're living and whatever they're doing to fill their days and nights is not working for them any longer.

They're hungry for something they can't name. Or the lightning has just struck, or the wolves are circling, or they've just sustained a blow to the heart, so hard an unexpected it feels like a mortal wound.

And they ask you what this Jesus was all about. And you realize that they're so stressed, or so desperate or so sad, that they only have the capacity to hear one sentence of what you might say.

If that's the case, you cannot do better than this extraordinary claim Jesus has made about himself; his one sentence mission statement:

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

But then suppose that statement resonates for them, and they want to know more. They want to know what that means, exactly. In that case you have nine beautiful declarations at your disposal, nine unique "I am" statements of what that mission looks like in practice: Jesus' very own job description.

But of course that is only half the story. Because let's be honest, this Christ event we read about in John happened a long time ago. This same Jesus no longer walks our streets or roams the countryside teaching people who he is, then showing them what that looks like, verifying his claims by what he does.

So this same question might reasonably be asked about us, as his followers: What are we all about? What is church about?

The good news is that we have an easy answer: our mission is the same as his. We live and serve so that they, our friends and neighbors and fellow citizens, might have life and have it abundantly.

Our *modus operandi* is the same as his was. It's to continue his work, to be his body, alive and at large in the world.

To open doors to the excluded, to offer protection to the vulnerable, to offer nourishment to the hungry, to offer pathways of hope to people whose life and health and safety are at risk.

When people are hungry, to offer them literal bread and then invite them join us at this table, where their deepest hunger is satisfied.

When people are scared or threatened, to welcome them into the safety of this sanctuary and then to advocate alongside them to protect and defend their interests.

When people are lonely, to reach out to them where they live, and to invite them and welcome them into the joy and support of this loving community.

Because this promise of abundant life? It still goes out to all the world. And it doesn't start when we die and go to heaven, at least not according to Jesus.

It starts right here, right now, with us.

Amen